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Technologies of Expression:
Poetic Inscriptions in Postwar America

By

Rebecca Gaydos

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the

requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

English

in the

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University of California, Berkeley

Committee in charge:

Professor Charles Altieri, Chair
Professor Susan Schweik
Professor David W. Bates

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Abstract

Technologies of Expression: Poetic Inscriptions in Postwar America

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Doctor of Philosophy in English

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Professor Charles Altieri, Chair

My dissertation argues that mid-twentieth-century American poetry was part of a multi-disciplinary effort to renegotiate the traditional boundary between living beings and manufactured forms. I depart from the prevailing understanding that postwar American poetry reprises Romantic "organic form," claiming to the contrary that postwar poets cast the literary text as an inorganic but nevertheless animate organization—an exteriorized correlate of the poet's vital processes. Instead of invoking the analogy between organic life and textual form as a way of naturalizing literary production, postwar poets endeavored to extend the category of life to man-made forms. Their effort to animate the artificial space of the poetic text is, I contend, a major contribution to a central problem of the postwar decades: namely, how to rethink nature and technology, organism and machine as non-oppositional pairings. I explore this problem as it unfolded across different discursive and creative practices—from the trans-disciplinary science of cybernetics, which modeled machinic intelligence after recursive, biological processes (rather than the abstract, representational capacities of the mind) to the poetics of the Projectivist and New York schools, which reconstituted the temporalities and rhythms proper to bodily life as graphic-verbal patterns on paper. Throughout, I argue that American poets and scientists, far from representing two antithetical cultures, were mutually invested in modeling life inorganically, that is, in designing dynamic, self-organizing configurations, and thereby upending the Aristotelian conception of the technical object as matter devoid of self-formative power.

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Introduction
Toward a Technics of Expression

Now, material, any material obeys laws of its own, laws recognizably given to it by the reigning forces of nature… We may follow them or oppose them, but they are guidelines, positive or negative… What I am trying to get across is that material is a means of communication. That listening to it not dominating it makes us truly active, that is: to be active, be passive. The finer tuned we are to it, the closer we come to art.

—Anni Albers, "Material as Metaphor"

Humanity is without qualities… it must invent, realize, produce qualities, and nothing indicates that, once produced, these qualities will bring about humanity, that they will become its *qualities; for they may rather become those of technics.*

—Bernard Stiegler, *Technics and Time 1*

What we wish to say is that there is a self-movement of expressive qualities.

—Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *One Thousand Plateaus*

The Trouble with Expression

In the world of contemporary innovative poetry, expression gets a bad rap. The editors of a recent anthology, *Against Expression*, trace an anti-expressivist aesthetic that runs from Mallarmé to Conceptual writing, sweeping up nearly every prominent twentieth-century avant-garde movement along the way. From Marcel Duchamp's readymades to Kathy Acker's punk porn to the mathematical procedures of the Oulipo writers to Kenneth Goldsmith's transcriptions of traffic reports to NourbeSe Philip's détournement of legal documents surrounding the slave ship, *Zong*—the through line connecting such varied projects is, the editors claim, a shared opposition to "ideologies of expression" (Dworkin xliii).

But what is so bad about expression? Why do innovative poets and critics regard expression—arguably one of the most powerful organizing concepts in Romantic and post-Romantic aesthetic theory and practice—with such suspicion and disdain? Part of the answer lies in the way I have phrased the question, that is, in the historical fact that the very term "innovative" (or for that matter, "experimental," "avant-garde," "difficult," "antiabsorptive," to list just a few of the terms used to set certain contemporary poetries apart from "official verse culture") has come to be distinguished against a conception of "poetry as the 'lyric' expression of a person" (Bernstein, "Artifice of Absorption"; White 11).

As we shall see, "lyric," "expression," and "person" form a much-used (and in the context of recent poetry criticism denigrated) conceptual triad, and it will be worthwhile to disentangle these concepts, or at least to think their interrelation critically and carefully. Pointing us in this direction, Gillian White's book, *Lyric Shame*, interrogates "the poetic shame culture"—the slew of negative affects, most notably embarrassment, that surround our engagements with the objectionable other of modernist and contemporary avant-gardes: the "expressive lyric" (4).

White argues that "expressive lyric" is neither a genre nor a literary object, but an abstraction projected onto certain kinds of writing, a mode of reading (or of imagining someone writing) that perpetuates even as it seeks to critique the New Critical understanding of lyric poems as "expressive objects that 'speak' to the reader without, paradoxically, the reader's need to understand anything of the history of the work's production, reception, or circulation" (4, 2). In an effort to overcome "a decades-long discursive gridlock in the field of contemporary poetics," a tiresome oscillation between defending or shaming "lyric" poetry identified with an "expressive speaking subject," White looks to the work of poets who have been labeled conventional lyricists to find "new inroads" to "the problematic and interesting interpretive limit of the personal" (16, 6). What is touched on but not developed in White's book is the question of how to understand not only the vexed status of the lyric subject, but more precisely, the discourses and practices that link subjectivity with expression and speech in such a way that the phrase "expressive speaking subject" becomes redundant—compressible into the single term "lyric." As White points out, the recent energy around theorizing and debating the lyric has much to do with the fact that "lyric" no longer designates an identifiable generic category based in characteristics that inhere in specific cultural objects. But I also want to insist, contra White, that lyric and the shame that attends it is not simply a reading practice, an index of the conventions by which we articulate our tastes and socialities. Rather, the term lyric now invokes—and provokes—a range of questions, anxieties, and ambivalences concerning the status of the human in postindustrial modernity.

To think through these concerns I choose to focus on expression—a term that seems to bear much of the weight in antilyric polemics (in fact poets, such as Sina Queyras, who wish to rehabilitate lyric often insist that 21st-century lyric "is not simply expressionism") (n. pag.). Since expression, unlike lyric, does not have a history as a generic category, focusing on expression may help circumvent the increasingly insular nature (the in-fighting) of contemporary poetry and poetics criticism. And since expression is simultaneously without generic baggage—at least since Hegel it has been used in reference to all the fine arts, not to mention bodily gestures, conversation, breast milk, etc.—*and* charged with a particular polemical meaning in post-World War II discourses on poetry, using expression as a lens allows me to do the double work of reaching below poetry's status as a specialized form—that is, it lets me consider poetry in relation to other organized forms (recall the non-specificity of poetry's etymological root, *poiēsis*: to make, to create)—while also attending to the historical and cultural logics that have rendered expressivist poetries so questionable in postmodernity. Although I am singling out expression for further scrutiny, it is worth underscoring that to deal with expression, especially insofar as it presents a distinct historical problematic, is to deal with a cluster of contemporary concerns regarding the relative roles of human subjectivity and embodiment, "nature," and inorganic media in *poiēsis*.

To return, then, to my initial question—What is so bad about expression?—a cursory answer would be: it's untimely. This was essentially Marjorie Perloff's point, when writing in the early 1990s, she lamented that expressivist poetries from the 1950s and 1960s (particularly the Projectivist, Beat, Confessionalist, and "Deep Image" schools) "counter…everything poststructuralist theory has taught us" (*Radical Artifice* 138). Perloff here is echoing the profound influence that a certain interpretation of poststructuralism had on Language poets in the 1970s, and which appeared—and for many still appears—to invalidate the previous avant-garde's interest in breath, speech, and the representation of immediate, personal experience.

Poets and critics like Perloff, who began writing in the 1970s and 1980s, labeled these interests "expressivist," which by the last quarter of the twentieth-century had come to mean, "mired in an outdated humanism." For Perloff, the mid-century desire to cast poetry as "authentic speech," "one's own voice," or lived-experience-made-present bespeaks a retrograde anxiety to prioritize human ingenuity, and human forms of presence, in a world increasingly organized by information and media technologies (41). And where mid-century poetry was historically off, Derrida's *Of Grammatology* hit the mark. "Surely," Perloff writes, "it is not coincidence that the poststructuralist attack on 'natural speech' as the embodiment of presence has come at a time when the available channels of speech communication have been so thoroughly mediated" (36).

The influence of Perloff's preference for poetries that reject "the 'authentic' individual self" in favor of "artifice"—her adoption and endorsement of the rhetoric of the Language poets—can hardly be overemphasized (19). Published twenty-years after Perloff's *Radical Artifice*, Dworkin's and Goldsmith's *Against Expression* re-presents not only the attack on speech, selfhood, and expressionism (which Perloff herself re-presents in *Unoriginal Genius* (2010)), but also the historical argument that gave Perloff's criticism such force: desubjectivized writing (always contrasted with "expressive" writing) is uniquely contemporary, which is to say, uniquely cognizant of technological change. Goldsmith, for instance, champions "uncreative writing" as "a poetics of the moment" especially suited to meeting the demand of the digital age: "Faced with an unprecedented amount of available digital text, writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance" (*Uncreative Writing* 1). "Uncreative writing," which Goldsmith glosses as "information management" replaces the poet-inventor—an outdated, Romantic figure—with the figure of the computer-programmer, DJ, or Pinterest-user ("Week of Blogs" 143). To be a good contemporary poet requires nothing more than a knack for mining and "maintaining a writing machine"—namely, the Web, where Goldsmith imagines all that needs to be written already exists (*Uncreative Writing* 2). Of course, as Goldsmith is well aware, selecting, cutting, pasting, and redistributing extant text is hardly unique to the late twentieth- and early twenty-first-century; nonetheless, he seems to envision uncreative writing's response to the increased malleability and mobility of digitized text as a mode of art-historical progress: "With the emergence of the internet…uncreative writing developed as an appropriate response for the time, combining historical permissions with powerful technology to imagine new ways of writing" (*Against Expression* xxi). Moreover, he claims: "French theorists who anticipated the destabilizing of language could never have foreseen the extent that words today refuse to stand still… Words today are bubbles, shape-shifters, empty signifiers, floating on the invisibility of the network, that great leveler of language, from which we greedily and indiscriminately siphon" (*Uncreative Writing* 218). What, we might wonder, would constitute an inappropriate, untimely response to the digital age? What does not have "historical permissions"? Presumably the kind of writing that missed the poststructuralist boat, that anachronistically "seek[s] to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies," that relies on "the rhetoric of natural expression," "individual style," and "voice" (Dworkin xliii).

The literary history I'm outlining—the arc from Language to "uncreative" writing (also known as conceptual writing), the depreciation of subjectivity and expression in postmodern poetics—is well known and arguably over-rehearsed. I rehearse it here only as a prelude to opening up another set of questions: Are we so sure that expression, specifically expressivist poetry, is technologically and historically naïve? Without making any definite claims about the status of the human vis-à-vis technology, without deciding whether or not we live in a world

dominated by "forms of observation and perception [that] may not even be linked back to single bodies or unified subjects," as one historian recently put it (Halpern 20), might it nonetheless be possible to take up expression as timely, even as crucial to current scholarship on human-technological relations?

Living Language: Expression in the Information Age

This dissertation ultimately answers the latter question affirmatively, but in advance of doing so, I would like to rethink Perloff's claim that expressivism, reaching back to the breath-based poetics of Charles Olson and the projectivist poets, counters everything poststructuralism has taught us. Her claim breaks down not only because poststructuralism articulated problems rather than teachings, but more pointedly, because the projectivist desire to write the breath, to transcribe the living body was, very much like Derrida's early polemics, an engagement with cybernetics, with a technoscience that sought to rearticulate the boundaries between life and nonlife, interior and exterior, organism and machine.

The discrepancy between Olson's bid for an expressive poetry based on the "speech-force of language" and Derrida's critique of logocentrism appears obvious to the point of being unquestionable, and yet, it bears rethinking in that it hinges on (what I take to be) a largely cosmetic difference in terminology and rhetorical emphasis (Olson *Collected Prose* 244). Beneath Olson's and Derrida's opposing rhetorical codes, there exists a mutual interest in the technicity of writing and its relationship to "the process of life" (Stiegler 136). As Bernard Stiegler reminds us, Derrida defines *différance* not only as writing that escapes "the phenomenological experience of a *presence*," but also as the "history of life," the "opening of exteriority in general, the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside: spacing" (*Of Grammatology* 68, 84, 70).[1] Derrida's highly generalized notion of writing—which, as Stiegler points out, "structure[s] all levels of the living and beyond," from the fundamentals of genetic inscription to human logos to automatic reading machines—must be understood as an insight, a way of thinking, opened up by a specific cultural-historical situation, which Derrida himself describes at length:

> For some time now…one says "language" for action, movement, thought, reflection, consciousness, unconsciousness, experience, affectivity, etc. Now we tend to say "writing" for all that and more… for all that gives rise to an inscription in general, whether it is literal or not and even if it what it distributes in space is alien to the order of the voice: cinematography, choreography, of course, but also pictorial, musical, sculptural "writing." One might also speak of…military or political writing in view of the techniques that govern those domains today. All this is to describe not only the system of notation secondarily connected with these activities but the essence and the content of these activities themselves. It is also in this sense that the contemporary biologists speak of writing and *pro-gram* in relation to the most elementary processes of information within the living cell. And, finally, whether it has essential limits or not, the entire field covered by the cybernetic program will be the field of writing. If the theory of cybernetics is by itself to oust all metaphysical concepts—including the concepts of soul,

[1] See Stiegler's discussion of Derrida in *Technics and Time, 1* 136-137.

> of life, of value, of choice, of memory—which until recently served to separate the machine from man, it must conserve the notion of writing… (*Of Grammatology* 9).

As the above passage makes abundantly clear, there is nothing incidental or idiosyncratic about Derrida's attempt in *Of Grammatology* to provide a trans-medial account of "writing" that encompasses life, nonlife, and the enigmatic relation of the former to the latter. Indeed, Derrida's expansive claim that all "signification is *a priori* written, whether inscribed or not" falls in line with the cybernetic (and information-theoretic) expansion of "writing" to include organizational processes that occur below the threshold of consciousness, as in genetic phenomena, or altogether without the aid of an organic body, as in the machinic manipulation of symbols (computing) (70). As Lily Kay has demonstrated, during the mid-twentieth century scriptural metaphors increasingly appeared in scientific discourses, technical as well as lay, such that it eventually became "intuitive and commonsensical" to refer to quantitative ratios as "information" and DNA as "living language" (capable of being read, translated, copied, and even edited) (19, 17).

In chapter one, I argue that the projectivist body-text analogy—the idea that "the whole physiology of man is at work in the poem," to borrow Robert Creeley's formulation—must be understood as a crucial part of a cross-disciplinary effort to explore the possibilities of this new scriptural-technological situation (21). For mid-century expressivist poets, it was not a leap of faith to believe their bodies could be present in their poems since the human body itself was widely understood to exist as a kind of pre-discursive writing or informational pattern. Far from being indicative of a naïve literary realism or retrograde humanism, mid-century expressivist poetry is "writing" in the expanded sense that Derrida describes. The poets examined in the following chapters—Charles Olson, Larry Eigner, and Frank O'Hara—wrote within a scriptural practice that was no longer connected to an authorial consciousness or spiritual origin, nor for that matter condemned as an exterior and therefore secondary record of the real. To typewrite the human body (as Olson famously encouraged poets to do), to relocate man's physiology in the inorganic space of print, implied a new (or at least historically-specific) mode "writing"—in Derrida's terms, a formal program of sequencing, spacing, or differentiation—applicable across the divisions that traditionally separated human symbol-use, biological processes, and mechanical operations.

The subsequent chapters approach mid-century expressivist poetry not as a belated Romanticism, a last-ditch attempt to humanize literature by anthropomorphizing poems into breathing, speaking, living bodies (what the Romantics called "organic form"), but quite the contrary, as an exploration of how *in*organic materials—in this case, linguistic signs, typeface, ink, etc.—might be vitalized. As recent revisionist scholarship on Romanticism attests, the trope of "organic form" has always cut two ways: if it assigns a biological meaning to aesthetic forms, it also suggests that man-made forms can be "alive."[2] From one vantage point, "organic form" naturalizes the work of art by likening it to organismic life. From another equally tenable vantage, it offers a theory and practice of inorganic life. While this dissertation approaches mid-century expressivist poetry from the latter vantage, I hope to keep both perspectives in play. In rethinking expressivist poetry, I do not wish to convert a specific moment in American literary history into a pre-history of our present, nor am I interested in arguing that post-Language poets and Conceptual writers have misunderstood their precursors. Rather than simply demonstrating

[2] See Mitchell, *Experimental Life*; Gigante.

that poetry labeled "natural expression" is in fact amenable to twenty-first-century forms of artistic mediation and artifice, I want to hold on to what is distinctive about post-World War II era expressivisms. After all, the mid-century interest in graphing bodily life is foreign to our present critical and aesthetic interests in ways that makes it almost illegible as a technologically significant pursuit. Mid-century expressivist poetry is more inventive than appropriative (even a work as citational as *Maximus* never lets you forget that Olson-the-man is out there sourcing materials); it doesn't use algorithms, preestablished rules, or artificial systems to generate its content; it is a poetry that relies not on "a convention," but as Robert Duncan wrote in the 1960s, on "the body of my own thought and feeling, my own presence" ("Truth of Life and Myth" 154). In sum, it is nothing like the kinds of poetries that we have come to accept as sophisticated engagements with the technological conditions of postmodernity, and for this very reason, expressivist poetry is uniquely capable of recalibrating our assumptions about what constitutes a "technology" as well as how human activities—from breathing to art-making—stand in relation to technics.

Writing at a moment when writing had lost its specificity, mid-century expressivist poets experimented with the idea of transcribing bodily life (assuming that the living body is itself already a kind of writing) into poetry, so as to create texts that would do more than merely reference the poet's body. In Duncan's words, such texts would themselves become "living Flesh" ("Truth of Life and Myth" 154). Expressivist poetry thus considers how writing as a technics functions *in relation to*, rather than at the expense of, organismic embodiment. Given this emphasis on exploring the possible continuities between organismic and manufactured forms, it is no surprise that expressivism appeared anachronistically Romantic to poets and critics writing during the 1990s and 2000s, a time when discourses on technology tended to revolve around questions of disembodiment and virtuality. For at least the past twenty-five years, critical theorists have debated the advantages and disadvantages of conceptualizing digital information as medium-less, an "entity separate from the material forms in which it is thought to be embedded" (Hayles 2). While a critic like Katherine Hayles laments that "the posthuman view privileges informational pattern over material instantiation, so that embodiment in a biological substrate is seen as an accident of history rather than an inevitability of life," Mark Hansen, for instance, though similarly concerned with the role of human embodiment in virtual environments, locates a liberatory potential in the Internet, describing it as a performative zone capable of "decoupling identity from any analogical relation to the visible body" (*How We Became Posthuman* 2; *Bodies in Code* 145). "So long," Hansen claims, "as the body is entirely constituted from text, it can have no necessary analogical correlation with the flesh-and-blood body of the user outside the virtual space; put somewhat differently, it lacks all force to compel the subjection of this latter body" (144).

Although Hansen wrote these words less than a decade ago, they echo strangely in our ears. Today virtual space abounds with images of our bodies, families, friends, and colleagues, and it increasingly functions as a platform for companies to profile and surveil our tastes and preferences—something that is done not only by establishing an "analogical correlation with the flesh-and-blood body of the user" but also by accessing our actual biology through the collection and analysis of biometric data. Indeed, the alleged opposition between embodiment and virtuality has been turned on its head as we enter what entrepreneur-geneticist Craig Venter calls "the digital age of biology"—an age in which "artificial life" is not restricted to building non-biotic, digital environments that simulate the complexity of organic life, but has come to include the

conversion of physical DNA into digital code that be modified, transmitted electromagnetically, and recreated in vivo (*Life at the Speed of Light* 47). Moreover, the passage from silicon to biotic material, from computer-written code to three-dimensional tissues and cells, now occupies an increasingly visible place in the contemporary art sphere, as artists team up with scientists to create living works out of bioengineered materials. As all of these examples emphasize, questions of embodiment, far from being eclipsed by digital technologies, remain present and pressing. Rather than bracketing or passing over the body, digital technologies are working on and in unsettling and problematic ways even merging with bodily life.

Suffice it to say, virtual space no longer appears quite so disconnected from the physical world. But, then, it may not be connected to the real in the ways we would wish. If now it is literally possible to "write" the body, to teleport life—making Walt Whitman's lamentation, "I pass so poorly with paper and types," indicative of an antiquated "old media" problem—there remains, nonetheless, a host of paradoxes and ethical tensions in the scriptural metaphors (and attendant technological practices) that shape both our conception of life as well as actual living forms (*Leaves of Grass* 69). As Derrida acknowledges, the political and ethical consequences of an expanded "writing"—a "language" divested of intention, untethered from human or godly origin—may turn out to be far from fortuitous (a point that seems to have been lost in literary theory's metabolization of poststructuralism). Taking up Derrida's concerns, Kay points out that the "Book of Life," originally a metaphor for God's "transcendent writing," received scientific legitimation in mid-century discourses that described DNA as "living language," a description that ultimately raises more questions than it answers: "If not God, then what is the agency of this writing in the secular context of molecular biology? What meaning can this writing convey within the stochastic and syntactical logic of cybernetics and information theory? And how is language possible without human consciousness?" (2, 19, 31).

These problematics remain with us today, and those of us in literary studies would do well to consider such Derridean questions not merely as "theory" but as issues that affect the kinds of life forms that can and will exist on this planet. If on the one hand, locating "language" and meaningful organization below and beyond the threshold of self-conscious intelligence has productively decentered the human agent, on the other hand, this waning of humanist agency has been, and continues to be, in alarming ways supplanted by more distributed forms of control and mastery. As Kay explains, the framing of bodily life as legible and recordable information not only opened up new ontologies—new ways of understanding our relatedness to other physical systems—it also opened our bodies (and the bodies of other species) to new mechanisms of biopolitical management. Beginning in the mid-century, "[g]enetic information signified an emergent form of biopower: the material control of life would now be supplemented by the promise of controlling its form and logos, its information (the DNA sequence, or the "word") (3). Stiegler's dramatic account of how this situation plays out in the twenty-first century is worth quoting at length:

> …genetic manipulations undoubtedly constitute the most striking technological development, giving rise to the most disarming discourses: worse than the possibility of sheer destruction of humanity, they make imaginable and possible the fabrication of a "new humanity," or a pseudo-humanity… This is the age in which Marvin Minsky has proposed that a program of miniaturized technological equipment be developed…on the inside of the human brain… This is the age when vast, horrific traffic in human organs is

> conducted with impunity on homeless children of third-world megalopolises, kidnapped and emptied of their livers, kidneys, hearts, their very entrails. This is all taking place at a moment when…a vast DNA research program aims at technoscientific "productions" capable of making profits upon receiving copyright, at a moment when genetic manipulations are directly affecting the organization of the human individual body, its specific memory and therefore its genetic prospects, its most "natural" "substratum," in a word, its nature.
>
> Which "nature"?
>
> This presentation, cursory, dramatic, but nevertheless exact, of the current state of contemporary technics and its effects, wishes to stress what today is universally felt if not clearly acknowledged: the urgency of an elucidation of the relations holding, at an ontological level (if one can here still refer to ontology), between anthropology and technology. This, at a time when technology has disquietingly cast doubt upon, while perhaps for the first time directly confronting, the very form of this question: what is the nature of the human? (87)

This dissertation looks back to expressivist poetry written during the postwar decades, in order to revisit the question of the body's entanglement with technology, a question that recent poetry criticism, with its focus on procedural, algorithmic, and rule-based methods of generating texts, has largely overlooked. Over the past several decades, many critics and writers have come to equate the impersonal and programmatic logic of the digital computer with our "technological and cultural moment," and yet, during this time bodily life in all its complexity, mutability, and personality has remained open to, and in ways has even become coextensive with, postindustrial technologies (Dworkin xlii).

In taking up the postwar writings of Charles Olson, Larry Eigner, and Frank O'Hara, as well as the twenty-first-century expressive lyrics of Craig Santos Perez, Heriberto Yépez, and Claudia Rankine, I hope to reopen questions that have come to a dead end in post-Language and Conceptual poetries and the critical discourses that surround them. Namely, how can we move past a narrow view of technology as applied knowledge geared toward practical ends? Are there ways for writers and artists to relate to digital technologies other than simply by using them or mimicking aspects of their functionality? Rather than associating expression with human interiority, and technological postmodernity with exterior matter, how might expressive practices destabilize the border between interior and exterior, self and environment? What other topographies and configurations does the concept and practice of expression make possible? What kinds of organizational continuities (physical or formal) would we like to see between organic bodies, aesthetic mediums, and technical systems? And lastly, for all the talk of language as an autonomous system—a technics capable of displacing the sensuous human "voice"—are we not rather finding ourselves in a situation in which biological, aesthetic, and technological categories no longer appear oppositional, but instead, are merging around problems of design and formal organization?

Conceptual poetry, as the name suggests, has a rather thin relationship to human embodiment, and for this reason, I find that most conceptual poems do not lend themselves as critical objects to engaging the above questions.[3] Invoking the deskilled aesthetic of 1960s and 1970s conceptual art, conceptual poetry similarly undercuts—sometimes to the point of

[3] There are of course exceptions, NourbeSe Philip's *Zong!* being perhaps the most stunning and powerful one.

negating—the sensuous significance of the media it works in.[4] As conceptual art—and now poetry—has shown us, minimizing art's presentational significance—i.e. identifying a work of art with a concept, idea, or set of instructions rather than a crafted object—tends to undercut art's status as a unique entity (in Adorno's words, the "things among things" that are "something other than thing") (*Aesthetic Theory* 120). The dissolution of art's distinctiveness—itself an art historical process—has taken different forms: from Marcel Duchamp's presentation of pre-fabricated, ordinary objects to Allen Kaprow's Happenings, which decried the static art object in favor of spontaneous events and parties, to Jack Burnham's celebration of so-called "unobjects," art made to be indistinguishable from "industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any of the other matrices of human activity" to, more recently, Kenneth Goldsmith's claim: "You really don't need to read my books to get the of idea of what they're like" (Burnham 165; Goldsmith, "Week of Blogs" 146). The dissolution of art qua crafted object has been glossed in critical literature, and in artist (or as Kaprow would say "nonartist") statements, primarily in two ways: in political terms, as an effort to de-rarify art by uniting it with "life" and secondly, as a way for art to keep pace with techno-historical development.

By turning to expressive rather than conceptual art practices—the former of which remains invested in the idea of a bounded, distinctive art object—I aim to take up the question of art's continuity with life, but from a different angle, one that is uninterested in pushing art toward a "vanishing point" (Dworkin xxxi). To imagine that art can be seamlessly integrated or dissolved into other relational networks and practical activities is not to imagine a relation of continuity between art and life, but on the contrary a relation of identity: two terms collapsed into one, which is precisely what a figure like Burnham envisioned when in 1968 he claimed: "In an advanced technological culture the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society." For Burnham, and for the conceptual tradition more generally, this has meant a radical rethinking of art's status as boundaried and distinguishable. This vein of thought has led to a hyper-criticality, or to borrow Gillian White's elegant formulation, to a "late-twentieth- and twenty-first century art made out capitalism: art so aware of the situations of its production and consumption, so late capitalist, that it cannot look away from them, let alone entertain a fourth wall enabling its privacy or distinction" (263).

As a point of contrast, consider Charles Olson's preoccupation with distinguishing the boundaries, fluid or otherwise, of an artwork: "…the poem carries in itself the evidence of what it isn't, as well as what it is. Thus acquiring to itself much more the power of power outside as well as, by this intensification of its own knowledge itself, its own power. That is, as in painting, the frame. All loss today, to conceive of the canvas in such self-isolation" (*Principle of Measure* 26-27). But, then, Olson worries: "…how do you paint it, when the frame is not the limiting factor it once was. How do you write the poem when you do not want the poem to stay in—even though it has to, to be itself. How do you do this?" (27). For Olson, and for projectivist-inspired

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[4] In his introduction to *Against Expression*, Dworkin defends conceptual poetry's relationship to the material world, arguing that it strives "to distance ideas and affects in favor of assembled objects, rejecting outright the ideologies of disembodied themes and abstracted content" (xxxvi). "The very procedures of conceptual writing," Dworkin contends, "demand an opaquely material language: something to be digitally clicked and cut, physically moved and reframed, searched and sampled, and poured and pasted" (xxxvi). However, the supposedly physical nature of these operations is largely metaphoric. With the exception of "clicked," which hardly suggests a robustly material event, all of the verbs Dworkin uses are interface metaphors (i.e. computer commands named after familiar physical activities).

poetics more generally, the primary question is how a made object can be something distinctive, with "its own power," without becoming isolated from its surroundings. As will become apparent in the subsequent chapters, this question—or rather problem—of how to create something that is lively, that neither congeals into a reified object nor dissolves into everyday activities, is essentially an organizational question, one that I will argue animated postwar expressivist arts and technoscientific experimentation alike. My chapters trace the collaborations between expressivist poets, philosophers, and scientists mutually invested in creating vital artifacts—that is, "live" constructions that upset the conventional distinction between animate beings and artificial structures devoid of self-formative power. Thus, far from being anachronistically Romantic, expressivist verse, I argue, has no need to catch up or keep pace with the technological practices of its time; it is, rather, an essential part of a multidisciplinary project (spanning the information and life sciences *and* the creative arts) during the postwar decades to articulate a non-oppositional relationship between nature and technology, organism and machine.

My dissertation also advances a larger claim. Beyond positioning mid-century expressivist poetry as part of its moment, I ultimately argue that expression—as both a concept and a practice—is crucial to understanding a fundamental similitude between art and technology. The art-historical explanation of conceptual practices restoring art's relevance, making art part of its techno-historical moment, presumes a narrative of technological development in which it is possible for art, or for certain non-advanced art practices, to lag behind technics. But what if to the contrary, art is never behind nor for that matter ahead of technology? What if, as Heidegger suggests, the question of technology and the question of art are—if not one and the same—deeply albeit mysteriously related?[5] Moreover, what if their relatedness has absolutely nothing to do with automation, programming, or following rules (as conceptual and Language poetries would suggest), but everything to do with expression?

Rethinking Post-Romantic Expression

Against the devaluing of expression as an aesthetic concept and creative practice, this dissertation rehabilitates expression as key to understanding the intimate relationship between art and *technē*—an intimacy, which far from being a remnant of pre-industrial and Romantic notions of craft, can and must be thought in relation to industrial and postindustrial modernities. There are, however, cultural logics that have made (and continue to make) it difficult to apprehend the connection between art and *technē* in non-nostalgic *and* non-reactionary terms. Writing in the 1950s, at the dawn of the postindustrial era, philosopher of technology Gilbert Simondon describes a devastating antagonism between culture and technics:

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[5] Although often read as an anxious polemic against modern technology, Heidegger's famous essay, "The Question Concerning Technology," ends by purposing an essential, but unknown, relation between art and *technē*: "Because the essence of technology is nothing technological, essential reflection upon technology and decisive confrontation with it must happen in a realm that is, on the one hand, akin to the essence of technology and, on the other, fundamentally different from it. Such a realm is art… Yet the more questioningly we ponder the essence of technology, the more mysterious the essence of art becomes" (340-41). Whether modernity will further conceal this relation or bring it to light is, Heidegger suggests, an open question.

> Culture has become a system of defense against technics… Culture behaves towards the technical object much in the same way as a man caught up in primitive xenophobia behaves toward a stranger. This kind of misoneism directed against machines does not so much represent a hatred of the new as a refusal to come to terms with an unfamiliar reality. Now, however strange this reality may be, it is still human, and a complete culture is one that enables us to discover that this stranger is indeed human… Culture is unbalanced because while it grants recognition to certain objects, for example to things aesthetic, and gives them their due place in the world of meanings, it banishes other objects, particularly things technical, into the unstructured world of things that have no meaning but do have a use, a utilitarian function. (*On the Mode of Existence* 1-2)

This spilt between culture and technics manifests not only in an antagonistic attitude toward the machine, but also in the exact opposite: the machine's fetishistic valorization by those who, seeking to defend the machine from cultural bias, accord technology an inflated, sacred status. "This," Simondon writes, "gives rise to an intemperate technicism that is nothing other than idolatry of the machine and, through such idolatry, by way of identification, it leads to a technocratic yearning for unconditional power" (2) If technophobia leads to a reactive technophilia, technophilia in turn encourages—even validates—technophobia. That is, a technophilic orientation moves in the direction of actualizing the conditions envisioned by the technophobe, producing a culture whose relationship to technics is based on a narrow understanding of the machine as an extension or replacement of human power.

The critiques of technocracy articulated by Theodore Adorno and Max Horkheimer, Herbert Marcuse, Hannah Arendt, Lewis Mumford, and Heidegger, among other postwar theorists, take account of this unbalanced cultural situation. Although there are many points of contention and nuanced divergences in these commentators' accounts of human-technological relations, their thinking converges around the problem of instrumentalism. That is, central to postwar discourses on technology is the idea of a crisis of enlightenment, a contradiction at the heart of Western metaphysics: when Western man's will to mastery reaches a certain threshold of excess, it redoubles on itself, making human life no longer a locus of subjectivity but just the opposite—an object to be conditioned and controlled; whether wittingly or not, man effectively transfers his autonomy to a technological world (in Frankfurt school terms, the "culture industry," in Mumford's language, a "megatechnics," "a uniform, all-encompassing, super-planetary structure, designed for automatic operation").[6] This technological world is capable of running without man, or as Marcuse fears, inside of man: even man's psyche, his "private space has been invaded and whittled down by technological reality" (10).

But, as Simondon's writing suggests, this line of critique does not deliver us to the heart of the matter. Insofar as this critical position is itself conditioned by the split between technics and culture, it remains caught within the twinned poles of technophilia and technophobia, telling us less about what technical objects actually may be, or how they may stand in relation to human life, than about the disastrous consequences of our refusal to consider technics in non-instrumentalist terms. Moreover, if we cannot conceptualize modern culture and technics together, in a non-destructive and non-fantastical manner, if we see in technology only "instruments of domination" and "external controls," it will be quite difficult to posit art's

[6] See Adorno and Horkheimer's chapter, "The Culture Industry," in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Mumford, "Tool Users vs. Homo Sapiens and the Megamachine" 344.

relation to modern technics in anything but reactive, defensive, and oppositional terms (Marcuse 20, 10). Even if we turn our attention to artistic movements that have been pointedly and favorably disposed to industrial technology, we find that many of these aesthetics (I am thinking here of a range of modernist machine aesthetics: Filippo Marinetti's futurism, Wyndham Lewis's vorticism, László Moholy-Nagy's kinetic sculptures, etc.) embrace a rhetoric of high impact, streamlined efficiency, and energetically moving parts—a rhetoric that courts precisely the kind of problematic idolatry and fetishistic identifications that Simondon critiques.

To move beyond this impasse, we need to be able to envision a technics that neither extends nor supplants human will and mastery, and relatedly, a sense of art, or of human creativity more generally, that defines itself neither in opposition to nor in accordance with the programmatic and instrumental logics so frequently associated with modern technics. My claim is that the concept of expression, if theorized carefully, enables us to approach twentieth-century art and technology non-oppositionally, and, perhaps even more importantly, to understand their continuity without dissolving human creativity into programmatic, "uncreative" logics. Over the next several pages, I offer a theorization of post-romantic expressionism that draws together the pragmatist thinking of John Dewey, the cybernetic philosophy of Simondon, as well as poststructuralist reconfigurations of information, life, and writing.

Before I begin, I want to emphasize that my selection of these theoretical terrains is motivated by historical as much as intellectual concerns. I first came to this project from the vantage of contemporary poetry and poetics criticism, where the term 'Black Mountain' is associated with naturalistic, speech-oriented free-verse—or more specifically with the poetics and coterie of Charles Olson. But as I investigated Olson's interest in cybernetics, particularly his interest in the writings of Norbert Wiener, I came to realize that Black Mountain College was a meeting ground for a truly heterogeneous mix of artists, scientists, and inventors.[7] When Olson became rector of the college in 1951, he replaced German émigrée and Bauhaus artist Josef Albers. Like the Institute of Design, which László Moholy-Nagy founded in Chicago in the late 1930s, Black Mountain College also served as a New Bauhaus—a continuation on American soil of the modernist industrial design school upended by the Third Reich.[8] Albers's meticulous geometric paintings, Buckminster Fuller's geodesic domes, John Cage's impersonal, chance-generated compositions were all part of the techno-cultural milieu that fostered what we now of think of as the naturalistic writings of the Black Mountain poets. Black Mountain College opened in 1933 and folded in 1957, and without homogenizing the diversity of aesthetic practices and sensibilities that developed there during the inter- and post-war years, I want to suggest a continuity between the Bauhaus's focus on integrating art and technology and the expressivist practices that flourished at Black Mountain in the aftermath of World War II. If the early years at Black Mountain were guided by Josef and Anni Albers's devotion to combining industrial precision and artisanal craftsmanship, the fact that cyberneticist Norbert Wiener joined the college in 1954, at Olson's request, should remind us that postwar expressionism was never

[7] People who either attended, taught at, or served on the advisory council of Black Mountain College include poets such as Robert Duncan, Robert Creeley, Ed Dorn, John Wieners, and William Carlos Williams, painters such as Cy Twombly, Robert Rauschenberg, and Franz Kline, choreographer Merce Cunningham, composer John Cage, geographer Carl Sauer, inventor Buckminster Fuller, art critic Clement Greenberg, atomic chemist Natasha Goldowski, cyberneticist Norbert Wiener, and Nobel laureate physicist Albert Einstein. For histories of Black Mountain College, see Katz and Duberman.

[8] In 1933, the Gestapo padlocked the doors of the Dessau Bauhaus, and its buildings were soon thereafter converted into Nazis training grounds.

merely a reactionary naturalism—a romantic backlash against the horrors of World War II and a rising military-industrial complex.

John Dewey—the pragmatist philosopher whose writings inspired John Rice to found Black Mountain College—is the thinker who, to my mind, best articulates a theory of expressive activity relevant to industrial manufacturing and manual craft alike. While Dewey is often remembered as promoting experiential learning (education that proceeds through hands-on engagement with the sensory world), in his 1934 book, *Art as Experience*, Dewey explicitly warns against any *a priori* dismissal of the aesthetic status of industrial commodities: "Objects of industrial arts have form—that adapted to their special uses… When this form is liberated from limitation to a specialized end and serves also the purposes of an immediate and vital experience, the form is esthetic and not merely useful" (121). The key idea in this passage is that of a form not limited to a "specialized end." For Dewey, there are always two sides, two origins if you like, to any made form. On the one hand, there is what he calls the "human contribution"—whatever mental intention or purpose guides the design process—and on the other hand, there are logics inherent to the materials being formed. Ultimately such logics are alien to the human maker, although of course the propensities and possibilities of a medium can interact with, reshape, and/or frustrate the maker's purposive actions. What links mechanically and manually crafted objects, then, is the fact that *all* manufactured objects—objects that are not "spontaneous and unintended" but "undertaken as a means to a consciously entertained consequence"—emerge through a double articulation: mental and objective conditions work on each other in such a way that both "acquire a form and order they did not at first possess" (Dewey 65, 68).

Thus, made objects are never merely the reflection of human needs and impulses. As Dewey eloquently explains, their "formal conditions…are rooted deep in the world itself" (153). However, when Dewey describes the "specialized end" of an industrial commodity, he is describing something that falls mostly on the side of human culture—a form that has been conceived primarily in reference to human needs and with very limited input from the media itself. Human needs and purposes, being highly specialized, tend to narrowly channel the formal possibilities of objective reality. After all, the laws of the physicochemical universe are manifold; there are countless (although not infinite) ways that material energies might be coordinated. If industrial production were not altogether defined by the limited human needs it serves—and Dewey hints that it need not be—its aesthetic character would more readily reveal itself.

In stating that the industrial object might be liberated from its "specialized end," Dewey suggests that industrialized production harbors formal possibilities that are irreducible to human desires. This conception of an industrialized modernity that exceeds humanity's plans, purposes, and instrumentalist strivings, while hinted at by Dewey, is brought to the fore in Simondon's analysis of industrialization. It is perhaps surprising that Simondon's thinking develops Dewey's account of the formal possibilities of industrial production given that Simondon was writing after the war, at a time when the philosophical condemnation of the "culture industry," "industrial psychology," and the like, had reached its most strident pitch. But rather than characterizing industrialization as the culmination and ironic undoing of enlightened humanism, Simondon, inspired by the cybernetic philosophy of Norbert Wiener (who we should note studied briefly

with Dewey), views industrial modernity as an opportunity to right some of our most basic but misplaced assumptions about human creativity and agency.[9]

Whereas Dewey suggests that the industrial arts could, potentially, be liberated from "specialized ends," Simondon describes industrialization as the stage in the evolution of technology that most strikingly reveals the technical object's quasi-autonomy from human schemes.[10] As counterintuitive as it may seem, Simondon's claim is that industrialization, far from representing a crisis of instrumentalist thinking, introduces an epoch in which technical objects no longer appear to be instances of "applied knowledge"—mental schemas crystallized in physical forms suited to furthering human ends. The industrial technical object enables humans to see technological development as a self-directed movement, a movement of "objective material…according to its *own* possibilities," to borrow Dewey's formulation (292). As Simondon points out in *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*: "The technical object is a physicochemical system in which mutual actions take place according to all the laws of science… the fact that the technical object belongs to the class of artifacts which meet a certain specific human need in no way limits or defines the type of physiochemical actions which can occur in this object or between this object and the outside world." However, the exogenous status of the technical object's use-value is obscured in a pre-industrial society since, as Simondon explains, "the made-to-measure object [of manual trade] is one which has no intrinsic limits; its norms are imposed from without; it fails to achieve its own internal coherence; it is not a system of the necessary; it corresponds to an open system of requirements" (18). In other words, in a pre-industrial society, in which individual craftsmen deliberately tailor objects to fit the needs of particular patrons, it is easy to imagine that technics and human intention conform, the technological object being nothing more than "a physical translation of an intellectual system" (46). With industrialization, however, technical objects acquire their own coherence, that is, their internal structure becomes standardized and can no longer be modified to address the plurality of particular human needs and desires. (In an industrial society modifications typically take the form of minor cosmetic adjustments; Simondon uses the example of a car that can be customized without in any way altering its technical essence (18).) Thus, with the rise of industrial modernity, "the system of supply and demand is less coherent than the [technical] object's own system. Needs are molded by the industrial technical object, which thereby acquires the power to shape civilization" (18).

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[9] Wiener completed a term of a post-doctoral fellowship at Columbia University, where he studied philosophy under Dewey (on Bertrand Russell's recommendation). See Conway and Siegelman 38.

[10] While it is true that technical objects emerge through human activity (disparate materials do not usually auto-assemble into synergistic arrangements), it is not the case that technical objects perfectly refract and conform to human ends. The emergence and development of technological objects, Simondon argues, proceeds according to "internal necessity and not as a consequence of economic influences or requirements of a practical nature" (*On the Mode of Existence* 17). Thus, it is not the assembly-line which produces standardization; rather it is intrinsic standardization which makes the assembly-line possible…" (17). In other words, it is only because technical objects tend toward "the formation of stable types"—stability here denotes the synergistic integration of sub-structures into a functional unity—that industrialization is possible (17). This tendency toward stability—in Simondon's vocabulary, "concretization"—is not governed by an inventive consciousness; it is, rather, a consequence of the fact that technical problems have many—*but only so many*—solutions, and that these solutions are constrained (as well as made possible) by the laws of the physicochemical universe. Because this is so, technological solutions (what we usually call "innovations") possess an objective reality that humans do not invent, but rather, must discover inductively (46-48).

The industrial object shapes but does not altogether determine civilization. For Simondon, as for Dewey, any type of *technē* requires a human element—a responsive consciousness that interacts with, and actualizes, the possibilities of objective reality. What is important, then, in Simondon's analysis of industrialization is the idea of a creative movement that resists reduction to either mind or matter. Like Dewey's aesthetic theory, Simondon describes a mode of form-giving that cannot do without a human mind even if the human's role is that of actualizing possibilities that neither issue from nor belong to it. I will return to the question the "human contribution" shortly. But first, I want to point out that Simondon's account of industrial modernity is favorable (in ways that one would be hard pressed to find in the anxious rhetorics of the Frankfurt school) not so much because he believes in the importance of industrial products per se (after all, he views utility as a non-essential aspect of technics) but rather because industrial processes point human thinking in a new direction—they help us reevaluate the nature of human ingenuity by making manifest the decisive (but not prescriptive) role that media play in the creative process. But although the creative agency of non-human materials becomes especially evident during industrial modernity, this is not to say that such agencies are absent in non-industrial modes of fabrication. The particular value of the industrial situation is it gives us insight into conditions that are not limited to it. According to Simondon, industrialization simply foregrounds a non-anthropocentric dynamic that has arguably *always* been present in human efforts to form the material world, regardless of whether such efforts are of an industrial or artisanal character.

Thus, Simondon's thinking moves in two directions. It highlights the human's persistent role in technological modernity—unlike Christian Bök who prophecies an era of "robopoetics" in which machines write poems to be read by other machines, Simondon's sense of technics requires a responsive consciousness; human creativity continues to exist, if not in a position of authorship, than as a mode of responsiveness capable of actualizing potentials that are, in a sense, already "there" even if they occur nowhere in nature (Bök "Piecemeal Bard" 10). In other words, human consciousness and skill coordinate media, or rather media interacts with human consciousness and skill, to produce forms that could not otherwise exist. Secondly, Simondon's thinking extends beyond the kinds of practices that we currently recognize as technological to make a more general claim about ingenuity: all inventive processes, those that appear to be driven by automated machines and those that proclaim to be pure products of human intellect, emotion, and dexterity, are in fact interactions between a living being and the structural possibilities of its environment. In *On the Mode of Existence* Simondon describes such processes under the heading of technics; in *Art as Experience* Dewey calls them artistic expression.

That Simondon's non-anthropocentric philosophy of technology would have an aesthetic counterpart is not itself surprising; after all, we are accustomed to discussing non-anthropocentric models of creativity in twentieth-century aesthetics, particularly in the factory-style manufacturing practices of Pop and market-driven artists (Andy Warhol, Jeff Koons, and Damien Hirst readily come to mind as examples of artists who embrace and/or reflect mass production and consumerism in their process). What is, perhaps, surprising is its connection to an aesthetic theory focused primarily on expression, if only because today expressionisms are routinely identified with interiority, private subjectivity, lyricism, humanism, etc. And yet, as Dewey reminds us, the pre-fix "ex-" in "expression" (to press out) indicates the outside.[11] The issue, which unfortunately gets lost in the polemical stance of being "against expression," is how

[11] See Dewey's interpretation of the etymology of expression 66-67.

to understand the outside included in the concept and activity of expression, particularly when artistic expression, rather than "discharge or mere exhibition," is at stake (66).

An outside no doubt implies the existence of an interior. But how exactly does this conceptual pair—outside/inside—function in expressive activity? Dewey purposes the following:

> With respect to the physical materials that enter into the formation of a work of art, every one knows that they must undergo change. Marble must be chipped; pigments must be laid on canvas; words must be put together. It is not so generally recognized that a similar transformation takes place on the side of the "inner" materials, images, observations, memories and emotions. They are also progressively reformed; they, too, must be administered (78).

While it is possible, at an analytic level, to describe expression as a doubly articulated movement—"one performed upon the outer material and the other upon the inner and mental stuff"—at the level of actual of expressive activity there is but a single stroke: "The work is artistic in the degree in which the two functions of transformation are effected by a single operation" (Dewey 78).[12] An expressive creation brings together human and objective components in such a way that neither component has temporal, let along ontological, priority. Thus, Dewey is not merely arguing that the properties of artistic media influence the maker's plan and process. His argument more radically suggests that neither one can exist without the other. In other words, we cannot understand artistic expression if we imagine it as a movement originating inside of man and eventuating on the outside. The outside in ex-pression is not secondary; it is always already located within the creative process as an absolutely essential factor. Why is this so? Dewey's argument is simple and convincing. If matter contributed nothing decisive, there would be no need to seek out materials from the environment, and to employ them as mediums. If psychical inspiration were "already self-sufficient and self-contained," there would be no motivation to turn to anything beyond the self. But of course this is not the case. Humans make things all the time, and Dewey ventures that we do so because we are incomplete, or more precisely, because we relate to our own partialness.

I have just said that we "employ" mediums, and that we "seek out" materials from the environment, but I recognize that this phrasing implicitly prioritizes the human agent. However, the importance of the concept of expression is that it captures the ways in which humans are bound up with their environments at a fundamental, organismic level, which precedes any conscious decision to make use of specific materials. That humans are continually drawn out of their selves, that they must look to the outside world to activate their inventive potential, is a consequence of the fact that no creature, human or otherwise, is capable of "liv[ing] merely under its skin" (12). Artistic expression is one of the most noticeable, and celebrated, ways that humans self-identify with their exteriors, but it is, Dewey claims, simply a specialized instance

[12] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari follow Dewey closely in their anti-humanist theorization of expression: "The distinction between content and expression is *always real*…but it cannot be said that the terms preexist their double articulation… Since every articulation is double, there is not an articulation of content *and* an articulation of expression—the articulation of content is double in its own right and constitutes a relative expression within content; the articulation of expression is also double and constitutes a relative content within expression" (*One Thousand Plateaus* 44).

(particular to human culture) of the way in which *all* living beings are coupled with their environments:

> …life goes on in an environment; not merely in it but because of it, through interaction with it. No creature lives merely under its skin; its subcutaneous organs are means of connection with what lies beyond its bodily frame, and to which, in order to live, it must adapt itself, by accommodation and defense but also by conquest. At every moment, the living creature is exposed to dangers from its surroundings, and at every moment, it must draw upon something in its surroundings to satisfy its needs. The career and destiny of a living being are bound up with its interchanges with its environment, not externally but in the most intimate way. (12)

That the life of an organism—its development and self-maintenance—depends upon how it interacts with its environment may seem like an obvious point to make. But what this effectively means is that the wholeness of a living organism—its integrity, functionality, and the very possibility of its continued existence—is not imminent to the organism, at least not if we define the organism as contents bounded by an epidermis. Instead, the live organism must draw its wholeness from the outside, from "what lies beyond its bodily frame."

The roots of artistic expression are to be found, then, in the fact that human life—like everything else that lives—is fundamentally uncontained, spread over both body and world. Thus, while Dewey acknowledges that "there is no expression, unless there is urge from within outwards," this movement from within outward does not in any way give priority to the human interior; rather, when we artistically express ourselves by moving our inner feelings outward, we are performing on a cultural level a basic aspect of biological existence: namely, that living beings cannot live except by interacting with their exteriors. We are capable of expression, it is within the range of human possibilities, because as living beings we already know how to recognize and relate to our surroundings as essential components of ourselves. Such an intimate relationship to the exterior is in fact demanded of us. We cannot live as a closed system. As Dewey puts it: "It is the fate of a living creature…that it cannot secure what belongs to it without an adventure in a world that as a whole it does not own and to which it has no native title" (61). It is worth pausing for a moment over the subtlety of Dewey's phrasing here. Dewey, as I understand him, is not arguing that in living organisms and aesthetic works the distinction between interior and exterior is dialectically resolved. Nor is he simply claiming that expression takes place on account of our embeddedness in the world. If Dewey insists that the outside "belongs" to us, and yet we have "no native title" through which to claim it, this would suggest that we are in some sense constituted by what is radically *not ours*. Thus, while Dewey emphasizes the importance of the environment, he also maintains its foreignness. Far from being one-with-the-world, he suggests that we relate *intimately* to our own alienation from it.

This qualification in Dewey's argument is important because without it he risks re-humanizing expression. If the exterior is understood to unconditionally belong or merge with the human, if we are one with our environments, then the logics and formal possibilities peculiar to the material world would just as well be ours. Dewey, however, avoids this problem by maintaining the distinction between a living system and inanimate matter even as he radically rethinks the conventional topographies that we use to differentiate living bodies from their elemental surroundings.

Thus, through a detour in American pragmatist philosophy and Simondon's cybernetic philosophy, we return to Derrida's preoccupation with "the enigmatic relationship of the living to its other and of an inside to an outside" (70). Indeed, the poststructuralist disarticulation of writing and human consciousness echoes one of the central concerns in pragmatist and cybernetic philosophies: to understand expression as a movement that not only occurs below the level of anthropic intention, but "even below the level of life" insofar as "living creatures can go on living only by taking advantage of whatever order exists about them, incorporating it into themselves" (Dewey 13). In the chapters that follow I look closely at the postwar writings of Olson, Eigner, and O'Hara, as well as the work of contemporary poets, such as Yépez, Perez, and Rankine, so as to explore the ways in which poetic praxis, like the philosophical ideas outlined thus far, contributes to a radical rethinking of the boundaries between life and nonlife, natural and manufactured forms. To wrap up the theoretical component of my argument, the theory of expression that I'm proposing can be summarized by way of three premises: 1) inanimate material is not unformed stuff; whatever medium is being worked already possesses its own set of formal possibilities; 2) these possibilities interact with and are actualized by a living "inside" that recognizes its inanimate "exterior" as at once essential and alien to it; and 3) inventive creations (whether of an artisanal, industrial, or postindustrial character) emerge from these interactions.

Summary of Chapters

In his biological theory of artistic expression, Dewey envisions a deep-seated continuity between the structural possibilities of organismic life (informed as they are by the organism's intimacy with the inorganic world) and those belonging to manufactured forms. For Dewey, then, the idea of an art-life continuum is not merely a figurative conceit; it suggests, rather, a literal connectivity, in other words, that there are certain formal arrangements, certain constitutive interactions between "interiors" and "exteriors," that are germane to biological, technical, and aesthetic entities. Although the significance of Dewey's thinking was missed by many of his contemporaries (particularly the sophisticated materialism of his theory of expression, which idealist philosopher Benedetto Croce famously dismissed as watered-down Hegelianism), the idea of a structural isomorphism between living bodies and artistic forms re-emerged in the 1950s and 1960s as expressivist poets worked to construct animate texts. *Technologies of Expression* departs from the prevailing understanding that postwar expressivist poetry simply reprises Romantic "organic form," claiming to the contrary that postwar poets cast the literary text as an *in*organic but nevertheless animate organization—an exteriorized correlate of the poet's vital processes. Instead of invoking the analogy between organic life and textual form as a way of naturalizing literary production, postwar poets endeavored to extend the category of life to man-made forms. Their effort to animate the artificial space of the poetic text is, I contend, a major contribution to a central problematic of the postwar decades: namely, how to articulate a non-oppositional relation between nature and technology, organism and machine.

I explore this problematic as it unfolded across different discursive and creative practices—from the trans-disciplinary science of cybernetics, which modeled machinic intelligence after recursive, biological processes (rather than the abstract, representational capacities of the mind) to the poetics of the Projectivist and New York schools, which

reconstituted the temporalities and rhythms proper to bodily life as graphic-verbal patterns. Throughout, I argue that American poets and scientists, far from representing two antithetical cultures, were mutually invested in modeling life inorganically, that is, in designing dynamic, self-organizing configurations, and thereby upending the Aristotelian conception of the technical object as matter devoid of self-formative power.

My project looks back to a moment in American literary history—the countercultural utopianism of the 1950s and 60s—that is often discounted as naively humanist or idealistically invested in the plentitude of the (smoothly functioning, white, male) body. Against this, I claim that postwar poetry—invested in both embodied experience and expressing or reconfiguring the body outside of itself—forges a potent heuristic for reimagining human-technological relations without succumbing to a simple distinction between humanist and posthumanist paradigms, and without discrediting the human body or the creative mind.

In chapter one, I read Olson's poetry and creative prose alongside Wiener's scientific writings, not only to challenge C.P. Snow's "two cultures" thesis, which split the postwar humanities and sciences into opposed camps, but also to show how the cybernetic project of arranging inorganic materials into dynamic, lively formations provided Olson with a way of refocusing the problem of art's continuity with life. Although Olson is often described as the purveyor of an organicist poetics, and Wiener as the father of automated machinery and systems control, I argue that their writings together stage a relationship between living bodies and inorganic formations that cuts across the opposition between vitalism and materialism. Wiener's central insight—that machines need not function mechanistically, but can emulate the self-modulating behavior of living beings—resonated with Olson, who likewise challenged the divide between life and nonlife in his efforts to transfer somatic rhythms onto paper. While Olson famously insisted that poetic form follows from man's breath, his cybernetically-informed vision of a creative interplay between breath and typewriter de-naturalized the expressive process while enlivening the material text. Unlike Heidegger, who feared the typewriter would destroy our physical connection to the printed word, Olson viewed its mechanical precision as an expressive medium enabling the poet to "score" his bodily cadences across the page. As I demonstrate, Olson's idea of the body "in" the text was neither naïvely realist nor neo-romanticist but consonant with the cybernetic endeavor to model life inorganically.

But whereas Olson and Wiener imagined a seamless coupling of body and machine, disabled poet Larry Eigner enriched their critique of "organic form" by offering a nuanced account of bodily discontinuity. Drawing on disability theory and philosopher Gilbert Simondon's critique of cybernetics, my second chapter argues that Eigner's prosthetic relationship to the typewriter recast the machine-organism coupling, highlighting the tensions and interruptions unique to living—but not necessarily organically whole—bodies. "Palsied from a hard birth," Eigner relied on the manual typewriter as a medium of communication, typing over 3,000 visual-poems with only his right index figure. Rather than viewing Eigner's "typewriter calligraphy" as the apex of "old" media art—a painstaking mode of craftsmanship no longer possible in the age of rearrangeable data—I claim that Eigner's typescripts from the early 1960s simultaneously anticipate the "remixability" of digital information *and* model the dynamic flows of an *embodied* consciousness. Although his visual-poems are meticulously crafted, the possibility of reconfiguration is built into their very structure in the form of dotted lines that Eigner marked on his typescripts in order to indicate how to divide his pages into smaller units. Far from being singular originals, Eigner's typescripts—comprised of "line[s] that may be

cut"—are intrinsically open to remediation; they offer an aesthetic counterpart to twentieth-century philosophical and scientific attempts to conceptualize (and construct) live bodies as open-ended, shifting organizations rather than integral wholes.

The third chapter turns to the poetry of Frank O'Hara to extend this investigation of reconfigurable bodies and texts. Reading across a variety of formal modes—his elegy for Jackson Pollock, his pithy "F.Y.I." poems, and his last major long poem, "Biotherm"—I argue that O'Hara's conception of "liveness" should not be equated with the poet's body or perceptual consciousness, and least of all with a particular cultural form (poetry may be lively but, as O'Hara never fails to remind us, the same can be said for painting, theatre, radio, television, and Hollywood cinema); instead, "liveness" is maintained as a type of uncertainty—an *inability* to exhaustively identify the contours and constituents of things. As I show, this uncertainty as to where a form begins or ends, and what it subsumes or omits, was also at the core of mid-century scientific theories of "open systems"—i.e. systems (whether animate, ecological, or socio-political) that exist in constant energetic exchange with their milieus, and which cannot be conceptualized topographically in terms of observable spatial boundaries. Registering the inflows and outflows of organismic, textual, and mass cultural systems, O'Hara's poems articulate a version of "liveness" that spans a variegated array of media. In this way, his poetry presents itself less as a distinct literary form than as part of a continuum of form-giving that encompasses vastly different scales of making and circulation.

Taken together, these first three chapters argue that technology is neither an exterior aid extending man's reach, nor an incursion into the human sensorium, but instead a series of relationships that realign the boundaries between human interiority—traditionally seen as the space of lyric possibility—and external matter. This understanding of technology enables a reconceptualization of living bodies and literary texts in terms of a reciprocal dynamic of form-giving rather than as discrete realms of life and nonlife.

And yet, given the myriad ways that machine-organism interfaces support contemporary forms of biopolitical control—from the computerization of life, as genetic sequences are increasingly digitized and commodified, to the biometric profiling of racial subjects—I would be remiss to imagine that such interfaces are necessarily pleasurable or politically desirably. If in the twenty-first century we are increasingly subject to biopolitical governance that opens our bodies to political and technological manipulation, does this suggest that the utopian possibilities of Olson's typewriter-poet coupling are no longer available to us? Or are there ways that we can continue to locate creative potential in the blurred boundaries between mechanical, aesthetic, and human life?

My final chapter pursues these questions by turning to two recent postcolonial revisions of Olson—Heriberto Yépez's creative nonfiction work *The Empire of Neomemory* and Craig Santos Perez's multi-volume poem *from Unincorporated Territory*—that speak to the limits and legacies of the mid-century critique of organic form. Approaching "Olson's character as a microanalogy for decoding the psychopoetics of empire," Yépez charts the "co-bodies"—the unacknowledged territories, subjectivities, and technological systems—that undergird mid-century American experimentalism (73).[13] Paradoxically, it is by *not* writing directly on Olson—by declaring "Olson in and of himself does not interest me"—that Yépez's writing comes closest to Olson, giving a concrete, literary form to Olson's principled rejection of the self-contained humanist subject (73). But if, for Olson and Yépez, the uncontainable body or text—the object

[13] Yépez develops his account of the "co-body" in the section "Co-body, Short Story, and Bradbury" 18-25.

that refuses to be "in and of" itself—represents a desirable social and aesthetic mode, Chamorro-American poet Perez rewrites bodily openness as the indigenous body's susceptibility to the hazards of chemical waste and nuclear fallout on Guam. The disastrous and far-reaching implications of Cold War technological innovation—implications that merely skirt the edges of Olson's rhetoric—come to the fore in Perez's poetry. Yet, *from Unincorporated Territory* refuses elegy in order to insist on the critical potential of the disintegrated body or text. Throughout, Perez investigates the politics of what Mel Chen terms "false containment"—the ordering of permeable matter into distinct, controllable units that deny the body's (or body politic's) fundamental porosity (210).

This final chapter ends with a reading of Claudia Rankine's *Citizen: An American Lyric*—a work that examines how the recording, circulation, and visibility of particular bodies functions as a form of biopower, extending all the way from the micromanagement of the kinds of affects and intimacies that individuals may participate in to the distribution of life and death along racialized lines. I argue that Rankine's book does not exempt itself from the realm of techniques that render human bodies publically visible and open to management. Although *Citizen* relies on an extended body-text analogy, it also critiques the politics involved in its own effort to textually encode bodily life. For Rankine, poetry stands in uncomfortable proximity to a host of extra-literary techniques by which bodies are recorded, distributed, and judged to be insufficiently or excessively "alive," or altogether expendable. More than merely mapping the contours of the body, *Citizen* records the problematic and differential ways that particular bodies *and* books become entangled with, and at times perpetuate, technologies of governance.

Chapter One
Forms of Cybernetic Life:
Charles Olson, Norbert Wiener, and the Typewritten Body

Although Charles Olson's influential 1950 essay on poetics, "Projective Verse," is often read as a valorization of the poet's body and inner energies, we might pause to ponder over the slipperiness of the term "projective." By calling for a projective poetics, is Olson foregrounding the poet's *interiority*—the space from which projection outward is possible—or alternatively, is he emphasizing the *outside*—the page, the tools of writing, the materiality of language, in short, the external things with which a poet interacts? Even if we agree that projection is a matter of externalizing an inner state, the question remains: at which point does the creative work emerge? Is it already formed within the inner reality of the poet? Or does it only arrive in the facticity of the poem itself—the textual object that stands apart from its creator?

It seems that the notion of projection does more to raise than to answer these questions. And yet, Olson's use of the term is routinely interpreted as a celebration of man's interior. As many critics have pointed out, Olson's sense of poetry as the expression of vital experience (if indeed this is his sense of it) is troublesome on at least two accounts: not only does Olson appear to idealize the poet's body as a self-sufficient vessel, but he also seems to fall prey to a naïve mode of literary realism—to the fantasy that a work of art could directly manifest or perfectly duplicate a lived reality. By claiming the body as the ultimate repository of poetic value and creative energy, Olson risks overlooking the constructedness of the work. The poem becomes, instead, a direct outpouring—the unmediated effusion of a "natural" body.

In contrast to Olson, postwar figures like John Cage and Jackson Mac Low, whose experiments in procedural form explore the limits of human agency and ingenuity, may seem more relevant to us today. Immersed as we are in a technified world in which virtual interactions are increasingly becoming the norm, Olson's emphasis on embodied presence somehow seems beside the point, if not downright quaint. It is no surprise then that in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Uncreative Writing*, a book dedicated to confronting, without apology or nostalgia, the demise of artistic originality in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries and the turn toward non-intentional modes of aesthetic production, there is no mention of Olson, nor for that matter of any of the figures commonly associated with the Black Mountain school of poetry. If the demand of our current moment is that of radically rethinking the human subject, then, projectivism, with its commitment to the human body and its expressive inner rhythms, appears quite out of step with contemporary concerns.

My aim, however, in this chapter is to articulate Olson's centrality to the contemporary moment. Rather than treating the poem as a direct outpouring, Olson, I will argue, takes up poetry as an opportunity to rethink the boundaries between human bodies, artistic mediums, and technical objects. Thus, far from harkening back to a romantic idea of poetry as "the repository of values that empiricism and science ignored," Olson's notion of poetry resounds with recent efforts in critical theory to move away from the simple antagonisms that structure such binaries as culture and technology, art and science, human beings and objects, and sentient agencies and inert matter (Steinman 27).[14] Projectivism, as I understand it, is not a bulwark against a technological, media-saturated world, but a careful engagement with it.

[14] See Steinman's discussion of romantic poetry 26-27.

Evidence of this engagement is present across Olson's oeuvre, and even within his most widely read work. Take, for instance, Olson's best-known poem, "The Kingfishers," which incorporates passages from Norbert Wiener's best-selling book, *Cybernetics: Or, Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine*:

> Not one death but many,
> not accumulation but change, the feed-back proves, the feed-back is
> the law
>
> …
>
> We can be precise. The factors are
> in the animal and/or the machine the factors are
> communication and/or control, both involve
> the message. And what is the message? The message is
> a discrete or continuous sequence of measurable events distributed in time
> ("Kingfishers" 8-9)

In the introduction to *Cybernetics*, Wiener argues that the concept of "feedback" allows scientists and engineers to conceptualize machines and animals as systems that function according to the same recursive processes.[15] That is, Wiener claims that machines can be designed so that, like living organism, they regulate their own movement "by some measure of the amount by which it has not yet been accomplished" (97). Are such machines dynamic, self-adaptive beings or, as Katherine Hayles has suggested, does Wiener's sense of feedback reduce purposeful action to a regulatory process?[16] This ambiguity cuts to the heart of "The Kingfishers," a poem that attempts to think order and creative adaptation together, beginning with the famous opening line, "What does not change / is the will to change."

After the lines that allude to the staggering death toll of World War II, "not one death but many, / not accumulation but change," the term feedback appears to enter the poem as a regulatory force—as proof and law working to calm the storm of history. And yet, Olson's repetition of the term "feedback" calls upon the formal resources of poetry—poetry as a system of echoes and repeated differences—to achieve a mode of coherence that doesn't rely on definition or demonstrative logic, but rather on stimulating acts of reading in which what follows always modifies, without erasing, what comes before. In other words, rather than reading

[15] Like the early computer scientist Alan Turing, who argued for the possibility of intelligent machines by suggesting that we conceptualize 'intelligence' not as a private consciousness but in terms of output or performance, Wiener's writings emphasize patterns of observable behavior and often bracket questions pertaining to the essence, internal structure, or specific materiality of the behaving system (See Hayles's chapter "Liberal Subjectivity Imperiled: Norbert Wiener and Cybernetic Anxiety" 84-112). Comparing a machine to a living organism does not, Wiener insists, mean resorting to an anthropomorphic, animistic, or otherwise scientifically questionable outlook. It simply requires that we disentangle the notion of purpose from the realm of inner, psychical intentions. According to cybernetic theory, intelligent, purposive behavior consists of a basic proprioceptive process—the flow of negative feedback. We can see this process at work in diverse realms of activity, including a person reaching for a pencil, an automated missile seeking its target, and even in such complex activity as an organism striving to attain the state of homeostatic equilibrium necessary to maintain its existence. See Turing, "Computing Machinery and Intelligence" and Wiener, *Cybernetics*.

[16] See Hayles 84-112.

Wiener's *Cybernetics* as an argument for control and regulation, Olson interprets feedback as an organizational model for the recursivity of poetic form.

But then again, a recursive form might establish a pattern based on regularities; Olson's declarative statement, "we can be precise," suggests as much; it turns the reader back toward the definitional rigor, rather than the repetitive play, of the preceding lines "the feed-back proves, the feed-back is / the law." The next lines, however, refuse to offer up the promised precision. Not only does the heavy enjambment warp Wiener's scientific discourse, but the repetition of "and / or" multiplies the number of ways a reader might interpret these lines. Precision, in this situation, is not a matter of designating a verbal and rhythmic sequence to be reproduced by the reader; rather, the slash encodes a moment charged with potential—that is, it expresses possible readings that may or not unfold in any one parsing of the text.

Olson's "and / or" is key to understanding the possibilities of the cybernetic era—possibilities that would soon be overshadowed by the rise of digital computing. Cybernetic devices, mostly analog, were not built to manipulate symbols or run logical programs. Instead, they were designed to simulate the organizational dynamics of physical life—dynamics that have a distinctive circular causality, in "which every part is reciprocally both end and means," as Kant pointed out centuries earlier (qtd. in Keller 110). Whereas the procedural aesthetic that we find in postmodern poetry—for instance, in the rule-based writings of the Oulipo circle and many of the Language poets—draws its inhuman inspiration from the operational logic of the digital computer, "The Kingfishers" stages a parallelism between artistic and technological processes that is based not on following or transmitting directions, but rather on encoding variations with the potential to disrupt the sequential order of our reading. For Olson, this disruption is still a mode of precision; it results not in indeterminacy, but rather, in a range of possible variations that exceeds the linear order of the poem's inscription—or better yet, the slash becomes the graphic indication of a specific degree of latitude in the poem's shape. This latitude or free space, which emerges from within a highly patterned and repetitive linguistic structure, is central to grasping the importance of cybernetics to Olson—that is, it brings into view the difference between a procedural technics (or aesthetics) based on prescriptive operations and a cybernetic investment in systems that are simultaneously highly organized *and* open to variability.

Wiener's *Cybernetics* was published in 1948, but Olson learned of it a year earlier through Natasha Goldowski, a Russian-born metallurgist who worked on the Manhattan Project, and after the war ended and the government revoked her security clearance, taught chemistry classes at Black Mountain College.[17] The fact that cybernetics makes a thematic entrance into "The Kingfishers," a poem brimming with nostalgia for pre-industrial civilization, is interesting in its own right. But the importance of cybernetics to Olson goes beyond thematics; cybernetic theory, I will argue, interests Olson as a conceptual resource for dealing with an aesthetic question: namely, how does one translate the dynamic quality of embodied experience into a concrete textual object?

For Olson, the political and ethical stakes of this question are rooted in the historical experience of World War II, and this becomes apparent in a letter he writes to Goldowski. After inquiring about cybernetics, which he describes in poetic terms as "that science of measure which is the 'latest thing,'" Olson expresses to Goldowski his belief that man's "only power" resides in "bone muscle nerve blood brain" (qtd. in Maud 80). Referring to the Nazis concentration camps, Olson writes: "[W]hen a number of men reduce man as value to so much

[17] See Maud 80-82.

soap, superphosphate for soil, fillings and shoes for sale, to oppose them other men have only one point of resistance to such fragmentation, one organized ground… It is man's own physiology… It is his body that is man's answer, his body intact and fought for, the absolute of his organism…" (qtd. in Maud 79). This appeal to the unity of the human body hardly seems commensurate with his interest in the new "science of measure," but as we shall see, Olson's commitment to bodily life engenders a problem, a problem that draws him to cybernetics.

Like Walt Whitman, Olson wants his poems to exist as extensions of his physical body, and like Whitman, he worries that, in the last analysis, living bodies and printed texts may only be metaphorically relatable. If poems begin in the bodies and minds of their makers, but end up as self-contained entities—textual objects that are quite literally "cut-off" from their human sources—does this not condemn poems to exist in state of boundedness that is fundamentally at odds with the non-delineable flows of bodily life?[18] How can a poem—a finite entity that begins and ends in a relatively short amount of space and time—convey our sense of an ongoing reality?

Olson's most memorable formulation of this problem occurs in his 1951 essay, "Human Universe." As he puts it, the problem with most creative acts it that:

> …the person and/or the writer satisfy themselves that they can only make a form…by selecting from the full content some face of it, or plane, some part. And at just this point, by just this act, they fall back on the dodges of discourse, and immediately, they lose me, I am no longer engaged… It comes out a demonstration, a separating out, an act of classification, and so, a stopping, and all that I know is, it is not there, it has turned false. For any of us, at any instant, are juxtaposed to any experience, even an overwhelming single one, on several more planes than the arbitrary and discursive which we inherit can declare. (157)[19]

In light of his Heraclitean view of the world as a state of constant variation and flux, Olson worries that the process of producing a formal object stilts the fluidity of the world. If form involves selection and therefore, exclusion, then it is always partial—but partial, not in the sense of failing to express the world in its entirety, but rather, in the more fundamental sense of ignoring the essential dynamism, or what Olson understands as the original "unselectedness," that marks both the world and our experience of it. The problem then is less that a given form can't account for all the variation in the world, than that the character of variation, movement, and fullness, so basic to our everyday, bodily experience, might not carry through into formal objects.

Olson frequently poses this problem as an aesthetic one, as a question about the relationship between bodies and texts; but as he is well aware, the effort to explore the interface between flux and form is by no means unique to poets. We find a philosophical formulation of Olson's problem in the early twentieth-century pragmatist thinking of William James: "The essence of life is its continuously changing character; but our concepts are all discontinuous and fixed…and you can no more dip up the substance of reality with them than you can dip up water with a net, however finely meshed" (James qtd. in Pickering 22). The concern here is that

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[18] In *Principle of Measure*, Olson acknowledges that the poem "cannot be if it isn't cut off, in the end, as an object, itself" (27).

[19] Throughout this chapter, all references to Olson are from *Collected Prose* (eds. Donald Allen and Benjamin Friedlander) unless otherwise noted.

concepts fail to adequately convey the fluidity and plasticity of our brains and nervous systems. But then, why expect concepts to participate in the continuously changing "essence of life"? Already in James, one senses the desire to model life, to refigure a conceptual system so that it corresponds with the continuous and variable formats of biological life.

With the emergence of cybernetics in the 1940s, the project of modeling life took on a concrete form, as scientists, mathematicians, and engineers collaborated to construct machines, which they hoped would emulate the dynamic, adaptive behavior of living beings. But while cybernetics blurs the boundary between mechanical and animal bodies, it is important to note that the cybernetic machine-organism analogy is not based on the Cartesian idea that organisms are themselves merely complicated mechanisms. Rather than reducing bodily life to a series of mechanistic interactions determined by a one-way causality, Wiener argues that inorganic materials can be configured to enact the recursive, self-modulating processes associated with living organisms.

The idea that such processes could be formalized and reproduced in the construction of dynamical systems greatly appealed to Olson. That is, the techno-scientific project of constructing animate machines resonated with Olson because embedded within it was a version of Olson's own aesthetic question: namely, is it possible for a highly organized, crafted entity to reproduce the dynamism and variability of the live body? But if, following Olson, we observe the aesthetic implications in cybernetic engineering projects, we can just as easily see a technological project in Olson's effort to compose vital texts—texts that don't just metonymically or referentially represent the body in language but that reconfigure physiological patterns in inorganic, nonhuman materials.

In his 1950 essay, "Projective Verse," Olson attempts to describe this compositional process in detail. "Projective Verse" is a quintessentially postwar text, not only because of its influence on postmodern literature and art, but also because, in it, Olson imagines a sense of form that traverses biological, technological, and aesthetic media. Although "Projective Verse" abounds with organicist rhetoric, and although Olson insists on the "role that breath plays in verse," the importance he places on a mechanical device makes it clear that Olson doesn't envision poetry as the natural outpouring of a human voice:

> The irony is, from the machine has come one gain not yet sufficiently observed or used… It is the advantage of the typewriter that, due to its rigidity and its space precisions, it can, for a poet, indicate exactly the breath, the pauses, the suspensions…of syllables, the juxtapositions…of parts of phrases, which he intends… For the first time he can, without the convention of rime and meter record the listening he has done to his own speech and by that one act indicate how he would want any reader, silently or otherwise, to voice his work. (245)

The irony, of course, is that it is a fairly stationary, mechanical object that facilitates the expression of vital rhythms—patterns of breathing, speaking, and listening. Although he notes the irony, Olson does not back away from recommending the typewriter as a significant creative element in what he calls "composition by field"—the idea that the spatial arrangement of words on the page can reflect certain aspects of the poet's vital being (239). In fact, it is specifically the mechanical nature of the typewriter, its "rigidity and space precisions," which gives the poet greater control over word placement. By making use of the typewriter's spatial precision, the

poet can arrange the words so that they "score" the rhythms of his pneumatic and auditory pulsations. In this way, the sensorial and physiological cadences experienced by the poet in the very moment of composition are made available to a reader who could presumably perform, 'voice,' or in some sense re-experience them. In short, Olson theorizes the typewriter as an instrument that makes bodily *variations* repeatable, that is, transmissible to a reader who accesses them after the fact.[20]

Olson's theory of field composition presupposes an underlying isomorphism between spatial and physiological patterns. Field composition works on the principle that it is possible to preserve a correspondence between a spatial pattern—how printed words are arranged on a page—and the rhythm of the poet's bodily functions. One should note that such a correspondence involves quite a formal conception of bodily processes, since in order to assert that a process performed on one system—a living organism—can be transmitted onto another medium—the written page—one needs to conceive of embodied processes as iterable patterns capable of transmission across various systems and media.[21] According to such a view, bodily sensations do not themselves belong to any particular sensory modality or substance, but instead, are seen as formal arrangements—informational patterns—that can be relayed and accessed through various modalities.

This leads to several interesting consequences for how we read Olson. It is no surprise that many poetry critics bristle at what seems like a naïve realism on Olson's part—his idea that the body is *in* the text or that the text is *of* the body. Olson makes this point quite fervently in the first section of "Projective Verse" when he claims that verse must "*put into itself* certain laws and possibilities of breath, of the breathing of the man who writes" (239; emphasis added). However, it's worth reevaluating the kind of body Olson has in mind. Although Olson references particular sense organs, such as the ear, he by and large views body parts in terms of the processes they enact rather than what they *are* or what they consist of. The poet's goal, then, is not to capture the body per se, but rather, to recording the recordings that the body makes: "…verse will only do in which a poet manages to register…the acquisitions of his ear" (241). Olson elaborates: "…the ear, the ear which has collected, which has listened, the ear, which is so

[20] I stress the potential for transmitting variations (repetition with difference) in order to clarify that Olson is not merely interested in the fidelity of poetic patterns to bodily ones. Although Olson describes a poem as "energy transferred from where the poet got it …by way of the poem itself to…the reader," he clarifies that this process of moving between different formats introduces unforeseeable modifications at every step of the way: "…a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, *yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away*" (240; emphasis added). I return to this passage further on in this chapter, but I cite it now to nuance Olson's claim for the typescript as "a script to its vocalization" (245). While Olson sees in the typewriter the promise of precision—as he puts it, "the intervals of [a poem's] composition could be so carefully put down as to be precisely the intervals of its registration"—Olson also understands that scripts are always subject to unpredictable variations in their inscription and performance, hence Olson's conflicting desire for his bodily patterns to be both reproduced precisely *and* transfigured by the typescript and the reader's voice (246).

[21] That Olson takes this correspondence for granted is particularly interesting given the history of the emergence of free verse. See Brain 88-117; in his essay on nineteenth-century *vers libre*, Brain argues that graphical recording technologies served as models for poets exploring how the nuances of an individual's interior rhythms might be externalized and made legible. The idea that one's inner rhythms could be exteriorized in a "freestanding artwork" meant that "rhythm had to exist at some point…that was not inextricably bound to one particular mode of perceiving it but that remained sufficiently abstract to be transportable across modalities" (90, 95). Graphical recording, which rather than capturing the phenomenological experience of sound, registers oscillations created by the movements of the vocal organs, was understood as indicating this "amodal" sense (95).

close to the mind that it is the mind's, that it has the mind's speed...it is close, another way: the mind is brother to his sister and is, because it is so close, is the drying force, the incest, the sharpener…it is from the union of the mind and the ear that the syllable is born" (246). While I find Olson's gendering of mind and ear problematic, to say the least, I think there is still room for a more sympathetic reading of this passage.[22] Working against the explicit gendering and implicit genitalization of mind and ear is the figure of the ear as collector, which need not be read in terms of a passive receptivity, but rather can be taken to imply a capacity for attunement. Indeed, a few lines earlier Olson describes the ear's receptivity as an on-going activity: "Listening for the syllables must be so constant and so scrupulous, the exaction must be so complete, that the assurance of the ear is purchased at the highest—40 hours a day—price" (241-42). This description of the process of listening suggests that Olson's interest is not limited to the corporeality of the ear as body part. Rather, Olson is concerned with a different set of issues, including, what an organ *does*, how sensory and mental processes are functionally interrelated, as well as the perceptual and cognitive labor involved in attending to rhythm.

Rather than depicting the body in a sensualist or substantialist manner, Olson describes the body more along the lines of an instrument which, when properly attuned to its environment, registers and acquires information from the outside. While I agree with Nils Röller that Olson stops short of explicitly addressing "the media quality of ear as an organ that modulates waves," I would argue that the very fact that Olson theorizes the typewriter "as an aid" to poetic expression implies that Olson holds a technicized view of the body (204). That is, it only makes sense to think of the typewriter as a device that records the body if one also conceives of the body as recordable—a system that registers, converts, and rearranges the oscillations and rhythms of its environment. I don't want to offer a reductive reading of Olson's understanding of organismic life, but I do want to stress why it is he is able to seriously claim that the body is *in* the poem—a claim that Olson intends not merely as a rhetorical gesture but in a strikingly literal sense. Olson is able to put forth this assertion in a serious manner—without invoking a naïve poetics of presence—because he conceptualizes the body on a highly formal level, focusing on its dynamics and patterns rather than its structural morphology or specific materiality. Thus, the body that gets into the poem is neither a substantial body nor a body represented by language but on the contrary, a collection of formal patterns transmitted across environmental, physiological, mechanical, and textual media.

In others words, the possibility of imprinting the body on the page via the "scoring" capabilities of the typewriter implies both that the body itself is to be understood in terms of formal patterns and that *living and nonliving entities can be dynamically organized to some degree isomorphically*. The cybernetic spirit of these ideas is apparent. Consider, for instance, the way Norbert Wiener depicts the live organism in *The Human Use of Human Beings* (a book in Olson's personal library): "To describe an organism, we do not try to specify each molecule in it, and catalogue it bit by bit, but rather to answer certain questions about it which reveal its pattern" (95). According to Wiener, "the physical identity of an individual does not consist in the matter of which it is made," but rather, "in a certain continuity of process": "Our tissues change as we live: the food we eat and the air we breath become flesh of our flesh and bone of our bone, and the momentary elements of our flesh and bone pass out of our body every day with our excreta. We are but whirlpools in a river of ever-flowing water. We are not stuff that abides, but

[22] For discussions of the role of the (male) gendered body in Olson's poetry see Davidson, *Guys Like Us* 28-48; Blau DuPlessis; and Brown.

patterns that perpetuate themselves" (96). Obviously Wiener is not claiming that bodies are immaterial but that if we are to grasp the significance of an organism's individuality, we shouldn't look for it in any particular piece of matter. Nor is it the case that by cataloguing and summing all the molecules of an organism we will arrive at a meaningful sense of its identity. The organism as a whole, as an individual, can only be grasped in terms of the processes it goes through in order to maintain certain configurations; it is these perpetuated configurations that are relevant to an organism's identity, not necessarily the matter being configured. According to Wiener, one of the consequences of this formal view of an organism is that it allows us to take seriously the idea that a living body could be duplicated and transmitted elsewhere in space. As he puts it: "…the individuality of the body is that of a flame rather than that of a stone, of a form rather than of a bit of substance. This form can be transmitted or modified and duplicated, although at present we know only how to duplicate it over a short distance" (102). Insofar as the body is an informational pattern it is iterable and transmissible, or in Olson's terms, capable of projection.

I want to reiterate that I am less interested in arguing for Wiener's influence on Olson than I am in understanding why Wiener's writings would have resonated with a poet. The answer I'm proposing is that Wiener was deeply invested in imagining and constructing dynamic forms. In the passages I just cited, Wiener refers to the ability of living organisms to maintain and re-organize themselves through a feedback process; but as we know, Wiener's larger claim is that mechanical systems can be similarly configured. It is not difficult to see the resonance here with Olson's own concern: if projectivism is to be a feasible aesthetic practice, rather than just a nice idea, dynamic processes cannot be restricted to the biological sphere; there must be a way to configure inorganic materials so that the textual object holds the flux of embodied experience.

According to Olson, the typewriter—itself an inorganic object—facilitates such a configuration. Insofar as it enables the poet to map his physiological fluctuations upon the spatial layout of the page, the typewriter serves as a hinge between the biological and aesthetic realms. This sense of the typewriter as a connective node between the body and the page offers us a compelling alternative to Friedrich Kittler's theorization of the typewriter.[23] Whereas Olson suggests a productive liaison between the poet's body and the typewriter, Kittler shares Heidegger's anxiety that the typewriter "withdraws from man the essential rank of the hand, without man's experiencing this withdrawal appropriately and recognizing it has transformed the relation of Being to his essence" (Heidegger qtd. in Kittler 199). Despite the apparent non-intrusiveness of this innocuous device, Kittler argues that the typewriter radically transformed the metaphysics of writing, that is, it fundamentally altered the way that we conceive of the relationship between being and language. Whereas the distinctiveness of handwriting preserves a sense of intimacy and fosters the illusion that man's whole spirit flows through the fluid motion of his script, with the typewriter and its bank of discrete letters it becomes possible to conceive of writing as simply a matter of selecting and combining signs. Unlike the printing press, which only transcribed already composed work and thereby preserved the authority of the human author as the originator of the written word, the typewriter intervenes at the very moment of composition.

Thus, with the typewriter, language is untethered from its longstanding association with a unified human spirit; language is made to appear as nothing more than the manipulation of discrete symbols. In this sense, Kittler claims the typewriter ushers in the age of binary

[23] See Kittler 183-266.

computing, where language is reduced to coding.[24] Or to make the same point somewhat differently, the typewriter gives rise to the realization that behind the written word there need not be a human mind or soul, simply the striking of keys. This in turn raises the question: are signs themselves sufficient to make statements—a question which Foucault answers in the affirmation when he finds that "[t]he pile of printer's characters which [he] can hold in [his] hand, or the letters marked on the keyboard of a typewriter" fulfill "all the criteria for an elementary statement" (qtd. in Kittler 229). And is this not also Derrida's question when he asks us what it can possibly mean for language to be invested with an intention?[25]

Yet if, for Kittler, the distinct modules of the typewriter keyboard suggest the autonomy of language (but an autonomy which comes with the loss of the non-divisible, "unsimulable" spirit of man, a tragic autonomy that paves the way for the reductive and predictable binary logic of the digital computer), for Olson, on the other hand, the typewriter represents an entirely different set of possibilities (188). While Olson similarly acknowledges the "rigidity" and "precision" of the typewriter, rather than viewing the discrete-state machine as utterly alien to the dynamics of the living body, he understands it as a tool by which the poet can "score" the rhythms of his breath. Whereas the discrete-state schema of Kittler's typewriter imposes its own logic *on* us, inaugurating a radical and irreversible shift in how we view the activity of meaning-making, Olson's typewriter provides us with an alternative to the suggestions of technological determinism that we find in Kittler. Significantly, Olson's alternative is not an attempt to reclaim the power of subjective expression. Rather, I want to argue that Olson moves us out of the stymie between a nostalgic humanism, on the one hand, and a brute technological determinism, on the other. A projectivist poem is not an expression of an inner spirit or pure subjectivity; the importance that Olson places on the typewriter makes it clear that despite the organicist rhetoric that runs through "Projective Verse," Olson does not want to locate the origin of the work of art *inside* a specifically human form. But if, according to Olson, the origin of artistic activity isn't wholly internal to the human, neither is it the case that the typewriter dictates creative production. Avoiding either of these extremes, Olson's sense of the projective opens up fresh possibilities for how we might readdress the question of human-object relationships.

In order to examine some of these possibilities, I'd like to bring Olson into conversation with Bernard Stiegler's more recent thinking on questions of human inventiveness and technicity. Of particular relevance, are the aspects of Stiegler's thinking that draw on Gilbert Simondon's 1958 philosophic work, *On the Mode of Existence of Technical Objects*. A contemporary of Olson's, Simondon's writing explicitly engages postwar cybernetic theory. The cybernetic "rejection of absolute distinctions among human, animals, and machines" inspired Simondon's effort to develop an "an account of co-constitutive and holistic relations among organic and non-organic beings" (an account which Simondon hoped would redress the assumption that modern technology stands outside of and against human culture) (Hayward 7). Stiegler, picking up Simondon's line of inquiry, argues in the first volume of *Technics and Time* that human creative consciousness and technical objects co-determine one another. According to Stiegler, technical activity cannot be understood solely in terms of a "fabricating intention," internal to the human mind, which precedes and determines the existence of the invented object (75). Arguing that "the technical object invents itself independently of a 'fabricating intention,'"

[24] See Kittler's discussion of how the discrete-state schema of the typewriter anticipates the digital mode of computing developed by Alan Turing and John von Neumann 249.
[25] See Derrida, *Limited Inc*.

Stiegler posits the technical object as a mode of being that confounds the traditional dichotomy between the passivity of inert matter and the activity of a creative consciousness (75). The formal coherence of the technical object is *not* brought about by an external and antecedent transcendent force (the mentality of the designer) which shapes the inert matter into a meaningful organization. Whereas for Aristotle, the technical object must be explained in terms of a human actor who provides the efficient cause, Stiegler argues that "the technical object calls in to play laws of evolution that are immanent to it, even if, as in the case of the living being, they are effected only under the conditions of an environment, to wit,…that of the human and the other technical objects" (71). Thus, for Stiegler, as for Simondon, technical objects—which include artistic works as well as instruments, tools, and machines—are not "authored" by humans in the sense that "they are never consciously conceived and realized by the human" (75). Rather, their realization occurs only "in the experience of the object itself, or, as it were, on stage, and not at the time of conception" (75-76).

According to this line of reasoning, technical objects instantiate a particular type of temporality in which nothing is carried over from the past. The idea that the technical object can only be understood as an emergent or wholly new configuration, that its origin and essence cannot be explained by referring to a previous intention or causality, seems to contradict the way we typically understand the process of skillfully forming matter. As Brian Massumi points out, the origin of the technical object has most often been understood in "purely cognitive" terms as "entirely internal to the human thinking subject" (39). Given this traditional view of origin: "Invention would move from the past of a thought, cognitively fully formed, toward the future of an embodiment materially repeating the original thought's abstract form. The relation of the technical object to its cognitive origin would be one of resemblance: conformity to a formal model" (39). However, in the work of Simondon and Stiegler we move beyond the traditional, Aristotelian view of form-giving. Although a human designer may conceive of a form and then decide to bring different elements together, he remains simply "a helpmate to emergence" (40). It is the precise moment at which the different elements *actually* converge, what Massumi calls the "effective entering-into-relation," that marks the true origin of the technical object (41). Massumi describes this moment in terms of a "leap" or "threshold" in which the logic proper to the object suddenly "clicks it" (39).

Like Simondon and Stiegler, Olson locates the moment of invention in the actual, physical occurrence of the coming together of the aesthetic object—that is, in the poem's literal inscription on the page. Only then does the work emerge as an effective configuration, governed by its own logic. It is precisely this notion of a logic immanent to the object, a logic which can only declare itself in the actual process of the object's emergence, and which the poet himself does not control, that Olson speaks of when he argues: "[f]rom the moment he [the poet] ventures into FIELD COMPOSITION—put himself in the open—he can go by no track other than the one the poem under hand declares, for itself. Thus he has to behave, and be, instant by instant, aware of some several forces…" (240). In an interestingly counter-intuitive sense, Olson understands the act of venturing into "the open" as adhering to a "track" (244). Ostensibly an oxymoron, this notion of an open track helps to clarify what Olson means by "the open." Openness requires that the poet come into contact with the logic of emergence governing the poem's becoming. In a sense, then, the poet will be constrained by the demands of the poem that declares itself, by what Olson calls, "the acting-on-you of the poem" (244). But this constraint is not actually opposed to openness; in fact, it is an instance of openness, because in relinquishing

his position as the sole agent or inventor, the poet becomes integrated into an aesthetic configuration that truly escapes Aristotle's hylomorphic schema. No longer a question of imposing "a pregiven abstract form," the poem's openness consists in the fact that, unlike a "closed form" poem, it cannot be explained in terms of an efficient causality that operates from the outside on it (Massumi 39). Openness, in the sense that Olson understands it, is a state of emergence.

Thus, Olson not only wants to develop a poetic practice which by casting off readymade metrical and rhythmic structures engages the question of form in the moment of composition, he also believes the poem should avoid relying on *anything* that is already constituted—such as a fully formed mental conception or a unitary self. Olson is less interested in expressing an already formed mental or physical state—the mind or body of an individual—than he is in exploring how the process of individuation comes about in the first place: "The objects which occur at every given moment of composition (of recognition, we can call it) are, can be, must be treated exactly as they do occur therein and not by any ideas or preconceptions from outside the poem…" (243). Although the poet obviously plays an important role in the creation of the poem, Olson doesn't want to understand the poem wholly in terms of a body or mentality, which existing before and outside of the act composition, simply imprints itself onto the page. By using "recognition" as a synonym for composition, Olson suggests that the creative act doesn't emerge out of the poet proper, but rather, demands that the poet orient himself toward the elements of language—described here as "objects"—which occur in their own right.

However, in Ron Silliman's view, projectivism depends, at least implicitly, on the notion of an "almost transcendent force" or "pure will…which moves the mind and thus creates a text written on and by the body" (370). According to Silliman's reading, Olson does not quite escape the hylomorphic schema; the shape of the text comes from the "dance of the intellect," which though filtered through the poet's body in the moment of composition, ultimately stands as both the source and aim of poetic expression (Olson qtd. in Silliman 370). Indeed, there are a number of passages in "Projective Verse" in which Olson valorizes the intellect or mind as a significant creative force. The question though is what particular role does Olson attribute to the intellect? Can we take Olson at his word when pointedly calls for "getting rid of the lyrical interference of the individual as ego, of the 'subject' and his soul"? (247) Or, as Silliman claims, despite such rhetoric, does projectivism rest on an implicit hierarchy between "text, body, and mind" in which the text is reducible to a body that, in turn, is moved by the mind? (370).

As should be clear, my position is that Olson's desire to rid the poem of the ego/subject/soul is, in fact, carefully thought out in "Projective Verse." However, if we are to take seriously Olson's rejection of the "the lyrical interference of individual as ego," if we want to pursue the ways in which projectivism poses an alternative to a subjectivist expressionism, we will need to reevaluate the rhetoric of immediacy that dominates much of "Projective Verse." It is quite tempting to see Olson's insistence on the instant of composition as further evidence of a problematic realism in which "[t]he self-sufficient individual…treats expressive moments as extensions of the body and cognition" (Davidson, *Outskirts* 269). This would seem to rest on the fantasy that expression occurs directly and instantaneously, that the inner feelings and thoughts of the poet simply gush out and become present in the world. It is true that Olson emphasizes the immediate—he urges the poet to develop a vigilant attentiveness to "each moment of the going" and to "be, instant by instant, aware" (242-40). However, such phrases might be taken to indicate an attentiveness to the present as an unfolding process (a series of interrelated moments), which,

of course, is not the same thing as a "spontaneous" overflow of the self, occurring directly and all at once.

Understanding Olson's insistence on the "instant" in terms of an aesthetics of spontaneity or a poetics of presence obscures his interest in the dynamics of transmission and the way that different mediums and objects (such as the typewriter) play active roles in shaping the creative product. Why, then, does Olson identify the "instant" as the crucial unit of compositional time? Rather than seeing the instant as a figure for spontaneity or presence, the emphasis on immediacy in "Projective Verse" can be seen in terms of a temporality of emergence, which, according to Stiegler and Simondon, best captures the heterogeneity of forces (organic and non-organic) as they converge to produce a skillfully formed object. Consider the following passage from "Projective Verse," in which Olson makes his most forceful demand for a poetics of immediacy:

> ONE PERCEPTION MUST IMMEDIATELY AND DIRECTLY LEAD TO A FURTHER PERCEPTION…get on with it, keep it moving, keep in, speed, the nerves, their speed, the perceptions, theirs, the acts, the split second acts, the whole business, keep it moving as fast as you can, citizen…always one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER! (240)

According to Daniel Belgrad, "[Olson's] effort to track the flux of energy across his unconscious mind was what created the imperative to keep *in* time—that is, to write spontaneously so as to keep the act of writing abreast of thoughts as they occurred" (123). Belgrad's interpretation of Olson's demand for real-time composition makes it seem as if the primary purpose of composing in the instant is to capture the activity of the mind by registering the coming into being of mental states. However, I would argue that for Olson, the importance of the instant in composition is that it's the point at which *other* agencies—ones that do not pertain to the artistic subject—enter the work.

Prior to the act of inscription, the poem, or the seeds of it, might be said to exist in some provisional state in the mind and body of the poet. However, Olson, being eager to go beyond "the individual as ego," prefers to focus on the moments in which inscription occurs, on the very acts of putting words onto the page, because it is in these moments that the poet forms significant links with nonhuman objects—such as, paper, ink, writing instruments, and what Olson calls the "objects" or "elements" language (247). Thus, rather than understanding artistic expression in terms of a direct transference of a previously experienced mental or physical state, Olson, wary of allowing in anything "properly previous to the act of the poem" which he fears may "sap the going energy of the content toward its form," stresses the moment of composition as an immanent act (243). According to Olson, the "crucial thing" is the poet's level of attentiveness to "the job in hand, from the push of the line under hand at moment, under the reader's eye, in his moment" (243). The phrase "under the reader's eye, in his moment" alerts us to Olson's interest in writing as such which unlike a mental act of composition involves the eye in looking at the hand's work. In this sense, Olson takes the moment of composition in its most literal and plastic sense. It's less a mental act of imagination than the actual mechanics involved in inscribing words on paper.

Although Olson initially describes a poem as "energy transferred from where the poet got it (he will have some several causations), by way of the poem itself to, all the way over to, the reader," he quickly clarifies that we are not to understand the poem as simply transporting some

immutable kinetic force: "…a poet gets in, at all points energy at least the equivalent of the energy which propelled him in the first place, *yet an energy which is peculiar to verse alone and which will be, obviously, also different from the energy which the reader, because he is a third term, will take away*" (240; emphasis added). Thus, far from hypostasizing "energy" as an underlying, transportable force, Olson is interested in tracing the specifics of how "energy" varies as it is reconfigured across a network of aesthetic activity. The moment of composition is the point at which verse's peculiarity takes effect: the transmission of the poet's own physiological and perceptual patterns ceases to be a direct transmission, but rather, becomes shaped, rearranged, and modified by other active, though inorganic, forces. This understanding of composition as a process of mutual modification between internal, organic forces and external, inorganic ones recalls Dewey's remarks: "Were expression but a kind of decalcomania, or a conjuring of a rabbit out of the place where it lies hid, artistic expression would be a comparatively simple matter" (78). In fact, "…the inner material of emotion and idea is as much transformed through acting and being acted upon by objective material as the latter undergoes modification when it becomes a medium of expression" (79).

Yet if, as I'm arguing, Olson doesn't view composition as a matter of exteriorizing an already formed mental or physical state, if instead of locating the origin of the artwork inside a human creator he stresses the instant in which external objects and the peculiarity of language become active forces in modifying the poet's own energies, what then do we make of the moments in "Projective Verse" that seem to unabashedly celebrate the poet's interiority? Olson ends the essay on a striking note of interiority, claiming that T.S. Eliot's writing is "non-projective" because "in his listenings he has stayed there where the ear and the mind are, has only gone from his fine ear outward rather than, as I say a projective poet will, down through the workings of his own throat to that place where breath comes from, where breath has its beginnings, where drama has to come from, where, the coincidence is, all act springs" (249). While it seems that Olson concludes "Projective Verse" by explicitly interiorizing and humanizing the creative impulse, his final call for a poetics that emerges from the depth of a poet's body must be read in light of the complicated inversions between interiority and exteriority that occur earlier in the essay:

> If he [man/the poet] sprawl, he shall find little to sing but himself, and shall sing, nature has such paradoxical ways, by way of artificial forms outside of himself. But if he stays inside himself, if he is contained within his nature as he is participant in the larger force, he will be able to listen, and his hearing through himself will give him secrets objects share. And by an inverse law his shapes will make their own way. It is in this sense that the projective act, which is the artist's act in the larger field of objects, leads to dimensions larger than man. For a man's problem, the moment he takes speech up in all its fullness, is to give his work his seriousness, a seriousness sufficient to cause the thing he makes to try to take its place alongside the things of nature. (247)

Significantly, the distinction between inner man and "the larger field" is not formulated in terms of a physical border, such as the skin, which encapsulates the living man. Nor is it formulated by localizing man's psyche, his consciousness, within a containing body. It seems, rather, that the difference between man's inner self and the larger, natural world is not in fact something that can be *delineated*. The outside and the inside are not quite marked off from one another. The man

who aims directly at the outside only rediscover his self and continues to write the ego-based lyric that Olson objects to, whereas the man who stays "contained within" finds therein "dimensions larger than man."

Thus, when Olson beckons the poet to "go down through the workings of his own throat" we must realize that he is also urging the poet, by this very act, to exceed the limits of the self. If the artist's aim is to create something that can "take its place alongside the things of nature," then to what extent does this act of creation remain tied to a creating self? As Olson puts it, the shapes which are properly man's, end up "mak[ing] their own way." What's more, Olson implies that it's the very fact that they "make their own way" that makes them most properly man's. Or put differently, the artistic self, man as a creative being, is in fact located outside of the self; artistic activity is one of the ways in which man exercises the special ability that humans have of "putting them outside themselves" (Stiegler 193). But if the self is actually located on the outside, then it no longer makes sense to speak of the artist's interior as preceding and determining the exteriorized product. In this sense, Olson's understanding of artistic expression, "the projective act," renders moot the traditional distinction between the exterior world and what is internal to man (the self, interiority, the spirit). Not only is it the case that the art object occupies the paradoxical position of being at once specially of the self *and* ultimately cut off from its maker, the very act of artistic creation, as Olson explains it, also partakes of this paradox. Creative activity is not a movement out of a well-demarcated inner space into an external world. Olson sees in the very depth of the poet "the field at large."

To sum up, for Olson, a poem is not a representation of mental content, but neither is it a straightforward manifestation of the body's rhythms. According to his view, the poem does not simply pour out of the artist's body; rather, the moment of inscription constitutes the poem's autonomy as a coming together of human and nonhuman agencies. The poem declares itself, "for itself," as that which is "acting-on-you"; yet, this declaration only comes about when it is "under hand." By accentuating this interface between a technological process of inscription—the autonomous logic of the "for itself"—and the dynamic processes of living bodies—the specificity of being "under hand"—Olson implies that poetic creativity cannot be reduced to either the physiology of the human organism or to an external technicity, but rather, is made available by a particular manner of linking the two.

In recent years we have tended to view poetry that emphasizes the "itself" of language as opposed to the sort of poetics that lays claim to the body as presence. Yet, in "Projective Verse" Olson offers us a way to think the body and the "itself" together, as part of a single system or process. Olson's typewriter is neither an extension of the body (in Marshall McLuhan's sense), or a figure for interruption (in Kittler's sense), but rather, an object that brings about a meeting between a precise, discrete-state schema and the continuous, variable dynamics of the body.[26] Why such a meeting would be important to Olson should be clear when we remember that the problem of open form centers around the anxiety that form is necessarily selective, partial, and discrete; the worry is that formal objects, by their very nature, will tend toward classification and representation rather than process and continuity. Yet, on the other end of the spectrum, there would be pure flow—unorganized and unexperienced. For Olson, the typewriter, more than being an instrument or a means to an end, enacts a coming together of the discrete and the continuous by facilitating a provisional convergence between the symbolic order of signs and the dynamics of the living organism.

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[26] See McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, especially chapters one and two.

Open Form Across the Disciplines

Projectivism, then, should not be understood as an attempt to forgo organization and constraint. Rather, it marks a serious effort to rethink aesthetic organization (in terms more compelling than the mode of textual unity proclaimed by the New Critics). The desire to produce a formal, bounded work of art that nonetheless carries the dynamics of the "going-on" entails that one take seriously *both* the continual, processual world *and* the reality of organized, stable. For Olson, addressing this interface between the formally bounded and the continuous is not a question of abandoning form in favor of a more immediate or natural method of bodily expression. It is, rather, a matter of interrogating the possibilities of form.[27] Is there a type of form, a mode of organization, which neither ossifies the flow of things nor devolves into chaos? What is the threshold between a static form produced through an exclusionary process of selection and the teaming mass of unstructured experience? What type of artistic practice might mediate between such extremes?

As I suggested in the beginning of this chapter, Olson's interest in accounting for both form and flow is by no means unique to him. It recalls the pragmatist philosophy of William James and John Dewey, the latter of which directly inspired the founding of Black Mountain College, where Olson served as rector from 1951 until the school folded in 1956. In *Art and Experience*, Dewey describes the relationship between form and flux as an essentially aesthetic issue: "Because the actual world, that in which we live, is a combination of movement and culmination, of breaks and re-unions, the experience of a living creature is capable of esthetic quality" (16). Hoping to uncover "the continuity of esthetic experience with normal processes of living," Dewey rejects the common conception of art, in which works are "isolated from the human condition[s] under which [they were] brought into being" (9, 1). This isolation proceeds partly from the fact that works are "products that exist externally and physically" as well as from the prestige associated with "classic" works, which tends to reinforce their "existence apart from [everyday] human experience" (1). The question, then, becomes how to best acknowledge the obvious fact that works exist "externally and physically" while also paying tribute to the activities of composition and reception? In other words, how do you theorize the artwork as a particular kind of object—an object that not only maintains but powerfully manifests its linkage with human activity?

[27] What makes Olson such a compelling figure, in my view, is his refusal to prioritize between form and flux; he insists on holding a double commitment, acknowledging the necessity and validity of both tendencies. This double commitment poses a counterpoint to Graham Harman's concern that process-oriented and poststructuralist philosophies reduce objects to relations, thereby turning the universe into "a holistic blend-o-rama in which everything melts into a perfectly interrelated lump…" (198). According to Harman, the only way to prevent the "blend-o-rama" is to concede that objects are both prior and irreducible to the relations and interactions that they enter into. Olson's interest in process philosophy—particularly his admiration for Alfred North Whitehead—has been much commented on. See Blaser; Bram; and von Hallberg, "Olson, Whitehead." However, the fact that it is possible to read Olson as process *and* object oriented (as Nathan Brown has argued) is not a fluke. Arguably, it's due to the fact that in projectivist poetics, and perhaps the case may be made for process philosophies more generally, the emphasis is on trying to think process/relationality/flux *in conjunction* with the obvious reality of bounded, discrete objects. Contra to Harman, a commitment to process need not devolve into a free-for-all. Olson cares about continuous processes precisely because he wants to offer a better account of the discrete object.

This dynamic conception of aesthetic organization—which allows us to consider formal, crafted objects in non-static terms—emerges out of Dewey's effort "to restore continuity between the refined and intensified forms of experience that are works of art and the everyday events, doings, and sufferings that are universally recognized to constitute experience" (2). Dewey begins by locating the source of aesthetic experience "below the human scale" in the biological life processes that we share with other organisms (18). Since the fundamental experience of an organism consists of a process of continual adjustments to the tensions of its environment, Dewey argues, we can see the basis for aesthetic organization in the organism's achievement of equilibrium:

> Life itself consists of phases in which the organism falls out of step with the march of its surrounding things and then recovers unison with it… And, in a growing life, the recovery is never mere return to a prior state, for it is enriched by the state of disparity and resistance through which it has successfully passed. If the gap between organism and environment is too wide, the creature dies. If its activity is not enhanced by the temporary alienation, it merely subsists. Life grows when a temporary falling out is a transition to a more extensive balance of the energies of the organism with those of the conditions under which it lives.
>
> These biological commonplaces are something more than that; they reach to the roots of the esthetic in experience. The world is full of things that are indifferent and even hostile to life… Nevertheless, if life continues and if in continuing it expands, there is an overcoming of factors of opposition and conflict; there is a transformation of them into differentiated aspects of higher powered and more significant life. The marvel of organic, of vital, adaptation through expansion (instead of by contraction and passive accommodation) actually takes place. Here in germ are balance and harmony attained through rhythm. Equilibrium comes about not mechanically and inertly but out of, and because of, tension. (12-13)

The important thing to note here is that equilibrium is not a state of repose or a restoration of the status quo; it is an active process that involves both passing through *and* being indelibly marked by tension and discord. For Dewey, aesthetic experience is a consequence of this capacity for attaining balance "out of, and because, of tension"—a capacity deep-rooted in biological activity rather than in a specifically human consciousness.

In Dewey's view, then, the art object is not static; it evolves out of tensions which become organized and integrated not through a simple layering of one element on top of the next, or a passive "taking in," but only through a dynamic and total reconstruction. To put it more precisely, Dewey distinguishes between "fixation," the halting or circumventing of tension, and "maturation," an altogether *new* state reached through a process of adaptive activity (42). So while the aesthetic exists in everyday life—it's the integral quality that marks any distinctive experience—as well as in the works and objects that populate the more rarefied realms of museums, private collections, patrimonial sites, etc., what links them both, what defines the aesthetic as such, is that it always involves a particular type of organization: it occurs whenever "a stable, even though *moving* equilibrium is reached" (13; emphasis added). Although the aesthetic often appears as an integral whole, as *a* work or *an* experience, Dewey reminds us that the moment of integration is not an instance of "arrest," but the expression of a cumulative

movement; it is "the manifestation of the continuity of an ordered temporal experience in a sudden discreet instant of climax" (24). It is precisely this sense of continuity shooting through a "fixed" (or rather, mature) form that Olson hopes a projectivist poetics will accomplish.

In the early twentieth-century, pragmatist approaches—such as Dewey's effort to overturn the static, reified conception of art and James's critique of the disconnect between discourse and vital experience—attested to an emerging concern that questions of wholeness and dynamic interactivity had yet to be adequately theorized. Beginning roughly in the late nineteenth century and continuing through the first half of the twentieth century, thinkers from a range of disciplines turned their attention to what they perceived as the inadequacy of a mechanistic worldview, while nonetheless hoping that this problem could be solved without abandoning the terms of natural science. Whereas classical empiricism dissolved the experienced world into segregate pieces of sensation connected through purely formal relations, relations which Hume famously maintained we have no perceptual access to, the radical empiricism that James proposed in *Principles of Psychology* offered an account of the direct perception and felt immediacy of relations. Similarly, gestalt psychology rejected the notion that human perception and behavior could be described in terms of a stimulus-response formula. In contrast to the mechanistic view that mental phenomenon can be resolved into elementary units—discrete bits of stimuli that, point-by-point, enter from outside the organism—gestalt psychologists argued that perception is organized by functional wholes, dynamic self-distributions which are themselves primary and not merely summations of smaller, isolated units.[28] To this list we can of course add the process-oriented philosophies of Henri Bergson and Alfred White Northead (one of Olson's greatest influences), as well as the cybernetic attempt to model machines after the dynamic, recursive processes of living beings. Taken together, these efforts to move beyond a reductively mechanistic worldview compose what Bruno Latour has termed the "second empiricism." Latour describes the second empiricism as equally, if not more, committed to the "real and objective" but also as "livelier, more talkative, active, pluralistic and…mediated" (115). It is perhaps best understood as a sophisticated materialism, which rather than decomposing our experience of the world into the purposeless play of particles—and then facing the problem of how to add value and relations back into the "bare," isolate facts—aims, instead, at offering a robust account of relationality, wholeness, creative synthesis, etc.

This move away from the older empiricism of classical science is nicely summarized by system theorist Ludwig von Bertalanffy:

> The only goal of [classical] science appeared to be analytical, i.e., the splitting up of reality into ever smaller units and the isolation of individual causal trains. Thus, physical reality was split up into mass points or atoms, the living organism into cells, behavior into reflexes, perception into punctual sensations… We may state as characteristic of modern science that this scheme of isolable units acting in one-way causality has proved to be insufficient. Hence the appearance, in all fields of science, of notions like wholeness, holistic, organismic, gestalt, etc., which all signify that, in the last resort, we must think in terms of systems of elements in mutual interaction. (45)

The dynamics of mutually interactive parts, of "phenomenon not resolvable into local events," is what Bertalanffy expressly set out to theorize in his 1968 work, *General System Theory* (37). By

[28] See Köhler and Wertheimer.

"investigating the isomorphy of concepts, laws, and models in various fields," Bertalanffy hoped to arrive at a general system theory capable of elucidating principles of interaction applicable to *any* kind of system, irrespective of its component parts.

This effort to formulize the relational principles of wholistic processes, principles which when formulated at a high enough level of generality could apply to social, cultural, and economic systems as well as mechanical and biological ones, was already well underway in the cybernetic theory of the 1940s. Thus, in a manner not dissimilar to the earlier pragmatist philosophy, cybernetics marks a step away from the kind of reductionism that attends the mechanistic worldview of classical empiricism and Newtonian physics, since it identifies and understands formal organization in light of the circuitous movements and translocal interactions that characterize whole systems. One can readily see how the belief that these processes could be grasped *formally* without severing their wholeness and *reproduced* (either literally in the construction of a similarly functioning entity or as a widely applicable conceptual construct) parallels Olson's notion of an open form—his idea that an aesthetic object might formally instantiate the processual, rhythmic flow of lived experience. Yet, here we might take pause to ask whether Olson's theory of poetry does not in fact represent a move contrary to the cybernetic spirit of thinking across the distinction between the organic and inorganic? Should we not see Olson's focus on corporeal rhythm and lived experience as an attempt to claim biology as the essential substrate of the aesthetic? Does he, as so much Olson scholarship has argued, offer us a fundamentally organicist interpretation of aesthetic form, which, of course, is not the same thing as eschewing the significance of the organic-inorganic distinction. [29]

We need to be careful in answering this question. Whereas a great deal of Olson criticism sees in his poetics a revival of "organic form," Nathan Brown has recently argued that Olson's interest in biological and organic processes does not reflect an essential division between living and nonliving entities, but that to the contrary, "Olson is careful…to specify that the body's operations as an organism are only a *subset* of its facticity as an object" (n. pag.). Brown's essay draws attention to the understudied implications of Olson's "objectism"—the "stance toward reality" described in "Projective Verse" in which man recognizes that "whatever he may take to be his advantages," he "is himself an object" (247).[30] Rather than treating Olsonian objectism as a throwback to the modernist Objectivist poets, Brown suggests how objectism reaches forward into the twenty-first century, proposing a particular resonance between Olson's objectism and the challenge to the organic-inorganic distinction posed by nano- and bio-technologies.

Along the lines proposed by Brown, I'd like to suggest that we situate Olson's interest in dynamic organization at a point of transition between the biological vision of process that dominates the early part of the twentieth century and the more technologically oriented approach

[29] McCaffery argues that Olson offers an "anthropological poetics," which locates the creative impulse within "the biological makeup of the human species" (45). For other accounts of Olson's emphasis on the living body and its physiological functions, see Watten, Perloff, and Silliman.

[30] As Michael Davidson points out, Olson's discussion of "objectism," which occurs in the second section of "Projective Verse," has received far less attention than the "poetics of orality and physicality" which dominates the first section of the text (*Outskirts* 132). Rather than feeling compelled to pick an Olson—the Olson who rejects the ego and emphasizes the poem's "facticity as an object" versus the Olson who naturalizes the poem as an extension of the (male) body—I'm interested in the fact that both of these tendencies exist within a single text. The necessary project, as I see it, is to account for the togetherness of these seemingly contradictory ways of approaching poetic composition. Olson's interest in cybernetics, a science that thought objects and bodies together, points toward a way of understanding some of Olson's most baffling inconsistencies.

that appears in the mid-century.[31] As I have been arguing, Olson's concern over open form concords with a growing interest in the question of dynamic organization—an interest which traversed a number of different intellectual and creative domains. Whereas in the first half of the century this question provoked new ways of conceptualizing organic processes (whether perceptual, mental, or behavioral), by the mid-century cybernetics and system theory take up the same question but with reference to the technological sphere. In other words, the biological approach that we find in pragmatism, gestalt psychology, and Bergson's philosophy, addresses the question of dynamic interaction as it pertains to living organisms, that is, it pursues a particular modality of existence. Alternatively, in cybernetics and systems theory the question of dynamic unity is not restricted to any particular realm, essence, or mode of existence. Thus, as Simondon describes it, cybernetics poses a "transcategorical knowledge...particularly fit to grasp the universality of a mode of activity, [or] of a regime of operation" ("Technical Mentality" 18). A transcategorical knowledge, or in Hayles's terms, an "analogical mode of thinking," "…leaves aside the problem of the atemporal nature of beings and of the modes of the real; it applies to their functionings; it tends towards a phenomenology of regimes of activity, without an ontological presupposition that is relative to the nature of that which enters into activity" (18). In leaving aside the problem of essences and modes of existence, a transcategorical knowledge never exhaustively describes a domain or region but instead, "accounts for a certain number of effects" within a domain and "allows for passage from one domain to another" (18).

This transcategorical knowledge held a special appeal for Olson. While on the one hand, Olson repeatedly describes the *difference* between the thingy-ness of the art object and the fluctuations of the live body, he just as frequently writes of the need to bridge the separation between these two admittedly distinct orders. The cybernetic spirit of thinking across domain specificity offers a way of refocusing the problem of the continuity (or lack thereof) between art and life. Furthermore, it gives us a way to rethink the so-called naïve realism of Olson's demand for a body-text connection. Along these lines, I don't read Olson as trying to root the aesthetic *in* the living, so much as I understand him to be concerned with the type of passage that might be made between these quite different modes of existence. Rather than positing biology as the origin of the aesthetic, what he is really concerned with is how to pass over from one sphere into the next without losing the kinds of dynamic tensions described by Dewey.

It is this concern for a way of passage between two seemingly incommensurable orders of existence—the apparent fixity of the inscribed poem and the on-going character of experience as it's lived—that I believe drew Olson to cybernetics. So while Dewey stands as the figure whose thinking marked the inception of Black Mountain College in 1933, I'd like to consider Norbert Wiener as the figure standing at the other end of the college's lively twenty-three year history.[32] In the summer of 1954 Olson wrote to Wiener, inviting him to serve on Black Mountain College's newly formed advisory council. Wiener responded promptly, thanking Olson for the

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[31] This is not to diminish or ignore the modernist interest in technology, which many scholars have explored. See Hugh Kenner, *The Mechanic Muse*; Lisa Steinman, *Made in America: Science, Technology, and American Modernist Poets*; Tim Armstrong, *Modernism, Technology, and the Body: A Cultural Study*; Mark Goble, *Beautiful Circuits: Modernism and the Mediated Life*; Sara Danius, *The Senses of Modernism: Technology, Perception, and Aesthetics*; and Robert Michael Brain, *The Pulse of Modernism: Physiological Aesthetics in Fin-de-Siècle Europe*. Nonetheless, the midcentury rhetoric of information is historically and aesthetically distinct from the modernist rhetorics of technology, which tend to cast thermodynamic "energies" and high-powered machinery as agents capable of reconfiguring (for better or for worse) the texture of psychobiological reality.

[32] For histories of Black Mountain College see Katz and Duberman.

invitation, which he accepted as "a high honor."[33] As Olson explained in his letter to Wiener, the purpose of forming the advisory council was to garner public enthusiasm for the college at a time when enrollment had plummeted and funding was scarce. Its members, which besides Wiener, included Albert Einstein, geographer Carl Sauer, abstract-expressionist painter Franz Kline, and poet William Carlos Williams, would demonstrate, by the very fact of their membership, "that leading scholars, artists and citizens know of the work of the College and believe in the principles of education on which it was founded…."[34] Despite Olson's efforts, the college folded in 1956. Nonetheless, Olson's appeal to this diverse group of prominent scientists and artists represents something more than a last-ditch effort to secure public support. It is not only a testament to Olson's deep-seated conviction in the compatibility of the sciences and the arts, and in this sense an extension of his earlier effort to establish an Institute in the New Sciences of Man, but it also speaks to a historically specific moment. In recent years we have seen an increase in conversation between the natural sciences and the humanities (however, the form that this takes often leaves something to be desired, particularly in the case of neuro-aesthetics, which attempts to "explain" art in terms of internal, neural activity) but recent energy towards bridging the humanities and the sciences notwithstanding, it is rather difficult to imagine that nowadays two world-famous scientists would not hesitate to attach their names to a tiny, experimental art school on the verge of financial collapse. Or conversely, that an artistic director would mention figures like William Carlos Williams—at the time still an obscure poet—and Norbert Wiener in the same breath.

To conclude, then, let us recall that a common complaint lodged against Olson is that although he emphasizes the body rather than the intellect, his critique of humanism falls flat since he continues to conceive of language and art as the direct outpourings of a human creator. By contextualizing Olson's engagement with the problem of open form within a multidisciplinary framework, and by remembering that the relationship between continuous and discrete orders is a question as alive in the sciences as it is in the arts, we gain access to a different version of Olson—an Olson whose understanding of free verse neither presupposes a romanticized notion of authorial interiority nor lays claim to a naïve poetics of presence; an Olson who acknowledges and confronts the profound difference between formal objects and vital experience. And yet, he holds out the hope that if poetry doesn't simply flow out of man's inner core, there are nonetheless, many possible interfaces between minds, bodies, and objects, which lead to poems.

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[33] Letter, Norbert Wiener to Charles Olson, August 11, 1954, Norbert Wiener Papers 1898-1966 (MC.0022), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

[34] Letter, Charles Olson to Norbert Wiener, August 1, 1954, Norbert Wiener Papers 1898-1966 (MC.0022), Institute Archives and Special Collections, MIT Libraries, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Chapter Two
"A Line That May Be Cut": Larry Eigner's Bio-Writing

> *No brief biography of Larry Eigner could conclude without remarking the extent to which (more, even, than for Emily Dickinson?)* writing was his life.
>
> —Robert Grenier, "Larry Eigner Biography"

> *The simple act of recording anything on paper is already an immense transformation that requires as much skill and just as much artifice as painting a landscape or setting up some elaborate biochemical reaction.*
>
> —Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*

In 1963 Robert Creeley provokingly claimed: "It's just as relevant what size paper you use as whether or not you think you're writing a sonnet. In fact, it's more relevant" (41). Creeley's remark bespeaks the postwar desire to abandon intellectualist and humanist approaches to poetic composition; what matters is not what you think you're doing, but rather, the materials you use to do it. While Olson's account of the typewriter, examined in the previous chapter, stands as one of the most influential postwar theorization of a de-anthropized writing process, the figure from this generation of poets whose work arguably best demonstrates the creative possibilities of inorganic media is Larry Eigner.

Olson's theorization of a meaningful link between the typewriter and the poet's body took on a particular importance for Eigner, who typed nearly his entire oeuvre—which consists of a staggering 3,000 plus poems—leaning for support on his manual typewriter, using only his thumb and right index finger to work the keyboard. Due to cerebral palsy—developed at birth as a result of delivery complications—Eigner experienced severely limited mobility and muscle control. He spent the first fifty-eight years of his life living in his parents' home in Swampscott Massachusetts, composing poems on a 1940 Royal typewriter, which he received as a Bat Mitvah gift in lieu of the traditional pen and pencil set. With his typewriter, Eigner recorded the sights and sounds of his immediate environment in projectivist fashion, that is, by transposing them into intricate spatial patterns of words across the page.

While a number of critics have described Eigner's "typewriter calligraphy" as an exemplification and development of Olson's principles, often with the suggestion that Eigner's prosthetic relationship to the typewriter redeems Olson's idealization of the male body, it is interesting to note that Eigner himself doesn't give Olson all the credit for envisioning the typewriter-poet coupling.[35] In a letter to Clayton Eshleman, Eigner mentions, "having read N. Wiener's *Cybernetics* in '50 or '51 before I saw 'Projective Verse'" (n. pag.). This casual remark, which Eigner makes in passing, reveals Eigner's cognizance of the link between cybernetics and the projectivist tradition. As I have argued, the cybernetic emphasis on analogy resonated with postwar poets—particularly Olson but also Robert Duncan, Creeley, and others—who were interested in establishing an isomorphy between nonliving configurations (works of

[35] Both Grenier and Faville describe Eigner's work as "typewriter calligraphy," a phrase they borrow from one of Eigner's poems, and which signifies a hybridization of industrial and artisanal practices. See Grenier's introductory remarks in Eigner, *Collected Poems I* xii, and Faville's appendix in *IV* xxvii-xxxiii, "The Text as an Image of Itself." For a discussion of Eigner's relationship to Olsonian projectivism see Silliman, "Who Speaks" and Forrest, "The Body of the Text."

art, spatial arrangements of words on the page, etc.) and living systems, such as the live environment or the poet's body. In Eigner's work, the analogic relationships between vital, technical, and aesthetic systems are often explicitly thematized:

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branches
and  wires
    the distance  becomes  snow
        spaces renewed  lines
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(*Collected Poems II* 621)

With its sparse, concrete beginning, the poem brings to mind Pound's imagist dictum, "direct treatment of the thing," and Williams's nominalist "no ideas but in things." But although in one sense Eigner presents the "things" of a quotidian scene, the poem doesn't aspire toward a direct presentation of the thing-in-itself, as though the mediating structure of language could be somehow circumvented. In fact, the "branches" and "wires" function less as positive presences, less as things readily available to a perceptual consciousness, than as opportunities for imagining and investigating the negative "spaces" and "distance[s]" among things. The spaces charted are notably multifarious: perceptual (the gestalt formed by the lines of branches and wires against a background of snow), technological (the distance between parties communicating telephonically), medial (the poet's conversion of blank space into the variegated "spaces" that intersperse and "[renew]" the "lines" of verse), as well as meteorological (snow as the localization, the here and now, of very distant atmospheric conditions). And just as space is figured variously, the lines Eigner refers to are at once vegetal (branches), technological (wires), and aesthetic (verse). In this manner, Eigner's poem thinks across, and over, the distinctions that ostensibly separate different domains of existence and regimes of activity.[36]

Or consider the following poem, which all but pushes the inanimate-animate analogy to a breaking point:

```
so the words go up
into thin air

       parlor   the speaking
     room

                     birds pass the window
                    a plane lengthens through fog
                       or cloud bends away
                      the curves together

                            the phone the hallway
                               all my life
```
(*CP II* 685)

[36] Insofar as this poem imagines the world as interpenetrating mental, geological, technological, and medial spaces, it departs from the anxiety expressed in Objectivist poetry—namely, the fear "of becoming 'uprooted' from the natural world" through language and ideation (Mackey 129). In the poetics of Pound, Williams, and Olson—all crucial influences on Eigner—"mistrust of language's capacity for abstraction leads to an insistence on the accountability of words to concrete actions and things" (Mackey 130). In Eigner's poem, however, there is no primordial nature or "thing-in-itself" for language to reestablish contact with, and no pre-phonetic, concrete language (Olson's glyph or Pound's ideogram) to recover. Rather than paying homage to the tangible particulars of a natural, unmediated world, Eigner's poem achieves a more subtle effect: it reminds us that what ostensibly appears as an absence, as empty space or distance, may turn out to be the grounds of a becoming or renewal.

In a poem devoted to tracing the modulations of different entities—from the ephemerality of speech, to the subtle variations in animal, technological, and atmospheric forms of motion, to the apparent fixity of the built structures that frame domiciliary space—the summative force of the final phrase, "all my life," feels incongruous. Since it immediately follows "the phone the hallway," it is tempting to read "all my life" as an oblique reference to Eigner's physical confinement in his parents' house. However, the phrase has a more radical function. It throws into confusion the entire poem, that is, the entire project of tracing the morphology of everyday forms. What could the "all" in "all my life" possibly signify? Compared to the other structures that populate the poem, structures whose subtle differences and distinctive tangibilities are not lost on Eigner, what is the status of life? Do the "all" and the "my" give a form to the life, or do they not, rather, accentuate the impossibility of tracing a life's structure, as if life admitted of summation, being, like the phone or the hallway, a mere thing, an event gatherable as an "all," or possessable as a "my"?

But if, on the one hand, this poem accentuates the utter distinctiveness of a life—life as an immeasurable mode of existence that stands in contrast to the *hic and nunc* object world—on the other hand, it flirts with the possibility of flattening out this difference, of placing life on nearly the same level as phone and hallway. As in the previous poem, there are no hard-edged distinctions between subjects and objects (just as there is no wholly natural, unmediated sphere of existence for language to regain contact with). In cybernetic fashion, Eigner qualifies life's specificity by compressing the question of life into the apparatuses and architectures of a built environment. And yet, if Olson, following Wiener, imagined a seamless coupling between the live body and its techno-environmental surroundings, Eigner's analogies compress without altogether collapsing the difference between living beings and the inanimate world.

While cybernetics marked a new direction in twentieth-century conceptualizations of life—and in artistic experiments to map the living body onto the page or canvas—it is important to realize that it did not represent a total departure from the vitalist framework.[37] Even at the height of cybernetics' influence, theories attentive to the specificity of life, to the limits of the organism-machine comparison continued to develop. Given Eigner's interest in the interstices between the living and nonliving, Simondon's philosophy, which cuts across the vitalism-mechanism divide while remaining cognizant of life's distinctiveness, is especially illuminating.[38] For Simondon, a living being is always more than an aggregated sum of organs, and it is precisely this irreducible wholeness that Simondon argues is crucial to grasping the distinction between technics and life:

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[37] As Norbert Wiener remarks in *Cybernetics*: "[T]he modern automaton exists in the same sort of Bergsonian time as the living organism; hence there is no reason in Bergson's considerations why the essential mode of functioning of the living organism should not be the same as that of the automaton of this type" (44). While Wiener describes vitalism as a defeated perspective, he clarifies that what has been defeated are not the creative, recursive properties of self-modifying configurations, but the claim that these properties are unique to life. "In the end," Wiener writes, "the vitalist proved too much. Instead of building a wall between the claims of life and those of physics, the wall has been erected to surround so wide a compass that both matter and life find themselves in it" (*Cybernetics* 38).

[38] In *On the Mode of Existence*, Simondon critiques Wiener, arguing that even from an operational point of view a living being cannot be understood as equivalent to a technical object: "There is one element that threatens to make the work of cybernetics to some degree useless as an interscientific study (though this is what Norbert Wiener defines as the goal of his research), the basic postulate that living beings and self-regulated technical objects are identical" (42).

> What technical activity produces is not an absolutely indivisible organism that is metaphysically one and indissoluble. The technical object can be repaired; it can be completed; a simple analogy between the technical object and the living is fallacious, in the sense that, at the moment of its very construction, the technical object is conceived as something that may need control, repair, and maintenance, through testing, and modification, or, if necessary, a complete change of one or several of the subsets that compose it. ("Technical Mentality" 19)

Interestingly, and somewhat surprisingly, Simondon follows these remarks by cautioning against adopting "the holistic postulate"—namely, "an attitude of respect for life, a person, or the integrity of a tradition" simply on the basis of its wholeness (19). According to Simondon: "To accept or reject a being wholesale, because it is a whole, is perhaps to avoid adopting a more generous attitude: namely, that of careful examination. A truly technical attitude would be more refined than the easy fundamentalism of a moral judgment…" (19). The aspect of "holism" Simondon objects to is not the idea that living organisms are integrated, irreducible wholes (an idea he clearly shares with physician and philosopher Georges Canguilhem).[39] Rather, as Brian Massumi clarifies, Simondon objects to philosophies that "[attribute] a foundational ontological priority to the whole rather than rightly placing it on the level of emergent effect" (Massumi 41).

In Simondon's philosophy, the indissolubility of the living whole, its status as more than a sum, is not a first principle but "a relative reality, a certain phase of being" ("Position" 5). Western philosophy, Simondon argues, has mishandled the question of individual beings by assuming that it is the already constituted individual "that is the interesting reality, the reality that must be explained" ("Position" 4). This approach, which first identifies a formed individual and then steps back to search for an originating principle, fails to produce a real account of an individual's ontogenesis. In supposing the existence of an individuating principle, a first term that would explain why the individual is an individual, one misses the ontogenic process altogether; any first term, Simondon points out, must already be an individual or, at least, something individualizable. As he puts it, "If there were not a certain inherence of haecceity to the atom, the matter or the form, there would be no possibility of finding a principle of individuation within these realities" ("Position" 4). In this sense, the search for first terms cannot lead to a direct description of ontogenesis. It merely displaces the question of the nature of individuation onto supposedly more primary planes of reality. Thus, Simondon proposes to reverse the steps of inquiry. Rather than attempting to "pass quickly through the stage of individuation in order to arrive at the final reality that is the individual," he prioritizes the operation of individuation—the process of becoming—and claims "*to know the individual through the individuation, rather than the individuation through the individual*" ("Position" 5; author's emphasis).

Simondon's approach to individuation is key to understanding his rejection of the cybernetic analogy between organism and machine. That is to say, Simondon differentiates living and nonliving entities on the basis of different regimes of individuation:

> In the domain of the living…individuation no longer occurs, as in the physical domain, only in an *instantaneous*, brusque and definitive manner that is like a

[39] See Canguilhem, *The Normal and the Pathological*.

> quantum leap... This type of individuation also exists for the living being as an absolute origin; but it is accompanied by a perpetual individuation, which is life itself, according to the fundamental mode of becoming: *the living conserves within itself a permanent activity of individuation*. ("Position" 7; author's emphasis)

Despite Simondon's rejection of a functional equivalence between living beings and technical objects, there is a noticeable cybernetic vein to his style of thought. Like Wiener, who argues, "the physical identity of an individual does not consist in the matter of which it is made," but rather, "in a certain continuity of process," Simondon is uninterested in distinctions between organic and inorganic matter (*Human Use* 101). Although he insists on the specificity of life, his thinking is congruent with cybernetic theory insofar as he brackets questions of material substances, and chooses, instead, to describe specific operational patterns. But, unlike the cyberneticists, he finds significant differences between the functioning of living and nonliving beings. The living being, according to Simondon, never completes itself; it is, rather, a "perpetual individuation."

Issues of individuation—how entities begin, end, and connect to what lies outside, the ways in which they perpetuate or dissolve their borders, whether or not they complete themselves (or, are, in essence, capable of completion)—are at the very heart of Eigner's poetics, as well as his reflections on life:

> No really perfect optimum mix, anyway among some or many thousands of distinct(ive) or distinguishable things (while according to your capacity some minutes, days or hours, 2,4 or 6 people, say, are company rather than crowds), and for instance you can try too hard or too little. But beyond the beginning or other times and situations of scarcity, with material (things, words) more and more dense around you, closer at hand, easier and easier becomes invention, combustion, increasingly spontaneous. And when I got willing to stop anywhere, though for years fairly in mind had been the idea and the aim of long as possible works about like the desire to live for good or have a good (various?) thing never end, then like walking down the street noticing things a poem would extend itself. […] Near and far—wide and narrow (circles). Your neighborhood and how much of the world otherwise. Beginning, ending and continuing. As they come, what can things mean? Why expect a permanent meaning? What weights, imports? A poem can't be too long, anything like an equatorial highway girdling the thick rotund earth, but is all right and can extend itself an additional bit if you're willing enough to stop anywhere. (*Areas* 125)

Embedded in this "prose adventure"—a cross-genre piece, first published on the front page of the inaugural issue of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E magazine—we find Eigner's cardinal principle, namely, the readiness "to stop anywhere." With this principle, Eigner articulates an alternative vision to the modernist epic, to those "long as possible" works (e.g. *The Cantos, Paterson, Maximus*) that remain caught up in "the desire to live for good." The aspiration toward length is, Eigner suggests, intimately connected to the human dread of impermanence and the hubristic quest for immortality.

Thus, as Eigner understands it, a willingness to stop anywhere is not only an aesthetic principle but also an ethical orientation. More precisely, it is a framework that allows for the co-articulation of the aesthetic and ethical spheres, enabling Eigner to move easily from questions of sociality (what is the difference between company and crowd?) to economic conditions of scarcity to an ecopoetics *avant la lettre* ("a poem can't be too long, anything like an equatorial highway girdling the thick rotund earth").[40] In a 1977 interview, Eigner remarks on the subject of Pound's anti-Semitism: "trying too hard to create gets you no place or hardly anywhere—you may mean to write a great lengthy poem but it doesn't come off much or not at all unless you're fairly willing to settle for less or stop anywhere" (*Areas* 159). And, in response to a question regarding the Israel-Palestine conflict, he imaginatively projects himself into a site of violence, envisioning that, in his wheelchair, he would be a "sitting duck" for "bullets or bombs"—yet, he concludes: "you always want in some degree to go on living forever, yet you have to be willing enough to stop sometimes, at least to stop trying to get more security" (*Areas* 161).

For Eigner, then, life and writing meet one another in the sense of being different answers to a foundational question: how much of anything, of "some or many thousands of distinct(ive) or distinguishable things," is enough?[41] "Why expect a permanent meaning," Eigner asks, a question that beckons us to embrace the provisional, to be ready at any moment to stop what we are doing—stop writing, stop trying to get more security, stop even persevering:

```
so what if mankind dies?

   the birds
   the croak and whistle
   has no future, either

so what?
so what?

the future arrives

the end of a stick
in my crotch

toward the speed of light
```
(*CP I* 160)

As Charles Bernstein points out, this poem, composed in 1955, is simultaneously "a comment on progress" emerging from the heart of Cold War America and a reflection on the intersections of sexuality and disability, "a hard-on being just about as far as the future is gonna go for Eigner" ("On Larry Eigner" n. pag.). It offers a powerful anti-reproductive vision of futurity, disposing of mankind with a brisk "so what?"[42]

Yet, one wonders, does the willingness to stop anywhere, to settle for less, tend toward pessimism? Is it fatalistic—a death wish rather than, as I am arguing, a theorization of life? The

[40] Eigner's image of an "equatorial highway" echoes a passage in Ralph Waldo Emerson's essay "Experience": "Everything good is on the highway. The middle region of our being is the temperate zone. We may climb into the thin and cold realm of pure geometry and lifeless science, or sink into that of sensation. Between these extremes is the equator of life, of thought, of spirit, of poetry—a narrow belt" (277).

[41] For an analysis of the ethics of "enough" see Hart's article on Eigner and ecopoetics, "'Enough Defined.'"

[42] See Edelman's critique of reproductive futurities in *No Future*.

trouble is, by interpreting Eigner's "so what" as a figure of finality and closure, one stumbles on an ineluctable irony: the poet who insisted a poem might just as well "stop at any word" went on to produce a staggering oeuvre, writing over forty books during his lifetime. He wrote so much and so frequently, it seems (to recall this chapter's epigraph) that "*writing was his life*."

Crucially, then, the willingness to stop anywhere, as Eigner understands and practices it, is not at odds with fluency. According to Eigner, it is precisely one's readiness to end the poem at any word that paradoxically enables the poem to "extend itself an additional bit." That is, once the poet divests himself of the drive onwards, it is still possible to go on; however, the manner and meaning of achieving continuity change. The poem's "stretch" becomes a fortuitous formation—the effect of various uncertainties and consequent decisions that could, and perhaps should, have been otherwise since there is "[n]o really perfect optimum mix." Thus, Eigner's understanding of an open form—the kind of form that can only ever be provisionally delineated—differs, in a crucial way, from the principle of open composition envisioned by Olson. As we saw in chapter one, Olson dreams of overcoming the selectivity of form-giving by developing an inclusive poetics capable of capturing the plenitude of human experience. Eigner is similarly interested in the possibility of a formal object that partakes of the processual world, yet, for Eigner, it's precisely the introduction of discontinuity that facilitates openness.[43] That is, insofar as a willingness to terminate the poem at any point unsettles the logic of what is in and out of bounds, it generates an alternative to the well-demarcated, autonomous art object.

'A Line That May Be Cut'

Whereas Olson wanted to construct artifacts that would preserve "the continuously changing character of life," Eigner's poetics suggest that discontinuity isn't merely an effect of symbolic language or formal practice rupturing the body's fluidity; in fact, embodied experience is always already marked by discontinuities:

```
  a long
time
    I hadn't looked

        the sky
       corner the eye

      trees  cloud
          as various mists
        among houses

     the view of hills
```

[43] Eigner's thinking on this point recalls Gertrude Stein. Like Eigner, Stein also describes a desire to write "long as possible works." As she puts it in "Poetry and Grammar": "When I first began writing…I was completely possessed by the necessity that writing should go on…" Eventually Stein comes to feel that "[s]topping sometime did not really keep one from going on, it was nothing that interfered, it was only something that happened," and that, in fact, "stopping altogether has something to do with going on" (qtd. in Kwasny 293). Thus, a key feature of Eigner's poetics, which he shares with Stein rather than Olson, is that he does not attempt to overcome language's tendency toward division; rather, in his willingness to stop anywhere, he turns the potential for discontinuity into a means for continuance.

```
               gradations and shapes
                  thought of
                             the finite moved out
                      bind each other
```
(*CP II* 684)

Eigner's halting syntax appears to dramatize the problem of translating the fullness of the experiential world into written language. But, then, to say this, assumes that the poem posits a fullness beyond and outside of language, a fullness that escapes poetry's formal order. In fact, the poem opens by describing a lacuna in the poetic speaker's visual experience, "a long time I hadn't looked." The subsequent lines contain images of peripheral vision and clouded views, suggesting that the condition of not looking carries over into an experience marked by absences and blind spots.

While the imagery of indirect or interrupted perceptual access allows us to chart a series of experiential breaks, the poem's pivotal break occurs with the move from "I" in the first stanzaic cluster to "eye" in the second. The substitution of the definite article "the" for the expected possessive determiner "my" prevents us from identifying the ocular organ, and the ensuing view, as belonging to the speaker—or for that matter, as belonging to anyone in particular. And yet, Eigner doesn't introduce a lyric subject simply to dissolve it. Instead, he constructs a perceptual and cognitive space that holds sway throughout the poem—from the visual imagery of the tree-clouded hills to the "gradations and shapes / thought of"—but this space turns out to be fractured, divided into personal and impersonal registers. In other words, the experiential meat of the poem is both punctuated by gaps and presented as discontinuous with the poetic speaker. I'm insisting on these two modes of discontinuity because I want to be clear that the poem isn't simply an account of breaks in a particular individual's visual field; it's a poem concerned with the way in which personal experience as such may be discontinuous.

Although the phrase, "gradations and shapes / thought of," appears to recuperate the power of a lyric consciousness to synthesize discrete units of perceptual experience, the following lines, "the finite moved out / bind each other" suggest that Eigner is not making an argument for the boundlessness of mental life. As the double sense of "bind" suggests, to connect is also to circumscribe. Wherever thinking and perception happen—whether within or beyond the personal self—boundaries form. Far from being a seamless pulse that needs to be protected from the atomizing forces of language, Eigner describes life as a fractured and fracturing force.

However, there is a danger in setting up a too strong contrast between Olson's love of dynamic wholes and Eigner's motto, "a poem can stop at any word." For instance, consider the following poem:

```
from a fixed point
    the sky works
               out

         bottom of the road bends

                  an oak (old)

      now there another place
                            the plane cuts
```

```
 interior was
               brief
the corn grew
   behind the store  in its angle

 the uprights of counters

        to be hooked
                      panels
       when it rains
   muddily, whitely or

      the blue
        descends

            some familiar shadow
```
(*CP II* 426)

Although it is tempting to interpret the "fixed point" from which the scene unfolds as the poet's location, this point is at once specific and anonymous; we know it is there, but Eigner refuses to clarify whether it's a perceiving mind, a perceptual organ, or a location within the sky itself. While Eigner never specifies who or what initiates the opening perspective, the poem doesn't construct a transcendent, birds-eye view; in fact, many of its phrases imply perspectival vantages, such as the "bottom" of the road that bends the oak, the corn "behind the store in *its* angle," and "the uprights of counters." The poem traces the relational contours between different spatial patterns, which, like a cubist painting, can't be synthesized into a single point-of-view. And yet, this poem, like the last one, *does* present a coherent, familiar landscape. Despite Eigner's choppy syntax, the lines logically follow one another, and they produce a recognizable scenic space. In other words, in these poems fragmentation doesn't function through the modernist devices of parataxis and montage. Instead of setting different scenes beside one another, Eigner creates the sense of a whole that is fractured from within—a whole that is neither seamless nor smooth, and certainly not the product of a localizable subject. But a whole nonetheless.

What agency is responsible for this complexly variegated whole? With the dropped line, "now there another place / the plane cuts," Eigner gestures toward an impersonal geometry, an underlying formal order out of which various scenes and perspectival relations become possible. The word "cuts" is particularly important, in that it describes how discernible regions and points-of-view arise out of breaks in the world's continuum. Whether we read the plane as a geometric figure or as an airplane, in both cases it is something other than a human subject performing the cut. And this is fitting. The turn to the nonhuman reveals that Eigner at once recognizes that disruptions give order and shape to human experience and that humans themselves cannot directly experience the discontinuities in their experience.

I want to dwell on the figure of the cut, and the related notion of a punctuated whole, because these ideas are crucial to Eigner's poetics—not only in terms of how we read individual lyrics, but also in terms of understanding Eigner's compositional practice and the unique materiality of his typescripts. Like Canguilhem, who argued that the unity of the living organism is always provisional and never "referable to a…pre-established type," Eigner locates the body's

dynamism in its openness to disruptions (125).[44] Which means that, for Eigner, creating an animate poem depends less on producing the flow of bodily life as a textual pattern than on modeling the kinds of disruptions and radical reorganizations that organisms undergo. Eigner's poems figure disruption semantically and syntactically, but they also build it into their material structure, in the form of what Eigner calls "line[s] that may be cut."

Eigner frequently typed multiple poems on a single page in part because he wanted to save paper (one of his many ecologically-minded habits). But he also did so to conserve his energy—for Eigner, even the simple act of placing a new sheet in the typewriter involved a considerable effort. To indicate the separation between different poems occupying a single page he would often type a dotted line and the phrase "a line that may be cut" (or playful variations on this phrase—"a line that may or may well be cut," "scissable," "mordable," etc.). These quasi-partitions (unlike solid lines, they indicate *possible* divisions, lines that *may* be cut) appear in many of Eigner's typescripts from the 1960s onwards. While Eigner's careful spacing of letters and words gives his poems the feel of being set-to-the-page, the dotted lines interrupt the integrity of the page as a unit, raising the possibility of detachment, of new units that have not yet splintered off. In this sense, they resist—or at least complicate—the calligraphic aesthetic commonly attributed to Eigner.

If in the digital age of endlessly rearrangeable data it is tempting to look back wistfully to Eigner's typescripts, to regard them as the apex of "old" media art, artifacts of a time when forms were intractably material, "fixed once and for all," as Lev Manovich puts it in his classic study, *The Language of New Media*, we would do well to regard these dotted lines more closely (36). One of the simplest figures, the lowest of low-tech, the dotted line nonetheless invites its own alteration, beckoning us to manipulate, detach, make otherwise. Thus, built into the typescripts is the possibility of ignoring the provisional separation of the poems and reading them together—i.e. considering how the different poems and different elements within the poems are all charged by the page as field (to use Olson's terminology). Alternatively, one could actualize their separateness by severing them, either conceptually or by literally cutting along the dotted line (as Eigner did, or got someone else to do for him, when he wanted to send an individual poem to a friend or publisher).[45] Rather than realizing a particular possibility, the lines mark out a certain distance between the poems and their material support, suggesting that in Eigner's poetry the relationship between meaning and medium is neither one of perfect fusion nor convenient separation. So while the poems are indeed set-to-the-page—aesthetically, but also ethically insofar the desire to save paper expresses an ecological ethos as well as a physical limitation—this 'setting' is also a practice of acknowledging the limitation and partialness of all formats, and therefore, of granting the poems permission to splinter off, to exist discretely in other formats, in short, to be remediated.

If, for Eigner, "*writing was his life*," as the epigraph by Robert Greiner claims, it is not only because he conceptualized writing and life together, as various modalities of enoughness, but relatedly because his writing, like life in general, refuses to manifest itself as a singular

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[44] Canguilhem argues that if life were not radically provisionally, then "to live" would merely mean to "conserve oneself" (*Knowledge of Life* 132). There must, Canguilhem insists, be "a certain latitude, and a certain play in the norms of life," which means that it is never possible to decide in advance whether an aberration, disruption, or organic crisis will be catastrophic (the demise of a life) or the grounds for novelty and experimentation: a new mode of life, a new normal (132).

[45] My thanks to Robert Grenier for describing to me the details of Eigner's compositional process, especially the practical value of the dotted lines.

instantiation. As I have shown, this refusal to entertain wholeness as anything other than an emergent, provisional formation operates at each level of Eigner's creative practice—from his compositional principle of stopping anywhere to the process of making the typescripts, which, far from being singular originals, interrupt their own continuity to propose further individuations.[46]

And yet, given Eigner's painstaking compositional process, the immense care he took to organize his lettering spatially, it is understandable that his readers would want to preserve the original dimensionality of his typescripts, either in a facsimile edition or with a Courier computer font. The editors of *The Collected Poems of Larry Eigner*—a four-volume edition published in 2010—take the latter approach, citing Eigner's adage, "everything you do on the page matters," to justify their decision to replicate the dimensions of Eigner's typescripts using an equivalently spaced Courier font and an 8 ½ x 11 inch page. The end result, however, was denounced by Steven Fama, who claimed the edition had "profoundly violated" Eigner's poems by using a consistent margin throughout (rather than setting each poem individually). Although the editors and Fama all seem to agree that the typescripts are the "true" or original poems, they have differing conceptions of what this originality consists of. The margins, editor Curtis Faville claims, "weren't the crucial issue," rather, Eigner's "main preoccupation was with how the lines were set, in respect to each other within a single poem" (See the discussion thread on Fama's blogpost, "¿¿Fidelity to Eigner's Poem-Pages??"). Moreover, Faville argues:

> Larry's use of the typewriter was limited by his disability; typically, he would run out of space and [to avoid placing a new sheet of paper in the typewriter] finish a poem on the left hand side of the same page. In addition, Larry's corrections were often made by typing over or above the same place in the poem. Obviously, this was not what Eigner intended for the ultimate form of his separate poems.

For Faville, this means that "the typescripts must be regarded as 'work areas'—carrying all the messiness and roughness which that implies." He sees them "less as aesthetic objects than as directions." But regardless of whether one chooses to view Eigner's typescripts as complete aesthetic objects or directions to be carried out, both of these views miss the importance of "a line that may be cut." Given Eigner's unique physical relation to the typewriter, it is unsurprising that his readers and editors would end up arguing over how to correctly preserve the dimensionality of his typescripts—as if restoring the typescripts were equivalent to presenting the very body of the poet, as if by gazing at them we could encounter the otherness of the

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[46] Eigner's provisional aesthetics is also operative at the level of the oeuvre, which consists of over 3,000 mostly untitled poems. As Barrett Watten points out, "The individual poem both is and is not thematically and structurally set off from the entire body of [Eigner's] work" ("Missing 'X'" 175). Similarly, Alan Ramón Clinton observes that "looking at Eigner's body of work, one is either tempted to view it, with its suppression of conventional titles, as one vast, continuous poem or, alternately, in its tendency toward brevity that is even further broken up by abrupt shifts in subject matter, as a collection of fragments defying any sense of continuity at all" (155). The ambiguity that these comments point to—the individual poem "is and is not…set off," and the oeuvre appears equally as a continuous poem and as a cluster of fragments—is fundamental to Eigner's aesthetics. One of Eigner's major achievements is the way in which he manages to leave open the question of what constitutes an individual poem, where it begins and ends. To read through Eigner's poems is to continually question whether one is reading a self-sufficient piece, a part of a larger whole, or something that is neither whole nor part, but rather, to borrow Eigner's term, "a stretch of thinking" (*Areas* 3).

author's body, or somehow manage to feel our way through the texts into Eigner's singular life.[47] And yet, in the end, the vital link between body and text in Eigner's poetics doesn't operate through the preservation of a dynamic pattern, but rather through the figure of the cut. Ultimately what makes the typescripts lifelike is that they *don't* transmit any specific information about Eigner's body. Instead, the typescripts inscribe the possibility of their own mutability and reorganization, and it is in this sense that they can be said to be alive.

Bio-Writing

By way of conclusion, I want to turn to an instance in which Eigner writes the relationship between writing and his life. The instance I have in mind is nothing unusual; it is an author's bio, which Eigner wrote for his 1974 book *Things Stirring Together or Far Away*. Yet as will soon be apparent, the bio, which is nearly not a bio, does something exceptional:

> Larry Eigner has the palsy and still lives in Swampscott, Mass., his hometown, where there's less open area and woods than a few decades ago but enough for one man to roam and easily get well lost in, besides which there's a lot of audio and visual equipment at hand, bringing in for instance foreign films and plays like *The Andersonville Trial* from Boston and LA let alone live Orchestras from Boston, LA, Cleveland, London, Vienna, Salzburg et al, as well as news of what seem endlessly gordian knots with ominous consequences in infinite or tremendous variety, and such familiar characters as Gary Moore and Joe Friday. Also there are countless windfalls of books and magazines and letters to keep up with at least in some part while taking things one at a time in stride. Things as on shoestrings barely brought off, or an eyewink later on it turns out otherwise, substantial. You wonder about traffic or for instance how much newspaper or in

[47] This idea or fantasy of accessing the author's body through the "original" physicality of type- or manu-script is not entirely wrongheaded; Eigner was writing in the projectivist tradition—a tradition that explicitly engages the material text as a point of access to authorial corporeality. And yet, readerly desire for such access, in the case of Eigner's typescripts, seems to be charged with assumptions about how disabled or non-normate bodies relate to expressive mediums. It is telling that in the debate over Eigner's *Collected Poems*, Fama accused the editors of doing to Eigner's work "what the early 'editors' and publishers did to the poetry of Emily Dickinson" (See Fama's blogpost). The comparison between Dickinson and Eigner—both poets who composed massive oeuvres from (what some would consider) the "confines" of their family homes—is worth pausing over. What, exactly, is at stake in the desire to read the unedited versions of their work? The critical interest in Dickinson's manuscripts took off after Susan Howe's essay, "These Flames and Generosities of the Heart," celebrated the strangeness of the "word lists, crosses, blanks, and ruptured stanzas" that fill Dickinson's manuscript pages, and which her early editors chose to purge from their editions (n. pag.). As Howe points out, the visual complexity of Dickinson's manuscripts did not fit conventional publishing practices, but it is also likely that the early editors chose to redact Dickinson's "eccentric" marks because they viewed them as analogues of Dickinson's own unconventional physicality and comportment. But, then, recent attempts to attend to the materiality of her manuscripts share something with her earlier editors—namely, the idea that textual artifacts express the personhood or life-force of their authors. In the case of the early editions, this relation is being managed, regulated, erased even, and in more recent work, re-examined or restored, but in both instances, there is a sense that, although they may never become transparent or fully available to analysis, aspects of Dickinson's person and "abnormal" mode of life reside in the physical features—in the very format—of the documents. To encounter the graphic opacity of the manuscripts is, supposedly (and problematically, I think), an encounter with the nonconformity of the artist herself.

general writings or communications there's no drawback say distraction to speak of in having pile up or go around, circulate. The world opens and closes, discontinuous, various or disparate or round but constantly present all the same. Life's become both more of a pellmell rush and less extreme, strenuous, vigorous—cozier and more leisurely. Never any improvisations in the years of taking physiotherapy and for a longer period school subjects which permit of the handling of paper and bring success in the immediate and make you feel like Robinson Crusoe.

> The longest poem Eigner ever did, during the time he tried more or less to write long ones—which if they happen are till welcome, about like longevity—is The Breath of Once Live Things / In The Field With Poe (Black Sparrow Press, 1968). (N. pag.)

The bio note is clearly couched in the specificity of Eigner's situation. Eigner begins with a direct and unsentimental reference to his disability—"the palsy"—and closes with a statement that mentions his years of physiotherapy. The pile up of information and "endlessly gordian knots" also speak to his particular position and point of view, that is, to his awareness of the contrast between his local way of life as a person with limited mobility living in small town New England and the tremendous variety of communications and happenings that go on elsewhere—an elsewhere that various technologies "[bring] in." At one level, then, Eigner uses the bio note to describe his experience as a disabled adult "still" living in his hometown and to chart the torrent of information and entertainment that floods his otherwise circumscribed environment. The prolific "pile up" seems to rival nature; like the remaining woods and open area in Swampscott, it's "enough for one man to roam and easily get well lost in." But at another level, the particularity of Eigner's situatedness gives rise to a series of reflections that wander away from Eigner *qua* individual. The note ultimately overflows the specificity of what it purports to describe: the facts of Larry Eigner's life. It functions as a reflection on a much more generalized (and dispersed) state of affairs: the condition of communication and culture (both American and "foreign") in a technological age.

Thus, the bio note fans out from a description of a particular life to an account of the increasing tempo and build-up of information that characterizes the modern technological world. While such an account is familiar enough, its unexpected placement in an author's bio and the affective register of the passage (neither derisive nor celebratory) combine to create an extremely interesting piece of prose. All too often descriptions of technological modernity either denounce it as a source of disruption and alienation or celebrate it as confirmation of progress and development. Eigner's bio does something else altogether: "…there's no drawback say distraction to speak of in having pile up or go around, circulate. The world opens and closes, discontinuous, various or disparate or round but constantly present all the same. Life's become both more of a pellmell rush and less extreme, strenuous, vigorous—cozier and more leisurely." Whereas a technophobic stance emphasizes the frenzied pace of human lives as they are inundated and ultimately fragmented by an onslaught of communications, a technophilic stance, doing just the opposite, fixates on the possibilities of a more leisurely and interconnected existence. Eigner, however, thinking from both stances at once (life is both a "pellmell rush" and "cozier"), reflects on the ability of technology, which he casually refers to as "equipment at hand," to effect *both* a presencing *and* a distancing. If the world is, according to Eigner,

“constantly present,” this constancy is not simply the result of the power of equipment to extend one’s realm of experience. A world “constantly present all the same” is brought about not only by the sense of being more in touch but equally, if somewhat paradoxically, by the feelings and sensations that the “disparate,” “countless,” dizzying “go around” elicits in us. In other words, the dynamics of disruptions are integral to experiencing a mode of presence that is both powerfully here and yet, never thoroughly localized, always in various ways beyond the graspable: “[t]he world opens and closes.”

Along these lines, we can see the bio note itself in terms of two contrary movements. While in one sense, the note describes a “bringing in,” the localization of the “foreign” within Swampscott and within Eigner’s specific experience, it also enacts the impossibility of the purely local. Although the note purports to be (and surely is in a certain sense) biographical, it ultimately serves as a reflection on a set of material conditions that not only exceed the specifics of Eigner’s particular life, but nearly surpass the category of life altogether. In other words, the bio note moves out of the bio-sphere. Although it begins, conventionally, by naming a specific person (the author in question) and providing a few details about his life and milieu, the focus is not on Eigner himself, nor even on the living environment of Swampscott (its dwindling woods and natural areas are only briefly mentioned). Rather, the bulk of the note is oriented around the nonliving, namely, different forms of media and communication technology.

The question, though, is why? What business does a bio note have in dispensing not only with the (often tedious) facts of the author’s life, but also with the author as its primary subject? By 1974, Eigner had published over 20 books of poetry, and yet the bio mentions only a single work.[48] Modesty provides the most immediate explanation as to why someone like Eigner, who likes to “come into things by understatement,” would not fill his bio with a long list of publications (*Areas* 6). But, at another level, the lack of titles in the bio tells us something about how Eigner understands the category of life.

By refusing to place Eigner-as-author as the bio note’s central subject, Eigner playfully subverts the reader’s expectations. And yet, in this piece he ultimately does take up the question of life as the primary concern; however, he does so not by focusing undividedly on himself or by enumerating his many accomplishments, but by displaying the way in which, to borrow from Bernard Stiegler, “life…continue[s] by means other than life” (50). That is, he makes visible what Stiegler calls “the paradox of a living being characterized in its forms of life by the nonliving—or by the traces that its life leaves in the nonliving” (50). The majority of the note is given over to descriptions of equipment-based information networks and different types of media because it is through these nonliving configurations and materials that human beings both organize their engagements and experiences and are themselves organized. In other words, Eigner’s bio speaks to his understanding that one’s life is not located strictly within one’s self and furthermore, that human forms of life play out and carry on through “means other than life” itself. Thus, in order for the bio note to actually be about a life and, more specifically, Larry Eigner’s life, it must spill over into other domains—domains that play a constitutive role in the form life takes on.

The question, then, is does Eigner substitute the subject of technology for the subject of life? Have we not cycled back to kinds of misidentification between living and nonliving entities, which Simondon so carefully refutes? On the contrary, I want to insist that Eigner’s reflections on the technological condition are not directed toward technical objects per se. He glosses over

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[48] See Leif’s bibliography of Eigner’s work.

specific apparatuses as simply "equipment at hand." At stake, then, in Eigner's ruminations on the technological grounds of human experience, is an interest in thinking through possible modes of connectivity and relationality (how are things "brought off" or kept up with?; what is "substantial"?; how does one "[take] things one at a time in stride"?), *not* a fetishistic fascination with the thinginess of technical objects. Here, we might recall Heidegger's insight: "The essence of technology is nothing technological" ("Question Concerning Technology" 340).

To claim that Eigner's bio describes his life in terms of his technological engagements is a very different type of claim than the one Herbert Marcuse makes when he complains of people finding "their soul in their automobile, hi-fi set, split-level home, [and] kitchen equipment" (11). If, as I'm arguing, Eigner identifies the living in nonliving formats, this identification is distinct from the mode of false consciousness that Marcuse describes. It is not a matter of people falsely identifying with commodities, or even of an entire civilization "transform[ing] the object world into an extension of man's mind and body" (Marcuse 11). Eigner's bio is neither focused on life as contained within a single subjectivity-body nor is it preoccupied with the displacement of humanity onto material artifacts. The pertinent issue is to discover the connections and disconnections between, among, and through things.

This tendency to go beyond the personal, and even beyond the vital, in order, ultimately, to display the constitutive conditions of personal and cultural life occupies the heart of Eigner's poetics. Thus, the question of the technological, of the material-technical supports that shape communicative and aesthetic exchanges, is always active in Eigner's writings. If his engagement with the technological is not readily apparent—indeed, Eigner is more frequently discussed as an ecological poet—it is most likely due to the fact that Eigner's writings don't trade on the idea of technology that we are most accustomed to—namely, fascinating (or threatening) objects with clear-cut use-values. On the contrary, his work pursues technicity essentially as a matter of *connections*—that is to say, in terms of various relations that may be enabled or disabled, heightened or obscured, or otherwise re-arranged.

Thus, Eigner's writings show little interest in pre-constituted, already-there entities; rather, the imaginative force of his work is directed towards re-arrangements and re-configurations. This is especially noticeable in the motif of "turned-around space," which links many of the experimental prose pieces collected in *Country/Harbor/Quiet/Act/Around*. In these pieces of "fractal prose," Eigner considers the various structures—houses, furniture items, cars, doctor's offices, etc.—that shaped the suburban landscape of his 1930s New England childhood.[49] At stake in this collection of autobiographically inspired prose is not simply the ability to recollect the structures that determined one's past, but more to the point, to recapture, through the format of the experimental, narrative essay, the flexibility of a child's imagination—specifically, its capacity to reconfigure, to push back on, the pre-given arrangements of daily life. Of particular interest is Eigner's description, in the third-person narrative "Farther North," of an imaginative technique for re-orienting built spaces:

> …he was intrigued by the notion of turned-around space, or turned-over space, any given house, or room, say, or, still better, car, especially if turned over on its side, which would be halfway, or, that is, a quarter of the way. In a room, the furniture would only fall for a

[49] See Douglas Woolf's introduction to *Country/Harbor/Quiet/Act/Around* for a description of Eigner's "fractal" style.

> moment, a certain definite length of time, which theoretically he might avoid being hit with, and he could imagine where the pieces might land, more or less. (30)

After this initial imaginary "turn," the character reflects on "how he would get out of the place" (30). He pictures himself miraculously defying the laws of physics, moving his body through the flipped-over rooms until he reaches "where there would be the front door" (31). In the piece "Qt," Eigner similarly describes a body moving over the entirety of a house, ceilings included, although this time Eigner uses a first-person narrative:

> Slipperiness, with or without gravity. And we're still living here…where I used to want to go up the ceiling…into the attic, to crawl around anywhere once getting there, two windows sailing in front, the chimney, wires somewhere at the sides and down perhaps likely between the walls…I would've liked to go all over the different hill of the roof and from roof to roof or window to window outside. They were very book-like also. Connection just behind the front staircase landing to follow, some kind of glass or something knobs, and the flat grooved inside in fuse-boxes down the cellar. The front stairs were a channel with wall-paper, still there, and a flopbig plant on the window-sill, the back stairs echoing without. (105-6)

It's tempting to interpret these gravity-defying fantasies, fantasies of moving through impossible-to-reach spaces, in terms of Eigner's limited mobility—Eigner didn't receive his first wheelchair until age eleven and he describes his early years as dominated by impressions of "things…always tantalizingly beyond or almost beyond sight and hearing, out of reach" (*Areas* 26). However, reading these passages in terms of a compensatory economy, in which the run of the author's imagination makes up for his restricted mobility in actual life, risks over-simplifying the significance of the "out of reach," the "beyond" which Eigner describes in terms of fixed structures, the inaccessible attic, "the different hill of the roof." Informing the imaginative activity of shifting space or shifting the path a body makes through space, is the sense that our usual engagements with the way things "are," are by no means exhaustive—our activities only partially reveal the relationships that structures make possible (if not necessarily viable, or at least not viable for everyone). The house, as Eigner describes it, possess a quasi-autonomy, a composure that can be described on its own terms. The back stairs are "echoing" the front stairs. And surely no human intention is responsible for making windows—thresholds between interior and exterior milieus, which like the world, "[open and close]"— "very book-like"? The analogy between windows and books is apt; it taps into real relations that go beyond simple questions of intentional design and use-value. Part of what's at issue, then, in these fantasies, is the possibility of imagining configurations that exist, in a certain sense, without reference to a self. The body, or self, that goes where it cannot go, that uses things as they cannot be used, exploits the limits of what things are for; it opens up the aspects of structures that don't directly refer to it. But what does this mean, without reference to a self? In one sense, it can be taken to mean that much of the built world isn't arranged for disabled bodies. Or more to the point, to experience disability is to experience the world *in its arrangement*—that is, *as arranged* rather than as transparently accessible. But once again, if this takes us back to the particularity of Eigner's bodily experiences, by the same stroke it takes us beyond, revealing that there are logics to how things hold together (or fall apart), logics that can't be exhausted by any particular human's perspective.

Chapter Three
Systematicity and Spontaneity in Frank O'Hara

In 1966 Allan Kaprow described spontaneous, multi-media performance events, known as "Happenings," as the only "art activity that can escape the inevitable death-by-publicity to which all other art is condemned, because, designed for a brief life, they can never be overexposed; they are dead, quite literally, every time they happen" (59). From a historical perspective, not much time had elapsed since Charles Olson exhorted poets to be "instant by instant aware" and Hans Namuth captured Pollock flinging paint onto a canvas said to have "a life of its own" (*Collected Prose* 240; Pollock 79). Yet in Kaprow's words we find the postwar aesthetics of spontaneity already stretched to its breaking point. Rather than casting spontaneity in utopian terms, Kaprow suggests how thoroughly compromised any discourse of presentism had become by the mid-60s. If Kaprow's only recourse for defending the now-ness of the Happening is to describe it as instant death—a way of killing something before culture-at-large can get to it—then it would seem that tropes of "spontaneity," "immediacy," and "directness" are no longer available as unique markers of aesthetic possibility, let alone as ways of describing an intimate relation between art and life.

Frank O'Hara's "Ode (to Joseph LeSueur)," written eight years before Kaprow's remarks, similarly formulates the historical impossibility of experiencing "the now" as an affirmation of mental and bodily life:

> To humble yourself before a radio on a Sunday
> it's amusing, like dying after a party
> "click" / and you're dead from fall-out, hang-over
> or something hyphenated (*Collected Poems* 300)

"Click"—the familiar sound of the type bar hitting the page—conjures up a notion of off-the-cuff composition (the typewriter lauded by Olson as the poet's "instantaneous recorder"), but in the newly automated world of the Cold War a simple "click" also launches a nuclear missile. Typing poetry, turning on the radio on a lazy Sunday, or initiating doomsday—the "click" cuts across seemingly incomparable activities, establishing an uncanny synchrony between art, causal entertainment, and global catastrophe. Despite, or perhaps in light of, his casual style, O'Hara effectively raises the stakes of Kaprow's largely metaphorical conflation of immediacy and death. That is, the poem begins not by entertaining the possibility of an art-event designed to coincide with its own expiration—instant death as protection against publicity—but rather, by pointing out just how easy it is to imagine artistic expression, real-time broadcasting, and automated weaponry sharing the same punctual temporality. In such a world, how can art claim any special relation to the here-and-now?

Even the 1960s' most celebrated proponent of the here-and-now, Allen Ginsberg, recognized this problem. In his 1967 collection, *T.V. Baby Poems*, Ginsberg finds the perfect and tragic perversion of the counterculture's rallying cry "all is one" in a nightmarish medial atmosphere that erases the boundaries between individual minds:

> Six thousand movie theatres, 100,000,000 television sets, a billion radios,

wires and wireless crisscrossing hemispheres, semaphore lights
and morse, all telephones ringing at once to connect every mind
by its ears to one vast consciousness at This Time's Apocalypse—
everybody waiting for one mind to break thru— (n. pag.)

While granting that "artificial communications" (to borrow a phrase Ginsberg uses elsewhere) precipitate experiences of immediacy and direct connectivity, these lines also express the fear that telecommunication technology no longer functions primarily as a conduit for exchanges but rather as an entity in and of itself—an autonomous sphere that operates over and against human forms of presence (*Spontaneous Mind* 58).[50] For Ginsberg, then, the aesthetic of spontaneity retains its liberatory function since improvisatory art-making occurs against a consolidated technological enemy, whose forms of immediacy are essentially apocryphal or at least alien to human life.

O'Hara's poetry, on the other hand, insists on placing artistic improvisation in uncomfortably close quarters with mass-mediated modes of liveness. A poem such as "Ode (to Joseph LeSueur)" registers its own compositional speed not as an individual event but rather as part of a continuum of post-modern eventfulness—an era in which radios, televisions, and "intercontinental ballistics missile[s]" enable instantaneous connections among geographically disparate parties, present the world in real-time to home audiences, and threaten the annihilation of entire cities with a swiftness undreamt of (O'Hara, *CP* 300). Renowned for his ability to write poetry anywhere—in the street, on a lunch break, while riding public transport—O'Hara, like Ginsberg, crafted an aesthetic persona that came to exemplify the mid-century avant-garde's commitment to improvisation. But he also arrived at MoMA each day in a suit and tie, ready to organize exhibitions that would bolster America's international prestige. Far from being contradictory, however, O'Hara's multiple roles—poet, art critic, museum functionary, and eventually curator—bring into view the relationship between art-making and larger institutional and technological systems at a moment when immediacy and mediality, telepresence and human presence no longer appeared as oppositional pairings. O'Hara's poetry, I will argue, invites the reader to confront not only the way in which immediacy and mediality work in tandem, but also how they operate together, as a conceptual and experiential coupling, across vastly different scales of making, appreciation, and consumption.

During the late 1950s and 1960s, the effort to reconceptualize art's claim to presentational immediacy in relation to other modes liveness—technological and medial as well as bodily—took a variety of different forms: whereas Ginsberg sought to retain immediacy as a descriptor of human consciousness and the poetry that conveys it, Kaprow and art theorist Jack Burnham, in their promotion of "nonart" and "unobjects," imagined a world in which art would no longer exist in the form of discrete entities but instead become coextensive with "industrial complexes, farms, transportation systems, information centers, recreation centers, or any of the other matrices of human activity" (Burnham 165).[51] Frank O'Hara's poetry stands out in that it

[50] In this sense, Ginsberg's incantatory denunciations of mass mediated experience are part of a broader shift in the American public's perception of telepresence. As Jeffery Sconce explains in his cultural history of electronic media, *Haunted Media*, with the rise of mass broadcasting electronic presence "became less a function of engaging an extraordinary yet fleeting entity across the frontiers of time and space and instead assumed the form of an all-enveloping force occupying the ether" (11).

[51] See Burnham; and Kaprow, "Education of the Un Artist," *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* 97-126.

neither disavows the mediality of aesthetic and lived experience nor falls prey to a techno-utopianism that threatens to dissolve art entirely into other systems. Kaprow and Burnham describe their ideas about art as applications of cybernetic and system theory, but in what follows, I read two poems of O'Hara's—his elegy for Jackson Pollock, "Ode on Causality," and his last major long poem, "Biotherm"—arguing that they allow us to articulate the mid-century preoccupation with systems with greater nuance than more familiar, optimistic accounts like Kaprow's or Burnham's can give. With these poems, O'Hara poses the question thus: how do spontaneous acts of creation both *emerge from* and *become identifiable against* regularized systems?

Boris Groys points out that during the postwar era artists and writers increasingly thought of the individual artwork as inscribed in a "system of image production and communication *from the start*" (52; emphasis added). Rather than viewing "the commercial apparatuses of anonymous image production" as "something purely external," which individual artists could either resist (think Ginsberg) or appropriate (think Warhol), artists—in Groys's account, particularly the Minimalists and Conceptualists—began thinking of "the individual act of art production as…originally regulated by a 'system,' as following a certain general rule from the beginning, and as being inscribed into a certain social practice even before its product was submitted for definite social use" (52). While O'Hara is known for his affiliation with Abstract Expressionism, an aesthetic sensibility frequently described as vehemently anti-systematic, as a maximalist outpouring of untempered energies, Groys's emphasis on the original systematicity of the creative act is helpful when it comes to understanding both O'Hara's investment in problematizing the postwar aesthetic of spontaneity and his idiosyncratic reading of Jackson Pollock. I will return shortly to the question of how O'Hara reworks the popular image of Pollock, how he resists reading Pollock's work and life as anarchic struggles against unity, form, and system. But first I want to point out that, according to Groys's account of the sixties, rethinking the autonomous art object as an element within a system did not diminish art's critical function. On the contrary, the figure of the artist-as-critic emerged in a new light during this period. Groys explains:

> If the creative act itself is part of a certain system and guided from the beginning by a certain set of rules, then the artist has a unique inner access to the system… Overall, the art of the 1960s shifted its focus from the individual creative act to a description, investigation and development of communication systems and visual codes… The artist's main occupation became not to create but to criticize. The paradoxical figure of a 'critical artist' that emerged in the 1960s announced an end to a long period of confrontation between the individual artist-creator and the art critic serving the 'system,' a conflict that contributed substantially to the dynamic of romantic and modernist art. (52)

Simultaneously creator and critic, O'Hara was more than willing to defend the compatibility of his professional and creative undertakings—and, arguably, this says less about O'Hara's sense of self than it does about his sense of art's entwinement with other productive (and destructive) systems. When in an interview Edward Lucie-Smith questioned O'Hara's double role as museum functionary and artist, remarking that "museum officials are usually thought of in Europe as the codifiers of art, a final court of appeals, but not as participators," O'Hara fired back: "Jean Cassou is a poet, isn't he?" ("Interview" 4). As the figure of Cassou—

resistance fighter, poet, critic, and museum director rolled into one—suggests, the line between codification and oppositionality is not clearly drawn, a point which O'Hara returns to throughout the interview. Pressed about the status of the avant-garde, O'Hara dismisses the notion of an "embattled vanguard" as "a lot of romantic nonsense," reminding Lucie-Smith that "there's a whole Cinemateque on Lafayette Street to show [Andy Warhol's] movies," whereas "even most Hollywood producers don't have their own showcase in New York" (8).

As these examples suggest, O'Hara saw clearly that in mid-century America creation and critique, novelty and codification, Warhol and Hollywood were hardly binary oppositions. In his elegy for Pollock, written around the same time as "Ode (to Joseph LeSueur)," O'Hara thinks through these conjunctions—conjuctions that, however paradoxical, bore out a real, historical logic:

> There is the sense of neurotic coherence
>
> you think maybe poetry is too important and you like that
>
> suddenly everyone's supposed to be veined, like marble
>
> it isn't that simple but it's simple enough
>
> the rock is least living of the forms man has fucked
>
> and it isn't pathetic and it's lasting, one towering tree
>
> in the vast smile of bronze and vertiginous grasses
>
> Maude lays down her doll, red wagon and her turtle
> takes my hand and comes with us, shows the bronze JACKSON POLLOCK
> gazelling on the rock of her demeanor as a child, says running
> away hand in hand "he isn't under there, he's out in the woods" beyond
>
> and like that child at your grave make me be distant and imaginative
> make my lines thin as ice, then swell like pythons
> the color of Aurora when she first brought fire to the Arctic in a sled
> a sexual bliss inscribe upon the page of whatever energy I burn for art
> and do not watch over my life, but read and read through copper earth
>
> … (*CP* 302)

"Ode on Causality" begins by straining against the closure offered by Pollock's tombstone (which, we should recall, was not any ordinary tombstone but a boulder hauled into the cemetry by tractor). The project of the elegy-ode is to revivify has been literally and figuratively set in stone, to convert the "least living" of materials—bronze, marble, and rock—into less "lasting" formations. According to John Wilkinson, "when O'Hara conjures himself to 'read and read through copper earth' the reading-through is as reciprocal as earth's manifestation in paint,

seeing through the name [etched on the rock's plaque] to the life of earth and of Pollock's art, then reading back from the dead the words inscribed in verse" (111). At one level, then, the poem takes up the central question for artists of this era, what I described in chapter one as the problem of open form: how to imbue inorganic art objects with the life energies of the artist. In imagining the text or painting ("lines thin as ice" alludes to Pollock's drip-skeins as well as O'Hara's verse) as an inscription of "sexual bliss," the page (or canvas) as a material instantiation of vital and virile "energy," O'Hara proposes a continuum of forces that, as Wilkinson points out, flow bi-directionally. So while the lively body is capable of passing its energies into a quiescent object, it's equally possible, for that very reason, to read beneath or beyond the object's apparent quiescence to find the affectively charged energies deposited by the now absent body.

Or so O'Hara fantasizes. If it were that easy, there would be no need to worry about poetry becoming "too important" or to fret over "the vast smile of bronze," and no need to write an elegy that *de-memorializes* a dead artist. As the poem continues, it becomes clear that O'Hara is dealing with more than just an aesthetic problem and that, in fact, the relation between what's lively and what's petrified can never be a merely compositional question. For however radically open, spontaneous, and wild an artist's forms may be, there is also the question of audience, of culture at large, of those who come with "sweet scripts to obfuscate the tender subjects of their future lays / to be layed at all! romanticized, elaborated, fucked, sung, put to 'rest' " ("Ode on Causality" *CP* 302-03). Here the generative instabilities of pathos and "sexual bliss" are transformed into their sugary, aggrandized formats—formats that spell death for the artist, or rather, for the life-pulse of art.

The mythos surrounding Pollock, the James Dean of the art world, is a case in point. But as O'Hara is well aware, Pollock's is only one case out of many; it bespeaks the larger issue of art's heteronomy, of all the ways that compositional techniques—pours of paint, typewritten poetry, performed events—become invested with ideological and libidinal meanings. In "To Richard Miller," written around the same time as "Ode on Causality," O'Hara envisions the abstract expressionist Mike Goldberg "with the gang / of early-morning painters (before noon) / as they discuss the geste or jest / of action painting, whether it's Yang / or Yin and related to the sun or moon" (*CP* 310). And in the earlier "Poem," he describes meeting Mike for a beer at the Cedar, where "Norman [Bluhm] tells about / the geste, / with the individual significance of a hardon / like humanity" (*CP* 286). If "Ode on Causality" describes the transference of corporeal energy, the inscription of "sexual bliss," in earnest, that is, as a viable aesthetic possibility, then the "geste or jest of action painting" balks at the conception of action-painting as a self-contained act, an event in and for itself. Instead, the geste/jest points to the way in which larger paradigms—from Americanized Eastern mysticism and its attendant gender binaries to humanist claims for the individual—map onto an allegedly non-symbolic, gestural aesthetic. It would seem then that the geste/jest serves as a counterweight to the sincere account of expressionism that we find in "Ode on Causality." After all, the image of painters quibbling over whether pours of paint are Yin or Yang belies the eros of art-making proposed quite seriously in "Ode on Causality."

But even within "Ode on Causality" O'Hara challenges the notion of an inviolable sphere of art, a sphere populated only by inspirited bodies and the objects that bear their inscriptions. As the poem reaches its climatic ending, the question of history (of "era" and "audience") enters, and the idyllic body-canvas dyad ceases to be the unit of concern:

what goes up must
come down, what dooms must do, standing still and walking in New York

let us walk in that nearby forest, staring into the growling trees
in which an era of pompous frivolity or two is dangling its knobby knees
and reaching for audience
over the pillar of our deaths a cloud
heaves
pushed, steaming and blasted
love-propelled and tangled glitteringly
has earned himself the title *Bird in Flight* (*CP* 303)

In this final passage the figure of the child, Maude, returns in the image of "dangling…knobby knees." Whereas the earlier passage provides an imago of the child as all that is "distant and imaginative"—it is the child that sees past the closure of Pollock's gravestone, who locates his spirit in the wooded "beyond"—by the end of the poem the space of the forest, although figured as child-like, is no longer an idealized region of imaginative reach and free play. The space has become historical; it harbors eras "of pompous frivolity" in which art cannot not be understood in terms of the "[reach] for audience," in which the very notion of an embattled vanguard appears as "a lot of romantic nonsense."

However, O'Hara's tone in this final passage is far from mournful and the poem still manages to come to an orgasmic close. If anything, in the build-up to the ending O'Hara effectively rewrites the earlier idealization of the creative process. Or, to be more precise, he makes the case that the status of art's liveliness, its claim to vital spontaneity, can no longer be posed within the closed circuit of an artist and his materials. If a heaving, love-propelled art is going to emerge, it will nonetheless be interlocked with the frivolity of all that is "romanticized, elaborated, fucked, sung, put to 'rest.'" In other words, if the beginning of the poem casts the problem of memorialization as an aesthetic problem, a problem that has to do with the rigidity of physical materials (marble, rock, bronze), as the poem proceeds it becomes clear that the problem of art's ossification, its tendency toward a state of rigid conventionality, cannot be dealt with in solely aesthetic terms; it demands more capacious parameters of analysis.[52] So although O'Hara initially substitutes a reverie on the creative process for an analysis of mass cultural memory and the expanding art market, by the end of the poem it is impossible to keep Pollock pure—impossible, that is, to think his memory without acknowledging larger systemic

[52] A similar point is at the root of Kaprow's polemic against Robert Morris's conception of process-art. In "The Shape of the Environment" (1968), Kaprow writes: "Artists really pursuing the palpable experience of the measureless, the indeterminate, the use of nonrigid materials, process, the deemphasis on formal esthetics, would find it very difficult to do so in gallery and museum boxes or in their equivalents. For these would only maintain the conventional dualism of the stable versus the unstable, the closed versus the open, the regular versus the organic, the ideal versus the real, and so on" (93). Kaprow's point is that art's claim to openness can never amount to an annulment or cancelation of form because art is *essentially*, rather than contingently, involved with its "enframing spaces"; even the loosest, wildest, and most ephemeral material arrangements are themselves forms—forms that articulate a *relationship* (of contrast) to the West's dominant form: the rectilinear (92). "For cultural or personal reasons," Kaprow acknowledges, "we may prefer this pattern to that one—say a pile of shit to a series of cubes—but they are equally formal, equally analyzable" (90).

conditions, without paying tribute to the logics of novelty and obsolescence in which "what goes up must come down."

It is significant, then, that although the poem underwent several title changes—including, "Ode on Causality in the Springs," "Elegy on Causality (in the Five Spot Café)," and "Ode at the Grave of Jackson Pollock"—in the end, O'Hara dropped any reference to locality from the title, instead foregrounding the principle of causality. Whereas place names (so common in O'Hara's poetry) create the effect of liveliness by marking the scene of writing and positioning the poem as an on-the-spot occurrence, the notion of a bare causality is clearly antithetical to the idea of creative spontaneity for which Pollock and O'Hara are famed. Deleuze and Guattari describe causality alongside resemblance and contiguity as "protective rules," "a sort of 'umbrella'" shielding us from the chaos that art daringly courts (*What is Philosophy?* 201-02). As they put it, artistic work is carried out "less against chaos…than against the "clichés" of opinion" (204). "The page or canvas," they write, "is already so covered with preexisting, preestablished clichés that it is necessary first to erase, to clean, to flatten, even to shred, so as to let in the breath of air from the chaos that brings us vision" (204). Deleuze and Guattari composed this passage in the early 1990s, but it might as well have been written in the fifties. Their metaphors of erasure and destructive cleansing speak to the famous sequence in Hans Namuth's 1951 documentary *Jackson Pollock*, in which Pollock begins a painting on glass and then, having "lost contact" with the process, destroys his work by washing the glass clean and starting afresh—a literal enactment of the inextricability of creation and destruction. In his monograph on Pollock, O'Hara flirts with a similar conception of art-making, describing Pollock's work as "painfully beautiful celebrations of… what may be destroyed at any moment" (*Jackson Pollock* 22). Yet, despite moments that give voice to the mutual imbrication of ecstatic creation ("whatever energy I burn for art") and visionary destruction ("do not watch over my life"), "Ode on Causality" ultimately pushes past the romance of Pollock-the-bar-wrecking-genius. As the poem's counterintuitive title already implies, "Ode on Causality" is directed less toward an anarchic purveyor of "incommunicable novelty" than toward the structuring forces of O'Hara's mid-century world (Deleuze and Guattari 204). Or rather, it queries how the former can exist within and through the latter.

In this regard the poem's final gesture, offering Pollock the title "Bird in Flight," holds a special significance. As Wilkinson points out, "Bird in Flight" is the title of a work in marble by the Romanian-French sculptor Constantin Brâncuşi, who died the year before O'Hara wrote "Ode on Causality." If the "pillar of our deaths" includes not only Pollock's and O'Hara's deaths but also the recent death of Brâncuşi, then we can read the poem as containing an implicit elegy locked within the explicit effort to elegize Pollock. The very idea of a covert elegy—an elegy that doesn't announce itself as such, that rather than naming Brâncuşi, mentions a piece of his work only to pass it off as an honorific to someone else—such a circumventive elegiac structure suggests precisely the kind of anti-memorialization, the non-closure, that O'Hara postulated in the poem's opening lines. On the one hand, then, the poem's ending leads us quietly back into the aesthetic sphere—under the guise of bestowing a title, it refers us to a specific work of art. It's as if, at the poem's end, O'Hara still nurses the hope that art itself may be capable of finding its way out of culture's conventionalizing tendencies, as if O'Hara believes, but without directly saying so, in the power of Brâncuşi's marble and bronze-cast sculptures to counterbalance the funereal significances that the poem otherwise associates with these materials. And yet, on the other hand, to name Pollock via the title of a Brâncuşi work is to offer a specific interpretation of

Pollock's aesthetic—one which, as we shall see, interrogates the relationship between art critical categories (abstraction, figuration, and mimesis) and larger cultural systems.

According to a familiar narrative, Pollock's drip paintings marked the zenith of his aesthetic achievement and the decision to stop making them, to return to figuration, precipitated his career's downturn and his descent into alcoholism. A version of this narrative existed during the 1950s, and over the years, critics influenced by Clement Greenberg's powerful formalist reading of Pollock have carried on the preference for the "all-over" paintings, applauding the drip-skeins as radical affronts to the bourgeois taste for organic unity, or in Rosalind Krauss's formulation, as "strikes against… the singleness of the good gestalt, its hanging together, its self-evident simplicity, its Prägnanz" (266). Given the longstanding critical preoccupation with Pollock's ability (or fatal failure) to annul the figurative and metaphoric elements of painting, it is quite telling that O'Hara ends his elegy-ode by conflating Pollock with Brâncuşi —an artist whose sense of abstraction always remained, at a certain level, mimetic, despite his departure from figuration. Throughout his celebrated *Bird in Space* series, which includes the "Bird in Flight" that O'Hara cites, Brâncuşi created streamlined, oblong pieces that invoked "the essence of flight" rather than the bird's external form (Brâncuşi qtd. in Shanes 40). So while the *Bird in Space* sculptures dispensed with figuration—in fact, their non-resemblance to birds became a highly publicized matter in 1926, when U.S. custom officials refused to grant the sculptures a tariff-exemption, since in the custom officials' eyes they were simply pieces of metal, illegible as *objets d'art*— Brâncuşi insisted that despite the sculptures' non-resemblance to a bird's morphology they represented what he understood to be flight's essential form. In other words, for Brancusi, the departure from figuration didn't entail a departure from mimesis; on the contrary, it helped him unlock art's real relationship to the essence of things.

The question of figuration has always been central to conversations about Pollock's work, especially to the desire *not* to read Pollock's marks as the "consistent trace of a making subject, but rather as a texture of interruptions, gaps, zigzags, a-rhythms and incorrectnesses" (Clark 332). Which is to say, establishing the non-figurative status of Pollock's painterly gestures has been part and parcel of an argument against representation, against the enormous, perhaps unavoidable, temptation to see Pollock's canvases as continuations of his body and psyche, as arenas of "masculine theatrics" (Clark 356). What I want to suggest, then, is that O'Hara's allusion to Brâncuşi, to an artist who felt he could reject figuration without jettisoning art's representational powers, tacitly works to formulate a different reading of Pollock, a reading in which mimetic form-giving is not the enemy to be fought off at all costs.

But why it shouldn't it be? If O'Hara were to proffer an answer to this question, it wouldn't so much entail a philosophy or politics of art as a history, an acute awareness—shall we say a curator's awareness—of the possibilities and limitations of art in the mid-twentieth century. As Krauss would have it, Pollock's drips "[cancel] more than just this or that figure," they "[operate] instead on the very idea of the organic" (266). This may well be true when the parameters of one's analysis are focused on the artist's body and canvas. At this level of analysis, we can at least theoretically see the inorganicity of Pollock's chaotic skeins, even if his contemporaries insisted in re-attributing vital characteristics to them. But what happens when, as O'Hara suggests, the question of art isn't restricted to the artist and his materials? What happens when the artist ceases to be a solitary figure working under open skies, as Namuth filmed Pollock, but instead is imbricated "in an era of pompous frivolity or two?" At the level of the body/canvas dyad, there may be a triumphant cancellation of the figure, but as we all know, once

we enlarge the scope of our analysis, when we let in what T.J. Clark calls art's "host culture," (363) or in O'Hara's terms the "reaching for audience," the figure is bound to reemerge.

For Clark, the figures that most infamously emerge when we take culture at large into consideration are the female figures of *Vogue* fashion models, whom Cecil Beaton photographed posing in front of Pollock's paintings for the magazine's March 1951 issue. As Clark puts it, "the photographs are nightmarish. They speak to the hold of capitalist culture: that is, to the ease with which it can outflank work done against the figurative, and make it part of a new order of pleasures—a sign of the order's richness, of the room it has made for more of the edges and underneath of everyday life" (365). One can't help wondering what O'Hara—who, we should recall, worked briefly as Cecil Beaton's secretary—would make of Clark's remarks, especially in light of what Lytle Shaw describes as O'Hara's "heretical interpretation of Abstract Expressionism," his tendency to fuse descriptions of abstract expressionist painting with Hollywood imagery, and his way of using "the psychologically and formally more finite world of the canvas to open out to the larger structures of cultural fantasy that make [painting's formal] effects legible in the first place" ("Gesture" 48; *Frank O'Hara* 187). Although I agree with Shaw that O'Hara sees culture at large, in its most mainstream, nationalistic form, as inseparable from "any attempt at artistic wildness," I would add that for O'Hara, understanding this entanglement is not simply a matter of coming to terms with (or celebrating the incompleteness of) "culture's recuperation" of "'wild' energies" (*Frank O'Hara* 179). To propose (or oppose) a process of recuperation is to presuppose art's autonomy—*first* there is the wild mark and *only then*, by some nightmarish turn of events, its appearance in *Vogue*. Such an account assumes that, however inexorable the events leading up to Beaton's photographs are, they remain secondary and parasitical in their relation to Pollock's paintings. O'Hara is subtler than this: art's claim to ontological and spiritual priority is precisely what "Ode on Causality" contests. The poem is a prime example of O'Hara's tendency *not* to think in terms of the logics of recuperation, assimilation, or co-option, logics which disavow the possibility that art's claim to presentational immediacy may always already be shot through with the affects and meanings of its host culture, and vice-versa.

A decade after O'Hara wrote "Ode on Causality," *Artforum* featured Burnham's "Systems Esthetics," an essay able to declare with unflinching optimism: "In an advanced technological culture the most important artist best succeeds by liquidating his position as artist vis-à-vis society" (166). While Burnham understood the liquidation of the traditional artist and the total absorption of the *objet d'art* into industrial and informational systems, as the culmination of a "systems viewpoint," the idea of art's seamless integration and disappearance into other relational networks arguably sidesteps the real questions animating the mid-century transdisciplinary interest in systems: How can we understand and identify spontaneous creative activity as something that emerges from, but is not reducible to, a regularized system? O'Hara's elegy for Pollock may not offer an answer, but since it neither liquidates nor circumscribes art, it insists on the questions: What happens when the "geste" is not a self-contained mark, or the index of a dynamical body, but instead a movement captured on film, mounted on a museum wall, or publicized via mass media? How are we to understand the varieties of spontaneity, openness, and unprecedented novelty that exist within, but also show up against, large-scale media and information systems? How might it change our reading of "Ode on Causality"—how might it alter our sense of its love-propelled, glittering climax—to know that in 1939 when

MoMA became the first museum to appear on a live television program, the telecast featured Alfred H. Barr and Nelson Rockefeller discussing Brâncuşi's *Bird in Flight*?[53]

'Infinite Waves of Skin': O'Hara's "Biotherm"

O'Hara's last long poem, "Biotherm (to Bill Berkson)," represents his most ambitious articulation of the intertwinement of spontaneity and systematicity. What makes this poem particularly ambitious, and arguably an aesthetic failure (although a grand one), is O'Hara's effort to grapple with the notion of liveliness in all of its temporal, aesthetic, technological, and organic formulations. "Biotherm" began as a modest occasional lyric, "a little birthday poem" for Bill Berkson, and expanded into a twelve-page typescript, which O'Hara worked on from August 1961 to January of the following year (*CP* 553). The poem cycles through a dizzying array of linguistic registers: inscrutable inside jokes, mid-century slang, nonsense syllables, scatological humor, parodies of Stevens, Pound, Eliot, Williams, and Rimbaud, as well as a seemingly endless stream of references to Hollywood stars, Manhattan socialites, B-movie actresses, comic strips, avant-garde theatre, commercial magazines, hotel bars, New York City Ballet dancers, Impressionist painters, and gossip columnists.

Finding "Biotherm" simultaneously impossibly private and frenetically pop, critics have struggled to make sense of the poem's "maddening seizures of genre," "fleeting micro-data," and absence of "dependable form" (Wilkinson 107; Ward 20, 24). Indeed, "Biotherm" begins by acknowledging its break-neck pace:

> The best thing in the world   but I better be quick about it
> better be gone tomorrow
>   better be gone last night and
>   next Thursday better be gone
> better be
>   always   or what's the use the sky
>   the endless clouds trailing we leading them by the bandanna, red (*CP* 436)

In these opening lines, O'Hara stages the poem's accelerative motion as a form of transience, a disappearing act. Whether projected or retrojected, whatever happens is already "gone"—or we are told it "better be." Thus, right from the start, instantaneity is compromised as the romantic notion of spontaneity gives way to a pragmatics of efficiency, the imperative to "be quick about it." Quickness, bereft of the spiritual and metaphysical connotations of spontaneity, is speed as a purely quantitative vector; however accelerative, it never gets you anywhere, never blossoms into an inhabitable experience, which is why the eternal clouds in Wordsworth's "Intimations of Immortality," "But trailing clouds of glory we do come / From God, who is our home," (*Poetical Works* 281) must be replaced by clouds that are merely "endless."

Along these lines, we can read "Biotherm" as an articulation of "chronophobia," art historian Pamela M. Lee's neologism for the "obsessional uneasiness with time and its measurement" that characterizes 1960s American art (xii). As she argues, the sense of non-contemporaneity, of existing outside of historical time amidst "moments that endlessly elude

[53] See Spigel, *TV By Design* 145.

one's grasp," is itself an acutely historical experience, a favored trope of literary modernism, and yet also a specific concern of postwar artists and critics grappling with the rise of computing technology with "its rhetoric of speed and seemingly instantaneous processing of information" (xii). In fact "Biotherm" is part of a series of poems exchanged between O'Hara and Berkson that take variations on the office memo acronym F.Y.I. (For Your Information) as their titles. M.L.F.Y. (My Love For You) was one working title for "Biotherm," and although O'Hara ultimately titled the poem after the trade name of a skin cream product, the poem's relentless pacing and compressed references seem to parody—or lovingly indulge?—a technocratic sensibility.

Parodic or indulgent—it is at times difficult to tell which is the point of emphasis, in part because the F.Y.I. poems were inspired by information's heterodoxy; that is, O'Hara was doubly enchanted by the acronym as a marker of bureaucratic discourse and by the fact that F.Y.I. was the name of a gossip offset for employees at *Art News* (where Berkson worked as an editorial assistant). Allen Ginsberg's elegy for O'Hara closes with a reference to "deep gossip"—a delightfully oxymoronic phrase that points to the importance of non-verifiable, offhand circuits of communication.[54] Following Ginsberg, I want to suggest gossip as another way of understanding the intervention "Biotherm" makes. As Mutlu Blasing has argued, the relentless pacing of "Biotherm" fails to animate the poem: "Talking faster and faster and piling up more and more minute personal details, more and more intimate revelations, and more and more physical "speech"—all in an attempt to escape the finality or "death" of "literature"—constitutes, in the end, only another way of writing literature" (59). If this is so, then perhaps the poem's examination of liveness resides less in impressions of effervescence and instantaneity than in the protracted and unwieldy circuits of exchange that characterize gossip. In other words, if "Biotherm" displays anxiety over the speed of information and the relentless recession of "the now," it also considers information's mobility in terms of a basic waywardness capable of generating, and sustaining, unpredictable trajectories:

> I know you are interested in the incongruities of my behavior, John
> just as Bill you are interested in the blue paint JA Oscar Maxine Khnute
> perhaps you'd better be particularly interested POOF
>
> extended vibrations
> ziggurats ZIG I to ZIG IV stars of Tigris—Euphrates basin
> leading ultimates such as kickapoo juice halvah Canton cheese
> in thimbles
> paraded for gain, but yet a parade kiss me,
> Busby Berkeley, kiss me
> you have ended the war by simply singing in your Irene Dunne foreskin
> "Practically Yours"
> with June Vincent, Lionello Venturi and Casper Citron (*CP* 437)

Considered biographically, "the incongruities of my behavior" may refer to O'Hara's tendency to balance multiple love affairs simultaneously, or perhaps to John Ashbery's perplexity over the nature of O'Hara's feelings for heterosexual Bill Berkson. At the level of form, however,

[54] See Ginsberg's "City Midnight Junk Strains" in *T.V. Baby*.

incongruous behavior describes the twists and turns of a thoroughly unpredictable poem. Any clear directionality is interrupted by the vagueries of intrigue, being "particularly interested" dissolves into a "POOF," and the reference to *Practically Yours* spurs a list of people (only one of which is an actor) who weren't even featured in the film.[55] In "Biotherm," information doesn't exist as a mode of content; that is, no particular piece of information maintains a grip on the author's (or reader's) attention. Instead, the poem delights in "the trajectories of things," especially in unusual flows and redirections (Joselit 40).[56]

In this sense, although "Biotherm" remains intelligible within the tradition of the modernist long poem, it also aligns, to a certain extent, with Kaprow's notion of non-art: creative work organized not by the properties peculiar to specific mediums (painting, sculpture, literature, etc.) but by its participation in "technological pursuits," notably "the spread of information" (106). As in "Biotherm," the spread of information that Kaprow envisions is marked by a fundamental unpredictability, an essential tendency toward "play," which he takes to be the hallmark of the creative impulse. So while Kaprow forecasts that "'systems' technology" will become an important purveyor of aesthetic experience in the coming decades, he imagines: "a systems approach that favors openness toward outcome, in contrast to the literal and goal-oriented uses now employed by most systems specialists. As in the childhood pastime "Telephone" (in which friends in a circle whisper a few words into one ear after the other only to hear them come out delightfully different when the last person says them aloud), the feedback loop is the model" (106). Kaprow's use of a children's game as a metaphor for systemic openness strikes a cord with "Biotherm," especially given the poem's proclivity for silliness and its tendency to warp serious literary allusion into gibberish. For instance, a passage that begins as a playful queering of Coleridge's "The Ancient Mariner," devolves into a string of scrambled syllables:

> (fart) "Suck this," said Old M, spitting on his high heels
> …
> but even that extended a litter further,
> out into the desert, where
> no flash tested, no flashed!
> oops! and no nail polish, yak
> yak, yak, Lieut.
> no flesh to taste no flash to tusk
> no flood to flee no fleed to dlown flom the iceth loot (*CP* 438)

as does O'Hara's reference to Book V of Williams' *Paterson*:

> "measure shmeasure know shknew
> unless the material rattle us around

---

[55] See Shaw, *Frank O'Hara* 77.

[56] My thinking here is influenced by David Joselit's discussion of media ecology, which I find particularly useful for approaching the politics of "Biotherm." Arguing that "meaning inheres not in things, but in their 'social lives,'" Joselit claims that the historian's duty is to imagine "how objects might circulate differently," that is, beyond the narrowly defined channels that comprise commodity circulation. The historical imagination can find inspiration in "the impossible trajectories invented by artists and the short-lived ruptures of political intervention" (41).

pretty rose preserved in biotherm
and yet the y bothers us when we dance
the pussy pout"
never liked to sing much but that's what being
a child means BONG (*CP* 439)

In fact, as I shall show, these two passages suggest two different models of how systems may be open, rather than goal-oriented, in their organization. In Kaprow's "Telephone" example, unpredictability is created by distortion internal to the system. That is, errors tend to accumulate, altering the message being conveyed, but without altering the conveying organization (in this case, the circle of children). The first passage cited above suggests the "Telephone" model—i.e. unpredictability via accretive internal distortion. Repeated words cease to signify, descending first into pure sound and ultimately into noise as the last semblance of structure—maintained through the sheer force of alliterative cohesion, "flood," "flee," "fleed," "flom"—disintegrates before the unpronounceable "dlown." Of course, the descent into noise is itself meaningful, especially in the connection with the imagery evoking the atmospheric nuclear tests carried out in the Nevada desert prior to the signing of the Limited Test Ban Treaty in 1963. These detonations, several of which were made spectacularly visible to mass audiences over network television, nefariously exemplify Heidegger's complaint about the blindness of a techno-science that can only confirm what it already postulates as law. That is, the very fact that actual, full-scale denotations were understood primarily as "tests" would seem to corroborate Heidegger's sense of modern science's tautological recursivity, its tendency to shrink knowledge to a matter of confirming the already known.[57] O'Hara's "yak/ yak, yak, Lieut./ no flesh to taste no flash to tusk/ no flood to flee no fleed to dlown flom the iceth loot" not only explodes the presumed innocuousness of a nuclear "test" by conjuring a scene of burning flesh and fleeing bodies, it disallows the correspondences necessary for experimental testing to be conducted at all. In other words, the descent into noise at the heart of controlled experimentation interrupts the recursivity of scientific knowledge, suggesting that if anything is given in advance, it is not the ordered regularity Nature, which need only be confirmed through the proper test, but the ever-present possibility of distortion—the breakdowns that haunt even the most systematic sequencing of events.

However, while "Biotherm" is replete with similar passages staging significant interruptions in the poem's intelligibility, the "Telephone" model of intra-systemic unpredictability is neither the only nor the most revealing type of open system that "Biotherm" examines. The idea of aligning literature (from the Romantics onwards) not with information and communication but with the disturbances and ambiguities that generate "organizational complexity" is a familiar one (Paulson 48). But if the idea of literature's inherent unpredictability has itself become thoroughly predictable, if we are accustomed to theorizing literature as "the necessary condition of invention and unpredictability in culture," "Biotherm" surprises us by offering yet another model of literary and cultural unpredictability—one that doesn't levy its own complexity and difficulty against anything, nor even identify its breakdowns as its own (Paulson 143). While the amplification of disturbances is one strategy for maintaining "openness

[57] As Heidegger writes in "The Age of the World Picture," under modern science, nature is demoted to a "ground-plan," a "closed system of spatio-temporally related units of mass," which is "secured in place in that physical research, in each step of its investigation, is obligated to it in advance" (60).

toward outcome"—in other words, for carving out literature's specialized and agonistic position within the normative and regulatory processes of a broader culture—another way to address the potential of an open system is to consider not just the errors intrinsic to it but the malleability of its boundaries. "Biotherm" takes this latter approach to an extreme, such that the poem, far from imagining itself as an irruption of novelty over and against an administered culture industry, nearly forfeits its sense of poetry's distinctiveness as a cultural form. Again, this is not to equate poetry with formlessness, chaos, or noise, but to consider how "Biotherm" articulates itself as part of a continuum of form-giving encompassing vastly different scales of making and circulation—a continuum in which identifiable systems exist, but without it being possible to ever exhaustively cite where they begin and end, or what they include and exclude.

To return, then, to the second passage cited—in which O'Hara parodically reworks the following lines from Williams's *Paterson*:

> The measure intervenes, to measure is all we know,
>
> a choice among the measures . .
>
> the measured dance
> "unless the scent of a rose
> startle us anew" (239)

we can see now that O'Hara's critique of Williams's poetics goes beyond the introjection of nonsense syllables, "measure shmeasure know shknew." If, for Williams, the specific materiality of a rose is capable of "startl[ing] us anew," jolting us out of the strictures of measure, in effect revivifying our most patterned responses to the world, for O'Hara, "the material" can at most "rattle us around." Whereas Williams's writing reserves a space for specific entities, in their unique material concreteness to impinge on human experience productively, in "Biotherm" entities do not retain any specific material structure but are continually refashioned and transmogrified as they are assimilated by larger systems. Thus, Williams's emphasis on the self-contained, singular rose ("the thing itself!") gives way to "pretty rose preserved in biotherm"—in other words, not to the rose, let alone any particular rose, but to its oil, extracted and mixed into "a marvelous sunburn preparation full of attar of roses, lanolin and plankton ($12 the tube)," as O'Hara jubilantly describes the product in a letter to Donald Allen (*Paterson* 208; O'Hara, *CP* 554).

It is significant that the reference to the poem's title surfaces in the passage that rewrites Williams. Critics who have glossed the poem's title as "life energy" or "body heat" have tended to emphasize the poem's connection to O'Hara's body. Blasing, for instance, describes "Biotherm" as "a '*journal intime*' that places us inside language as it is being spoken and takes us back to the root connection of 'intimate' and 'intestine' ('in time' of the body)" (53). Certainly, the idea of a direct link between the corporeal and the verbal captures important facets of Olson's and Williams's poetics (Williams's use of the triadic line after suffering several strokes being the most literal illustration of the linkage between prosody and corporeality). I suggest, however, that the explicit reference of O'Hara's title is perhaps more important to the poem's conceptualization of liveness: Biotherm, we must remember, is as much a trade name as an allusion to energy or life. If the name serves as an organizational model for the poem, it is not

by simply positioning life, or living matter, as poetry's root. Whatever "life" Biotherm sunscreen contains exists as an admixture of organic matter with chemical ingredients, and, as O'Hara is keenly aware, such an admixture is eminently marketable: "Plankton it says on it is practically the most health-giving substance ever rubbed into one's skin" (*CP* 554)

But if life doesn't exist in the consolidated form of a root, if instead it is dispersed and adulterated, commodified and commercialized, O'Hara is nonetheless fascinated by the radical permeability that such dispersive trajectories imply. As various critics have noted, "Biotherm" abounds with imagery of digested (and indigestible) substances, and it is full of scatological and sexual references to the consumptive and eliminative processes of human, as well as nonhuman, bodies. But however visceral the imagery, particular substances never stabilize long enough to "startle us anew." In other words, metabolism underscores that it's not the "thing itself" that matters—the thing, far from being "itself," is always en route to becoming part of something (or someone) else. Instead, O'Hara's interest lies in the processes and exchanges that set things on their way to being otherwise—reworked, relocated, and sometimes altogether removed. The form this takes ranges from bawdy humor, as in:

> hey! help! come back! you spilled your omelette all over your pants!
> oh damn it, I guess that's the end of one of our meetings (*CP* 440)

and

> you put the shit back in the drain
> and then you actually find the stopper
> …
>   I am rather irritated at your being born
>   at all
>   where did you put that stopper (443)

and

> first you peel the potatoes
> then you marinate the peelies
> in campari all the while playing
> the Mephisto Waltz on your gram
> and wrap them in mush ouch
> that god damn oven delicacies
> the ditch is full of after dinner (443)

to the more overtly political:

> …at the
> most recent summit
> conference they
> are eating string
> beans butter

smootch slurp
pass me the filth
and a coke pal (442)

and

out of the dark a monster appears full of grizzly odors which exhale through
him like a samovar belches out the news of the Comintern in a novel by
Howard Fast
BUT
the cuckoo keeps falling off the branch so everything's okay
nobody worries about mistakes disasters calamities so long as they're "natural"
sun sun bene bene bullshit it's important to be sensitive in business and
insensitive in love because what have you if you have no "balls" what made
the French important after all if not: jeu de balles, pas de balles and,
for murders of Algerians, règle de balles may I ask
"do you love it?" (438)

In this last passage, O'Hara analogizes bodily processes to political-cultural ones (specifically comparing the excretion of body odors and best-selling leftist literature), but then immediately retracts the validity of corporeal-political analogies by exposing the masculinist assumptions that pervade so-called "natural" and biological metaphors which, as O'Hara points out, are frequently used to excuse repression, from heterosexism to colonial atrocity. Thus, the passage stages the limits of an aesthetics based on spontaneity, or the identification of art with life, by reminding us of the dangers inherent in facile conceptions of the "natural."

And yet, O'Hara is not content with addressing limitations; "Biotherm" offers an alternative approach; that is, in its refusal to localize life *in* a body, in its attention to the act of *passing through* (occurring both thematically and organizationally insofar as the poem's restless churning deflates the metaphysics of "the now"), the poem poses a vision of liveness based on a fundamental permeability, an uncertainty as to what belongs where. As I will elaborate momentarily, such an uncertainty was at the basis of mid-century theorizations of "openness toward outcome," not only in poetry and art (or "non-art") but also in philosophical and scientific efforts to define open systems—i.e. to specify how highly organized structures (from living organisms to socio-cultural systems) behave spontaneously and creatively. Interestingly enough, even Biotherm sunscreen—a French luxury toiletry, hardly an obvious symbol for the creative impulse!—suggests a productive uncertainty as to what belongs where. In other words, what impresses O'Hara is precisely Biotherm's status as only quasi-organic: the fact of organic matter enfolded into a commercial preparation, itself intended to be absorbed through the skin but also to serve as a protective barrier for the skin. In this sense, Biotherm sunscreen—as O'Hara imaginatively elaborates it—dramatizes John Dewey's insight that "[t]he epidermis is only in the most superficial way an indication of where an organism ends and its environment begins" (61). "There are," Dewey writes, "things inside the body that are foreign to it, and there are things outside of it that belong to it *de jure*, if not *de facto*" (61).

Indeed, insofar as it is possible to boil down "Biotherm" to an underlying organizational principle, it is surely an experiment in the indeterminacy of spatial boundaries—from the poem's

shifting margins and flows of "micro-data" to its preoccupation with metabolic activities in all their assimilative and excretive varieties. This indeterminacy, or uncertainty, as to where things begin or end, and what they subsume or omit, pervaded O'Hara's experience of writing the poem—"I don't know anything about what it is or will be but am enjoying trying to keep going..." (*CP* 553-54). It is also at the root of a more widespread interest during the 1950s and 1960s in open systems, namely, in entities (whether organic or otherwise) that exist in constant energetic exchange with their environments, and which therefore cannot be conceptualized topographically in terms of observable spatial boundaries. Systems theorist Ludwig Bertalanffy's description of an open system's ability to "maintain itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components," practically doubles as a description of "Biotherm."

Much like Norbert Wiener's *Cybernetics*, Bertalanffy's *General System Theory* (1968) explores "phenomena not resolvable into local events… in short, 'systems' of various orders not understandable by investigation of their respective parts in isolation" (37). According to Bertalanffy, this formal approach—i.e. the effort to conceptualize organizational patterns, elements existing in dynamic interrelation, in lieu of investigating specific substances and materials—enables an appreciation of the structural similarities between otherwise very different organizations. Bertalanffy hoped that by attending to the formal similarities between organizations that differ in makeup (electrical, biological, mechanical) or scale (cellular, organismic, socio-political), we might come closer to a "unitary conception of the world…based, not upon the possibly futile and certainly farfetched hope finally to reduce all levels of reality to the level of physics, but rather on the isomorphy of laws in different fields" (48). In this sense, Bertalanffy envisions system theory as an antidote to a reductively materialist or mechanistic world-view:

> The unifying principle is that we find organization at all levels. The mechanistic world view, taking the play of physical particles as ultimate reality, found its expression in a civilization that glorifies physical technology that has led eventually to the catastrophes of our time. Possibly the model of the world as a great organization can help to *reinforce the sense of reverence for the living which we have almost lost in the last sanguinary decades of human history*. (49; emphasis added)

Unsurprisingly, living systems occupy a prominent place in Bertalanffy's *General System Theory*, which is largely devoted to addressing the complexities of open systems; that is, systems that continually exchange material with their environments, and which are capable of "processes of growth, development, creation, and the like" (210). Echoing Norbert Wiener's remark that "we are not stuff that abides, but patterns that perpetuate themselves" Bertalanffy describes biological existence in terms of an organized flux (*Human Use* 96). The live organism, he writes, "maintains itself in a continuous inflow and outflow, a building up and breaking down of components, never being, so long as it is alive, in a state of chemical and thermodynamic equilibrium but maintained in a so-called steady state which is distinct from the latter" (39). But unlike Wiener, who celebrated homeostasis as "the touchstone of our personal identity," Bertalanffy takes issue with the concept of homeostatic equilibrium, describing it as a problematically conservative principle (*Human Use* 96). He associates it with the Freudian idea that human behavior is essentially geared toward minimizing tension. In lieu of homeostasis,

Bertalanffy introduces the more dynamic notion of a "steady-state," which is not a principle of stability but a form of disequilibrium, that is, an expression of the distance that a live organism must keep from perfect equipoise (total equilibrium, as Freud himself famously noted, amounts to inanimacy or death).[58]

In placing tension at the heart of his account of the open system, Bertalanffy stresses the absurdity of identifying life with homeostasis, pointing out that if disturbances had no positive biological value, if life were merely a process of regulation and adjustment, "it would never have progressed beyond the amoeba which, after all, is the best adapted creature in the world" (192). Cybernetics, in its preoccupation with homeostatic and regulatory processes, remains tied to what Bertalanffy calls the "robot model" of man. Despite its emphasis on dynamic unities, cybernetic theory misses what is essentially creative about the open system, that is, it neglects "processes whose goal is not reduction but *building up* of tensions"—tensions, which rather than being annulled, neutralized, or brought under control, may be expressively released in the form of spontaneous activity (210; emphasis added). For Bertalanffy, then, the real openness of a living organism consists of something more than the ability to import and export material, to exchange matter with its environment. In other words, the mere existence of inputs and outputs does not make a system "open" in the creative sense that interests Bertalanffy. What matters, rather, is the system's essential indeterminacy, the fact that an organism does not coincide with a particular organizational distribution or topography, let alone a spatial location. Instead, the organism, insofar as it comprises an open rather than closed system, consists of a basic ability to reorganize itself, that is, to change rather than conserve its own being by responding to, and making use of, tensions and problems.

"Biotherm," I am arguing, articulates a similar tension-based vision of systemic openness. Although the poem is deeply concerned with spontaneity, liveness, and immediacy, these concepts are equated neither with organic matter nor with a perceptual consciousness (the experience of the now); and they are certainly not correlated with a particular cultural form (poetry may be immediate and lively but, as O'Hara never fails to remind us, the same can be said for painting, theatre, radio, television, and Hollywood cinema—"after all, only Whitman and Crane and Williams, of the Americans poets, are better than the movies") (*CP* 498). In fact, "Biotherm" refuses to give spontaneity a positive form; spontaneity is maintained only as a type of uncertainty, a generative inability to exhaustively identify the contours and constituents of things (including the poem itself). The poem focuses less on things than on their trajectories, the processes and exchanges that set things on their way to becoming otherwise—whether by virtue of being passed over, absorbed into, or expelled from larger biological, technological, and socio-political milieus. And yet—and this is what makes the poem so striking, unique in comparison to other contemporaneous artistic explorations of systemic openness—it does so without valorizing process as such, that is, without elevating process to the level of an ontology. As a point of contrast, consider the utopian tenor of Burnham's optimistic interpretation of Bertalanffy:

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[58] In the fifth chapter of *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud writes: "At one time or another, by some operation of force which still completely baffles conjecture, the properties of life were awakened in lifeless matter… The tension then aroused in the previously inanimate matter strove to attain an equilibrium; the first instinct was present, that to return to lifelessness" (47). For Freud, the so-called "development" of living beings is an expression of the way in which inanimate matter has been disturbed by external influences (vivification is a fall out of equilibrium). Life seeks to minimize these disturbances, and ultimately to reinstate absolute equilibrium (e.g. lifelessness). Thus, Freud's famous claim: "The goal of all life is death" (47).

> The systems approach goes beyond a concern with staged environments and happenings; it deals in a revolutionary fashion with the larger problem of boundary concepts. In systems perspective there are no contrived confines such as the theater proscenium or picture frame… Where the object almost always has a fixed shape and boundaries, the consistency of a system may be altered in time and space…. (166)

We find an earlier version of the 1960s enthusiasm for a processual aesthetic articulated in Charles Olson's 1950 essay "Human Universe":

> …if man is once more to possess intent in his life, and to take up the responsibility implicit in his life, he has to comprehend his own process as intact, from outside, by way of his skin, in, and by his own powers of conversion, out again. For there is this other part of the motion which we call life to be examined new, that thing we overlove, man's action, that tremendous discharge of force which we overlove when we love it for its own sake but which (when it is good) is the equal of all intake plus transposing. (*Collected Prose* 162)

Here, man's skin may be a figure of permeability, but permeability is itself understood as the key to an "intact" existence. Inflow and outflow, in proper ratio, amount to a balanced life—this is a far cry from the tension-based conception of life, the principle of disequilibrium, which animates Bertalanffy's writings, and which we find throughout "Biotherm."

For O'Hara as for Bertalanffy, there is nothing essentially positive or harmonious about permeable, unbounded organizations. As Geoff Ward points out, "Biotherm" is brimming with "filth and expressions of disgust; 'spitting,' 'grizzly odors,' 'belches,' 'fart,' 'bullshit,' 'lice,' 'a shitty looking person,' 'a case of clap,' 'ugh.'" The list could be extended. According to Ward, this gives the poem "a sourness and bile quite contrary to the vibrancy and genial qualities" that typify O'Hara's oeuvre. Indeed, in "Biotherm," discharges of force, instead of being the "equal of all intake," tend toward extravagance and waste ("that god damn oven delicacies / the ditch is full of after dinner"), and nothing guarantees the innocuity, let alone usefulness, of what enters by way of the skin ("intake" comes just as easily in the form of nuclear fallout, venereal disease, exorbitantly priced cosmetics, surfeits of booze and food, etc.) O'Hara refuses to "comprehend…process as intact," but I would argue that this refusal is double-edged. Which is to say that while O'Hara refuses to assign a positive or liberatory value to the inflows and outflows of open organizations—while, to borrow one of his phrases, "There's nothing metaphysical about it"[59]—by the same token, there is nothing especially pernicious, or for that matter inherently negative, about the poem's tensions, surfeits, and filthy by-products. In short, "Biotherm" is profoundly ambivalent, unwilling to idealize or ontologize process, but equally unwilling to vilify the perturbations and imbalances that invariably occur. For all its grossness, the poem never reaches anything approaching abjection; one always senses the delight that courses through even the most unsavory and painful images, reminding us that as long as the line between positivity and negativity remains undrawn, every tension is as much a source of potential transformation as destruction.

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[59] See O'Hara's mock manifesto "Personism" in *Collected Poems* 498-99.

O'Hara's ambivalence comes to the fore as the poem reaches an ending as "endless" as its beginning. This time, however, it is not Wordsworth's immortal clouds but the empty modernist temporality of T.S. Eliot's "Prufrock" that O'Hara writes against:

(ALWAYS)

never to lose those moments in the Carlyle without a tie

endless as a stick-pin barely visible you
drown whatever one thought of as perception and
let all the clouds in under the yellow heaters
meeting   somewhere over St. Louis
call me earlier because I might want to do something else
except eat   ugh

endlessly unraveling itself before the Christopher Columbus Tavern
quite a series was born   as where I am going is to
Quo Vadis for lunch
out there in the babbling wind and glass   c'est l'azur

…

oh plankton!
"mes poèmes lyriques, à partir de 1897, peuvent se lire comme un journal intime"

yes always though you said it first
you the quicksand and sand and grass
as I wave toward you freely
the ego-ridden sea
there is a light there that neither
of us will obscure
rubbing it all white
saving the ships from fucking up on the rocks
on the infinite waves of skin smelly and crushed and light and absorbed (*CP* 448)

While he entertains the Prufrockian obsession over empty time—time in which finitude and serial expansion are rendered equally meaningless—O'Hara's version of it is even emptier (or better put, flatter) since he can't seem to muster any of the self-conscious angst that characterizes Prufrock's dilemma. Which is to say, if "Biotherm" doesn't have a trace of the eternal, it also isn't perturbed by secularized clock time. The "endless," as O'Hara figures it, is a thoroughly unremarkable affair, something one catches the drift of at the tavern or on a lunch date; it neither prompts an existential crisis nor precipitates a radical solution—the redemptive drowning that ends "Prufrock."[60] Whereas "Prufrock" ends not on the beach, but in the sea, in a watery grave

[60] The final tercet of Eliot's poem reads: "We have lingered in the chambers of the sea / By sea-girls wreathed with seaweed red and brown / Till human voices wake us, and we drown" (16).

suggestive of Freud's "oceanic" feeling—"a feeling as of something limitless, unbounded," something that unbinds the ego and restores its original oneness with the world, in short, "a sensation of 'eternity'" (*Civilization* 11)—"Biotherm" ends less conclusively, without anything as totalizing as death or the ego's dissolution. According to O'Hara, the only thing that drowns is "whatever one thought of as perception," as if to say that it's only ever a particular conception of the ego that literature manages to dissolve. The ego itself is remarkably resilient; hence O'Hara's sea, far from being a figure of primordial oneness, remains "ego-ridden."

To reiterate, "Biotherm" is concerned with the indeterminacy of boundaries, not their total dissolution. It does not seek the radical negativity of the death of the subject, which would only be another figuration of eternality, idealized oneness, or "intact" process. Although "there is a light there," a saving light that neither the 'you' nor the 'I' is capable of obscuring, it turns out to be nothing more transcendent than the white of sunscreen rubbed on the body. And yet, the poem's final image—which at its most literal level is simply an image of applied suntan lotion—hints at a mode of unboundedness, not by envisioning dissolution but by disquieting the very tropes that govern our notions of form and formlessness. In the poem's ultimate line, it is not the sea that expresses "something limitless, unbounded," but rather the body's epidermal perimeter: "the infinite waves of skin smelly and crushed and light and absorbed." In infinitizing the body's border, O'Hara gives us an oceanic skin, an image not predicated on traditional oppositions: openness vs. closure, form vs. formlessness, systematicity vs. spontaneous activity, etc. Such an image is not utopian; the fact that interiority and exteriority are infinitely reversible doesn't amount to a radical negation of lyric selfhood, the demise of the *journal intime*. However, it does suggest that it might be possible to affirm the self, or the body, without conserving it, without even being certain of its content and shape, which is, of course, not the same thing as advocating for its dissolution.

Chapter Four
Writing the Body in the Age of Necropolitics

> …a skeleton…had been substituted for the ship's proper figure-head—the image of Christopher Colon, the discoverer of the New World; …the negro Babo took by succession each Spaniard forward, and asked him whose skeleton that was, and whether, from its whiteness, he should not think it a white's?
>
> —Herman Melville, *Benito Cereno*

In the preceding three chapters, I argue that postwar poets reworked the Romantic trope of "organic form" so as to extend the category of life to man-made forms. That is, instead of invoking the analogy between organismic life and textual form as a way of naturalizing literary production, Charles Olson, Larry Eigner, and Frank O'Hara attempted to animate what they acknowledged to be the insistently inorganic and technical space of the poetic text. Their efforts to create vital texts without disavowing the artificial and technological qualities of aesthetic form were, I argue, an important contribution to one of the central problems of the postwar decades: namely, how to rethink nature and technology, organism and machine as non-oppositional pairings. As I have shown, this problem played out across different discursive and creative practices—from the trans-disciplinary science of cybernetics, which modeled machinic intelligence after the recursive, biological processes (rather than the abstract, representational capacities of the mind), to projectivist and New York school poetries, which sought to reconstitute the temporalities and rhythms proper to bodily life as graphic-verbal patterns. Throughout the preceding chapters, I have tried to bring into focus a shared investment among poets and scientists in modeling life inorganically, as well as how the postwar notion of the animal body as an iterable pattern allowed poets and scientists to invest the category of life with a certain mobility. As formal patterns the organismic body was no longer bound to specific material substances; rather, it was understood to be capable of passing through and into various media. In a reversal of the Cartesian claim for the body as a purely mechanical configuration, the cybernetic blurring of the organism-machine boundary suggested that technology might take its cue from life itself. Key to this historical moment, then, is a reworking of technics—a sense of the living body as a rich zone of possibilities and indeterminacies, which technological creation would do well to emulate.

In drawing attention to a continuum of aesthetic and technological instantiations of the live body, my goal has been to think *technē* outside the terms that dominate most critical accounts of the postwar era: control, automation, and militarization. In this sense, I am working in the tradition of what Peter Galison calls "the more critical branch of postmodern theory," exemplified by critics, such as Donna Haraway, who refuse "to espouse a nostalgia for a 'natural' world…that preexisted technology" (261). Like Haraway, my work is motivated by the desire to unsettle the connection between technology and control, in other words, to see such a connection as historically contingent and therefore non-necessary. Indeed, my reading of Olson's understanding of cybernetics resonates with Haraway's vision of cybernetic machines uncoupled from "power and control," "open-ended, nondedicated in their function, and able to reproduce, learn, and interconnect with the human" (Galison 260). And yet, as Galison rightly points out, the connection between technoscience and militarized forms of socio-political control, while non-necessary, is nonetheless real and I would stress *persistent*. "We are not," Galison reminds

us, "free by fiat alone to dismiss the chain of associations that was forged over decades in the laboratory, on the battlefield, in the social sciences, and in the philosophy of cybernetics" (265). Given the myriad ways that machine-organism interfaces function in contemporary domains of biopolitical control—the digitization and patenting of genetic sequences being one among many controversial forms of twenty-first-century biotechnological manipulation—we would be remiss to take Galison's words simply as a lesson in historiography.

My concern, then, in this final chapter, is to consider how aesthetic and cybernetic theories of "open form," while offering compelling non-anthropocentric models of creativity, remain entangled in systems of control, militarization, and biopolitical governance. I am particularly interested in how poets writing in the twenty-first century address these sites of entanglement, as well as how they historicize contemporary technocultures in relation to the American mid-century.

Perhaps the boldest recent formulation of this relation comes from Heriberto Yépez's poetic essay on Olson, *The Empire of Neomemory*:

> Each time North Americans imagine the preterite—and each time they draw nearer to the most distant of them—they draw nearer to seeing everything from the point of view of the 1950s. Olson and the Beats are not a coincidence. The white man, the hegemonic man, *the American*, did not begin seriously to rewrite his artificial memory until the 1950s. What Romanticism was for Modernity, the 50s will be for the North American empire. And they will be its Middle Ages—its Middle Ages express, *fast food classics!* And they will be its paleolithic. And they will be its Golden Age. And they will be its UFO Age. And they will be its Greeks. And they will be its post-Fordism. And the 1950s will be everything. And there will be nothing but 1950s for the USA. (136)

And in another passage, which similarly yokes Olson, 50s Americana, and imperialism into a cultural paradigm whose pastness is glamorously and disturbingly present, Yépez writes:

> Olson saw the world through the eyes of others. In some sense, the presence of others in his eyes/I's is coherent with his post-ego utopian poetics. At the same time, however, his post-ego desire was fulfilled through colonial high-culture spectacle. We carry the "History" we want to destroy glued onto our retinas… Many North Americans have no eyes. And have only images of other times. As if they have only the decade of the 1950s. (143)

Obviously Yépez is not alone in identifying Olson with "colonial high-culture" and projectivism with "an aesthetics of military speed" (143, 216). Michael Davidson and Rachel Blau DuPlessis, among others, have discussed the relationship between Olson's poetics and Cold War codes of masculinity, imperialist expansionism, and aggressivity at length. What is, however, distinctive about Yépez's narrative of the American mid-century is its doubled temporality. Yépez is not telling a story about the past from the vantage point of a present replete with the lessons of postcolonial theory and gender and sexuality studies. As the above passages suggest, Yépez's interest lies in how Olson's era folds into the present, and vice-versa. The move to see "the world through the eyes of others"—a reference to Olson's romantic primitivism in *Mayan Letters*—is a "microanalogy" (to borrow one of Yépez's neologisms) for a hegemonic society obsessed with the past, a society that, having "only images of other times," is non-contemporaneous with itself.

Thus, in Yépez's rhetoric, temporal and geographical forms of otherness merge into a single alterity: when North Americans "imagine the preterite," they "draw nearer to the most distant of them." It's as if the slippery slope between desubjectifying the self and assimilating the other were applicable to the historical situation of an entire society that finds pleasure and power in being out-of-phase with itself. In this sense, Yépez's drama of an eternally reoccurring 50s suggests a geopolitical structure as much as it suggests a historical or post-historical problematic. Yépez invents various terms to characterize this structure—"the Oxidental military-industrial complex," "the psychopoetics of empire," "Pantopia"—all of which point to the slippage between "post-ego desire" and technologies of control that promulgate "the illusion of a shared world, becoming similar via imaginary relations" (220).

Craig Santos Perez's multi-volume poem, *from Unincorporated Territory*, similarly examines the weight of the American 50s on the present, and *as* the present. Over the course of three volumes, *[hacha]* (2008), *[saina]* (2012), and *[guma']* (2014), Perez, a native Chamorro, investigates "the meaning of Guam," particularly the cultural, political, and aesthetic implications of the Guam Organic Act of 1950, which declared the Pacific island an unincorporated territory—a region neither within nor without the United States. Midway through *[saina]* Perez acknowledges and problematizes his formal affinity with Olson, noting that "Projective Verse" was "published the same year the organic act of guam was signed" (63). By linking Olson's techno-organicism with the Organic Act—and as we'll see, this link is more than just a coincidental concurrence—Perez asks us to consider the projectivist impulse, or in Yépez's terms "post-ego desire," not simply as a liberatory mode of openness. If Olson imagined openness as a strictly positive achievement—that is, as a way of decentering the ego by soliciting the influence of one's technical-material resources, and then treating these nonhuman elements as full-fledged agents in the creative process—openness, in Perez's poetics, is not confined to an individual artist courting select, small-scale technologies; it consists, instead, of entire populations and topographies whose "openness" to chemical waste and nuclear fallout does not end with the end of World War II nor with the end of the Cold War.

In footnotes to the serial poem, "Tidelands," (each volume of *from Unincorporated Territory* consists of interwoven serial poems, some of which, such as "Tidelands," stretch across multiple volumes) Perez presents the testimony that he, alongside other Chamorro activists, delivered in 2008 to the United Nations Special Political and Decolonization Committee:

> since world war two, military dumping and nuclear testing has contaminated the pacific with peb's and radiation… the violation doesn't end on our shores… eighty contaminated military dumpsites still exist on guam. the now civilian ordot landfill (a former world war two military dumpsite) contains 17 toxic chemicals, including arsenic, lead, chromium, peb's, and cyanide. the same 17 pollutants are also found in landfills located over the island's aquifer… while the u.s. military erodes the integrity of our land, expectations from military build up have more than doubled real estate prices and tripled home costs… u.s. colonial presence has not only damaged our bodies of land and water, but it's deteriorated our physical bodies as well. the military used guam as a decontamination site during its nuclear testing in the 1970s, which resulted in massive radiation and agent orange and purple exposure… toxic chemicals have snaked into our bloodstream, causing multiple sclerosis, alzheimer's, renal dysfunction, cardiovascular disease, liver dysfunction, deafness, blindness, epilepsy, seizures, arthritis,

anemia, stillbirths, and infertility… (60, 67, 83, 107, 114)[61]

Perez's chilling account of the afterlife of mid-century American military technology—of an Americanizing 50s *that does not end*—captures the protracted temporality of what Rob Nixon has called "slow violence." Whereas Yépez describes North America as a society whose desire to assimilate all forms of alterity renders it continually out-of-phase with itself, centered on a pastness that it relives via media images, Perez's poetic project explores non-contemporaneity at the material, molecular level. For the Chamorro body, the Pacific is still the United States' Proving Grounds, not only because militarization and colonial power persist into the present but also because, as Nixon points out, "industrial particulates and effluents live on in the environmental elements we inhabit and in our very bodies, which epidemiologically and ecologically are never our simple contemporaries" (8). Even if Micronesia now consists of sovereign nations—with the exception of Guam and the Northern Mariana Islands, which remain U.S. territories—colonial power continues to operate insofar as Micronesia's archipelagos are "in part governed by an irradiated past" (Nixon 7). Not only, then, must we understand body, land, and ocean as precariously open, susceptible to injury and disintegration, but the temporal-historical boundaries of these human and nonhuman topographies resist easy periodization; from the perspective of slow violence the "post" in postcolonial doesn't so much mark a before and after as it signifies something "open ended, eluding the tidy closure, the containment, imposed by the visual orthodoxies of victory and defeat" (6). And as Perez and Nixon both suggest, this accretive, open-ended violence has everything to do with the way military technology restructures populations in ways that outlast political and historical forms.

The uncontainable consequences of Cold War technology, which Norbert Wiener deeply feared, and which skirt the edges of Olson's rhetoric, come to the fore in *from Unincorporated Territory*. Although Perez shows us the dark side of open form poetry, casting Olson's desire for non-closure as an aesthetic counterpart to methods of territorial and geopolitical organization that capitalize on the body's and body-politic's permeability, *from Unincorporated Territory* is far from elegiac; it insists on exploring the critical potential of disintegrated terrains (whether organismic, territorial, or textual in nature). Standing before the United Nations, Perez testifies to pollutants that "erode the integrity of our land." But if the erosion of integrity has a purely negative meaning in the language of testimony, it is re-signified when placed in the context of Perez's serial poetics. Whereas a serial poem usually proceeds in a successive if aleatory order, Perez's technique of interweaving different serial poems creates a braided structure whose sequential "integrity," rather than being successive, depends on the way in which each series is interrupted by or laced with all the others. If we understand integrity as the state of being complete and undivided, then integrity is precisely the organizational form that Perez's poetic treatment of Guam breaks down. The formal structure of the self-divided poems mirrors the island's status as a non-integral division of the United States, a space that disrupts the nation-state's image as a self-contained, indivisible entity.

In other words, Perez's poetic treatment of Guam's colonial status demands that we perceive non-closure not only as a formal aesthetic but also a geopolitical relation that possesses critical potential insofar as it directs attention to the politics of "false containment," to borrow a phrase from Mel Chen's rethinking of neoliberal biopolitics, *Animacies*. Chen, like Perez, is

[61] In *[saina]*, these footnotes appear crossed-out, *sous rature*. I present them without the strikethrough for the purpose of readability.

interested in relational forms, particularly modes of bodily openness, that span individual, social, political, and environmental terrains, and which upset traditional distinctions between self and other, subject and object, animate and dead matter. Chen's theorization of toxicity—a category that maps points of slippage between "life, death, and things in between"—is especially relevant here, in that it assigns a *potentially* positive value to the eroded integrity described by Perez:

> …there is the strict physicality of the elements that travel in, on, and through us, and sometimes stay. If we ingest each other's skin cells, as well as each other's skin creams, then animacy comes to appear as a category itself held in false containment, insofar as it portends exteriorized control relationships rather than mutual imbrications, even at the most material levels… Furthermore, the toxicity of the queer to the heterosexual collective or individual body, the toxicity of the dirty subjects to the hygienic State, the toxicity of heavy metals to an individual body: none of these segregations perfectly succeeds even while it is believed with all effort and investment to be effective. (210)

While Chen locates a critical potential in toxins, describing them as agents that destabilize normative boundaries (materially as well as conceptually), and in so doing disabuse humans of their pretension to control and police their own bodies and the bodies of others, Chen also insists that it would be "foolish to imagine toxicity stands in for 'utopia' given the explosion of resentful, despairing, painful, screamingly negative affects that surround toxicity" (211). Reading Chen and Perez together, we arrive, then, at an ambivalent notion of open form, a situation in which bodily openness is neither coextensive with nor separable from historical and contemporary forms of biopolitical governance.

Thus, although Perez, like Yépez, calls into question the utopian valence of Olson's egoless typewriter-poet (and by extension Haraway's cyborg), his work nonetheless attests to the importance of continuing to investigate and reimagine the specific processes by which bodies become coupled to technological milieus. While the blurring of human-machine boundaries may perform a kind of liberatory work—redressing essentialist assumptions about gender, race, nationality, and the body's role in normative identity categories—we cannot risk a techno-optimism that ignores the fact that not all organism-machine interfaces are pleasurable or desirable. By the same token, we must avoid a technophobic outlook, which sees the irradiated topographies and bodies described by Perez and Chen only as abject formations—bereft of critical potential, they become tragic victims rather than testaments to a basic material condition, a permeability, that outstrips human campaigns for order and control. My aim in this final chapter is to think between these two extremes, and in this sense to apply pressure to the more positive theorization of technics that runs throughout the previous chapters, by asking: What does it mean to interpret technology optimistically, as a domain of life, in an era of necropolitics and biotechnological manipulation?[62]

The recent writings of Perez, as well as Claudia Rankine (whose work I will turn to momentarily), engage this question insofar as each poet rejects techno-optimism, and does so well aware that the demand of our contemporary moment is *not* to return to an organically unified human body purified of its constitutive entanglement with technology. On the contrary, these poets foreground the need to think carefully about the specific forms that human-technological relationships take, including the specific ways that poetic language works as a

[62] See Mbembe's reformulation of Foucault's concept of biopower in "Necropolitics."

technology today. In what follows, my focus will be on Rankine's *Citizen: An America Lyric*—a work that examines and problematizes contemporary practices of technologically encoding the body. That is, *Citizen* examines how the recording, circulation, and visibility of particular bodies functions as a form of biopower, extending all the way from the micromanagement of the kinds of affects and intimacies that individuals may participate in to the distribution of life and death along racialized lines. However, I argue that Rankine's book does not exempt itself from the realm of techniques that render human bodies publically visible and open to management. Although *Citizen* relies on an extended body-text analogy, it also critiques the politics involved in its own effort to textually encode bodily life. For Rankine, poetry stands in uncomfortable proximity to a host of extra-literary techniques by which bodies are recorded, distributed, and judged to be insufficiently or excessively "alive," or altogether expendable. More than merely mapping the contours of the body, *Citizen* records the problematic and differential ways that particular bodies *and* books become entangled with, and at times perpetuate, technologies of governance. While Rankine does not work as clearly within the projectivist tradition as Perez does, *Citizen* can also be described as an animate text—a text formatted to display poetry's formal and material continuity with living (and mortal) beings. However, the vitality of her textual production doesn't consist, as it did for Olson, in streams of perceptual data reconstituted graphically. Rather, than attempting to map the body as such, Rankine draws our attention to the literary and extra-literary technologies that record, subsume, displace, and injure bodies. Thus, the violence and erasures that *Citizen* records are complexly variegated cultural assemblages—life "experiences" that exceed (but still include) the phenomenology of particular individuals.

Grammatical Bodies, Paper Bodies: You, I, and 80# Coated Matte

The subtitle of Rankine's *Citizen*, *An American Lyric*, which it shares with her previous work, *Don't Let Me Be Lonely*, recalls us to Whitman. Her lyric project, which hinges less on the lyric "I" than on the second-person pronoun, revisits Whitman's preoccupation with the curious mix of intimacy and anonymity that characterizes poetic address:

> It avails not, time nor place—distance avails not,
> I am with you, you men and women of a generation, or
>   Ever so many generations hence,
> Just as you feel when you look on the river and sky, so I felt,
> …
> Just as you look on the numberless masts of ships and the
>   thick-stemm'd pipes of steamboats, I look'd.
>
> …
>
> Closer yet I approach you,
> What thought you have of me now, I had as much of you—
>   I laid in my stores in advance,
> I consider'd long and seriously of you before you were born.
>
> Who was to know what should come home to me?

Who knows but I am enjoying this?
Who knows, for all the distance, but I am as good as looking
at you now, for all you cannot see me? ("Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" 308-09, 311-12)

To receive the "you" in Whitman's "Crossing Brooklyn Ferry" as a personalized address requires that we feel "I" each time we hear "you," and feel "you" or not-me each time we encounter Whitman's "I." Such substitutions typically happen automatically, as a consequence of our familiarity with the anonymity of personal pronouns—their generalized applicability to different persons—as well as the conventions of literary address. Whitman, however, *ensures* that we carry out such substitutions by performing them himself, in advance of his reader. Through a temporal transposition that places his future reader, the "you," in *his* present tense—surely the masted ships and steamboats that "you look on" belong to Whitman's century—and the lyric "I" in the future's past tense, Whitman invests his "I" with the power to speak from a futurity that actually belongs to the "you" and the "you" with the ability to inhabit a history that actually belongs to his "I."

This is, of course, one of Whitman's signature techniques, and as such it performs the double work of rendering Whitman's poems stylistically distinctive—one never mistakes a Whitman poem—and ensuring the anonymity and generality of his lyric "I" (just look how easily it becomes "you"). And yet, as Whitman knew all too well, the ability of lyric address to affect an intimacy that is simultaneously immediate *and* infinitely transferable, specific *and* universally accessible is tenuous at best. The properly lyric "I," an "I" capable of endless substitutions, is always in tension with the "I" that belongs to a biographically and biologically specific individual: "I too had receiv'd identity by my body, / That I was I knew was of my body, and what I should be I / knew I should be of my body." How can the bodily "I" possibly be the same "I" that claims, "I am with you," "I am as good as looking at you now"? The specificity of Whitman's physical being, his bodily "I," is precisely what cannot be present to the reader. The "I" that is "as good as looking at you now" cannot but be a textualized subject, which approximates the ability to look back at the reader, to do something "as good as" but not equivalent to looking. This tacit refusal to grant the textualized "I" full-fledged sensory powers, in other words, to complete the body-text analogy, reminds us of the rift separating body and text. As we know, Whitman devised all sorts of strategies to pass his bodily "I" into the text—using photography to indexically represent his body on the page, marking printed volumes with his personal signature, etc.—but for all that, there remains a tension in his work between "I" as a conceptual entity and "I" as an extra-linguistic being with a distinct physicality.

The conceptual "I" is transferable on the condition of its generality; the physical body is specific on the condition of its non-transferability. This ineluctable asymmetry, which Whitman variously dramatizes and represses, gives his poetry an opacity and impersonality that arguably outstrips even the most abstruse passages in Eliot and Pound. In *Citizen*, Rankine similarly interrogates the asymmetrical arrangements that structure the difference between the communicable "I" and the specificity of particular bodies. At times, this difference surfaces thematically:

Sometimes "I" is supposed to hold what is not there until
it is. Then *what is* comes apart the closer you are to it.

> This makes the first person a symbol for something.
>
> The pronoun barely holding the person together.
>
> Someone claimed we should use our skin as wallpaper
> knowing we couldn't win. (71)

In this passage Rankine explicitly describes the first-person pronoun as thoroughly artificial—a technology that like any technology is subject to failure and breakdown. On the one hand, she strips the "I" of its efficacy, revealing how "I" struggles to do its necessary symbolic work of substituting the dispersed reality of a person for an integrated, intelligible sign. On the other hand, Rankine prevents her readers from glorying in the demystification of the symbol. Whatever we have forgone in way of generalized, symbolic intelligibility is reinstated with the "sometimes," "something," and "someone." These words return us to a form of language that names no one and nothing because it is capable of naming anyone and anything. Like the "I," these words seem to bear no relationship to whatever might be specific about a person or body, least of all to the specificity of feeling one's person or body disintegrate, to the coming apart of "*what is*." And yet, in the wider context of *Citizen*, it is clear that the reference to "our skin" denotes the skin of black bodies, despite the fact that this passage, like much of the book, withholds any description or visualization of racial markers.

I will return to the question of what it means to "see" race without visualizing it, since the (in)visibility of racial bodies is one of *Citizen*'s core concerns and also central to the biopolitical mechanisms that this chapter examines, but for now I want to underscore the degree to which the extreme violence of the last image, a shockingly literal coming apart or unbinding of historically-situated persons, is intensified by the sheerly formal universality of the linguistic code. If it is possible for neutrality to feel flagrant, it feels so here. Throughout *Citizen*, Rankine channels this formal universality, mostly through her use of the second person, in ways that deliberately exacerbate the distinction between what can and cannot be discursively exchanged. Put differently, she levies the universality of poetic address— its applicability to heterogeneous referents—so as to face the reader with a profound asymmetry between lyric openness (where "you" and "I" switch places with ease) and the differential ordering of lives through racial logics:

> Because of your elite status from a year's worth of travel,
> you have already settled into your window seat on United
> Airlines, when the girl and her mother arrive at your row.
> The girl, looking over at you, tells her mother, these are
> our seats, but this is not what I expected. The mother's
> response is barely audible—I see, she says. I'll sit in the
> middle. (12)

Whereas Whitman encourages us to lose ourselves in the anonymity that allows "you" to mean both me and whomever, Rankine forces her reader to simultaneously feel *and* override the second person's appeal to generality. In order to understand the situation the prose poem depicts, the reader needs to race the "you," a necessity all the more uncomfortable given that the poem

scrupulously avoids visualizing or naming race. In an interview, Rankine speaks to her heavy use of the second person, describing it as a tactic that at once allowed her to avoid claiming ownership of situations that do not belong to her biographically and as a way to abstain from explicitly racing individuals. Of course—and this point is crucial—the reader cannot read the above poem, nor any of the poems in *Citizen*, without the lens of America's racial history. The situations that the poems describe are structured in such a way that the subject-positions are determinate, one knows—even with minimal knowledge of American social life—the races of the bodies that belong to "you" and "I." And yet, the ubiquity of Rankine's pronouns, their steady accumulation throughout *Citizen*, force the reader to confront and even feel their claim to inclusivity, to represent whomever, while knowing all too well that this feeling is a formal effect.

Among the host of difficult emotions that *Citizen* elicits, the reader feels, and is given special access to, the problem of registering the body in language, since it is the reader herself who must do the work of reading against the generalizable, anonymous quality of Rankine's language to the differential ordering of human lives that the poems recount. This differential ordering occurs within lives, which is to say, it structures social and psychological terrains in ways that are injuriously uneven:

> A man knocked over her son in the subway. You feel your
> own body wince. He's okay, but the son of a bitch kept
> walking. She says she grabbed the stranger's arm and
> told him to apologize: I told him to look at the boy and
> apologize. Yes, and you want it to stop, you want the
> child pushed to the ground to be seen, to be helped to his
> feet, to be brushed off by the person that did not see him,
> has never seen him, has perhaps never seen anyone who
> is not a reflection of himself. (17)

However, Rankine also documents how racism operates not only within life but *on* it. In addition to describing the phenomenological effects of racism,

> An unsettled feeling keeps body front and center. The
> wrong words enter your day like a bad egg in your mouth
> and puke runs down your blouse, a dampness drawing
> your stomach in toward your rib cage. (8)

Citizen also examines racism in Foucaldian terms as a technology for managing life at the level of population, charting everything from the distribution of stressors, illness, and so-called "natural" disasters like Hurricane Katrina to the police-state-sanctioned killings of young black men. In this context, the depersonalization that occurs through Rankine's repeated use of pronouns to call up the anonymity of language qua a general system of symbolization is crucial to presenting race—specifically whiteness and blackness in America—as a structural phenomenon, a phenomenon felt within the body but also situated beyond and above human individuality:

> And still this life parts your lids, you see

you seeing your extending hand

as a falling wave—
…
How to care for the injured body,

the kind of body that can't hold
the content it is living?

And where is the safest place when that place
must be someplace other than in the body?

Even now your voice entangles this mouth
whose words are here as pulse, strumming
shut out, shut in, shut up—

You cannot say—

A body translates its you—

you there, hey you

even as it loses the location of its mouth. (139, 143-144)

Life, as Rankine characterizes it here, is neither a force emanating from within a body nor an organization peculiar to a body. It is, rather, something that acts *on* a body, compelling its lids to part, and its eyes to see. Life appears to affect the body, to open the body up, but it does so without being *of* the body. In other words, Rankine describes forms of living that happen beyond the personal self. She begins by collapsing any meaningful distinction between the first- and third-person perspectives, instead offering a depersonalized "you," a you that takes a third-person attitude toward its selfhood, whose own sight becomes the object seen, "you see / you seeing your extending hand."

The subsequent lines develop this account of what it means to live on the outside, to recognize life as nonsynchronous with the personal self. It is not only a psychological question of depersonalization or alienation—"double consciousness" in W.E.B. Du Bois's terms—but also a matter of how lived experience becomes disarticulated from the entire body. The body "can't hold / the content it is living," and the ability of speech to unite the physical and metaphysical dimensions (body and meaning) falters as mouth and voice desynchronize. Given all the ways in which this passage figures life as estranged from or in excess of embodied selfhood, we might pause to ask, in what does the this-ness of "this life" consist? Insofar as the very processes of individuation and personalization are challenged, what, if any, room remains for the demonstrative adjective, this, to function? Why refer to "this life" and "this mouth"? Why distinguish a "kind of body" if this "kind" is precisely the kind that is non-identical with its self, a body whose own content "must be someplace other than in the body"?

Once again, Rankine asks the reader to navigate a delicate balance: a language that announces the false closure of personal pronouns and liberal personhood, as in,

> I they he she we you were too concluded yesterday to
> know whatever was done could also be done, was also
> done, was never done— (146)

but at the same time imbues the impersonal—the forms of life that escape cementation into "I they he she we you"—with historical and sociopolitical specificity. The impersonal in *Citizen* is more than a philosophical critique of personhood or an aesthetic theory of creativity; it includes how racially-specific bodies, black bodies, show up or are ignored in public and cultural spaces, as well as the way in which racism capitalizes on the potential violence that haunts all bodies as addressable, emotionally-open formations.[63] The body that suffers racial violence, the injured body, is precisely "the kind of body that can't / hold the content it is living."

I read *Citizen* for the first time, shortly after its publication, in a working group at UC Berkeley, where I was struck by the reaction of other white readers, who expressed discomfort over the way Rankine's use of the second-person pronoun positions white readers in relation to experiences that they cannot have experienced personally. The "you" can only be a person of color, so what happens, they wondered, when white readers intone the "you" while reading *Citizen*? Do—should—white readers perform the lyric exchange of "I" for "you"? I was surprised to hear several white readers discuss how they felt reading a book that they couldn't directly relate to because when I read *Citizen* I understood it to be an unflinching depiction of how whiteness operates in America. To my mind, it seemed nonsensical, if not disingenuous, to claim non-relation when aspects of myself—my whiteness and my nationality—were clearly depicted. Perhaps, these readers were indirectly stating that their bodies and psyches haven't been injured in the particular ways that the poems depict (perhaps they were also expressing their fear of assimilating experiences that don't belong to them, or even wishfully disavowing inflicting such injuries themselves). In any case, in *Citizen*, the question of what it means to relate or not relate is a central one, and while Rankine describes her book as a book about intimacy, I would venture that the question of relationality in *Citizen* also hinges on investigating the very limits of experience, that is, *the aspects of life that cannot be lived* but that still shape lives in differential and precise ways.

As we have seen, the generality of the second-person pronoun invokes a racial logic that operates at a structural level, through and beyond the feelings of whomever "you" may be personally. At the same, it functions as a targeted address, which in Whitmanian fashion not only tempts its readers to feel "I" each time they read "you," but also to recoil from the seduction, violence, and impossibility of such an exchange. Whoever you are, whatever your subject-position, the lyric "you" is never *you*; it can never coincide with a specific biographical-biological person.[64] And while this may be true of lyric and language generally, *Citizen* has a particular investment in forms of failed identification. So although *Citizen*'s lyric structure

[63] In the third section of *Citizen*, Rankine describes a lecture given by Judith Butler, which discussed how "[o]ur very being exposes us to the address of another... We suffer from the condition of being addressable. Our emotional openness…is carried by our addressability" (49).
[64] Although, as I argued in chapter one, the question of whether a biological being can pass into language depends on how one conceptualizes the body (biological organization).

positions its readers in such a way that they must navigate their own relationality to the subject matter, there is a paradoxical but significant sense in which it does not and cannot matter how one relates to the text.

That is, there is a sense in which no one can relate to the experiences *Citizen* describes, including the nonwhite subjects to whom they refer, because, to put it bluntly, such experiences are unlivable. This is, I take it, the force of the two interrogatives: "How to care for the injured body / the kind of body that can't hold / the content it is living?" and "And where is the safest place when that place / must be someplace other than in the body?" The first interrogative stages the limits of phenomenological space to represent, contain, or resolve racial violence. The unlivable in this formulation ruptures human embodiment and mentality, in a number of related ways: 1) it exceeds what a person can emotionally make sense of (either because the unlivable is traumatically absent or, to borrow from Lauren Berlant, because violence and political crisis are often normalized and protracted to the point of becoming utterly ordinary "phenomena not prone to capture by a consciousness organized by archives of memorable impact") ("Slow Death" 759); 2) it erases a person's status as person (what Agamben describes as "bare life"); and 3) it ends or attenuates biological life, either abruptly as in the killings of Martin Trayvon, Michael Brown, and Eric Gardner, or slowly by maintaining bodies in reduced states of "getting by" or "living on" (Berlant, "Slow Death" 759).

The second interrogative, "And where is the safest place when that place / must be someplace other than in the body," I read as an appeal to extra-corporeal spaces, specifically the textual space of the book, which may be able to house the body's unlivable content. I should clarify, though, that I do not think *Citizen* is a "vital text," at least not in quite the same way that I have used this term to characterize Olson's, Eigner's, and O'Hara's textual productions. Whereas the mid-century poetry explored in the first three chapters of this dissertation attempts to exteriorize bodily life by identifying somatic rhythms and processes and then reconstructing them as textual patterns, Rankine is concerned with indexing the *un*livable aspects of bodily "experience." In other words, she uses the medium of the book to give shape to "experiences" that exceed the limits of what an organic body can hazard. In this way, *Citizen* reveals the political possibilities of inorganic life. It registers the contents of social, political, and cultural forms of violence that cannot be lived organically, but which in the inorganic, aesthetic space of the text become viewable once again as living contents—contents that indelibly inform (or deform) the very bodies they exceed.

Another way to understand *Citizen*'s investment in inorganic life is in the form of a question: how and where can a specific life leave an aesthetic imprint or articulate itself onto the nonliving, if part of what constitutes its specificity is not open to direct or personal experience? For instance, how does one register phenotypic markers poetically? How does one index a body as a collection of surfaces that bleed (sometimes literally) into its social and technological milieus? The difficulty, which Rankine takes on, lies in the fact that phenotypic markers, such as skin color, are not merely visual or even necessarily visible, nor are they confined to individual bodies as their sites attachment. As a point of contrast, consider the projectivist investment in registering the rhythmic patterning of the poet's breath, in Olson's words, making a recording of "the listening he has done to his own speech" (*Collected Prose* 245). As I have argued, Olson doesn't think that physiology and perception—breath, speech, hearing, etc.—are located strictly within the body. The body, for Olson, is available to be technically mediated (recorded and exteriorized into print) by the typewriter precisely because the body is always already an

instrument, a system for selecting, recording, and shaping its environment. But while the aspects of the body that projectivism focuses on are not only inside the body's interior, they are still localized around the body in a relatively circumscribed manner, and therefore constitute an accessible part of an individual's personal, albeit mediated, space. In comparison, racial color—as a socio-historical signifier that codes the body—does not have anything approaching a patterned or rhythmic structure when we consider the body qua individual, an entity unto itself. Arguably it is impossible to index blackness or whiteness, to show the specific contours of a racialized epidermal schema, if one abstracts bodies from their techno-cultural histories. Rankine attends to this impossibility, or put positively, she encourages us to consider the human body beyond its biological organization—or if not altogether beyond the biological then at the very limit of what is sensible or visceral. Her primary method of de-organicizing the body is by problematizing the opticality of racial color, the assumption that blackness and whiteness in America are visible, visual, or apparent. Her point, however, is not to claim twenty-first century America as a post-racial society, a society that no longer sees race, but rather, that seeing race optically, as image, is not necessary for racism to operate.

Rankine raises the problem of the sensibility of race—its "look" and "feel"—most directly in the second section of *Citizen*, which consists of an essay on tennis star Serena Williams:

> What does a victorious or defeated black woman's body
> in a historically white space look like? Serena and her
> big sister Venus Williams brought to mind Zora Neale
> Hurston's "I feel most colored when I am thrown against
> a sharp white background." This appropriated line, sten-
> ciled on canvas by Glenn Ligon, who used plastic letter
> stencils, smudging oil sticks, and graphite to transform
> the words into abstractions, seemed to be ad copy for
> some aspect of life for all black bodies. (25)

As various readers have pointed out, the pages of *Citizen*, like the referenced Ligon canvas, materialize the idea of whiteness as background. Rankine printed *Citizen* on 80# matte coated paper—a paper significantly heavier and brighter than the lightweight, greyish or cream paper commonly used in paperbacks. The pages of *Citizen* nearly glow; as Berlant notes, they create a "shocking whiteness" ("Claudia Rankine" n. pag.). And yet, as the above passage suggests, the opticality of race—especially the convention of identifying race with skin pigmentation—is highly unstable. Insofar as the racial legibility of bodies is volatile and contextually-sensitive, the trick of color-coding *Citizen*'s paper and typeface feels like exactly that—a trick. It tempts the reader to map background and typeface onto white and black bodies respectively. But it also calls into question the ease with which one performs this mapping; the cultural logic by which white and black, page and ink, are understood to signify race is so ubiquitous, so unremarkable, one can't help but doubt the force of Rankine's body-book analogy: it is conspicuous to the point of being unsubtle, even cliché.

Clichés, however, can be fascinating, not to mention mysterious. The sheer obviousness of a cultural logic does not make it emotionally irrelevant, nor does it guarantee its intelligibility. Keeping this in mind, we can understand the deceptively simple correlation between the

luminescent whiteness of *Citizen*'s pages and its racial thematic not only as referencing Ligon's and Hurston's meditations on "white background," but also as echoing a scene in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man* in which the narrator takes a job at Liberty Paint factory, where he's assigned the task of dropping "dead black" liquid into cans of "Optic White" paint (152). This black, unnamed liquid, administered by Ellison's black, unnamed narrator, is the key to making paint "as white as George Washington's Sunday-go-to-meetin' wig" (153). And, as if the faulty equation between whiteness, racial purity, and American liberty were not heavy-handed enough, the narrator soon realizes that the official company slogan, "If it's Optic White, it's the Right White,"—invented by a black workman—is a thinly-veiled, variant of the childhood jingle: "If You're White, You're Right" (165-166). Just as Ellison mobilizes the tropological dimension of color to the point where its banality must be reckoned with, *Citizen*'s color-coded design presents an unavoidable analogy between body and book, but one in which we can hardly pretend to see the material traces of specific bodily formations. What the reader accesses or "sees" is less an inorganic correlate of a particular body or population, than a metaphor crumbling under the weight of its own ubiquity.

To look at black type against "shocking whiteness" is to perceive an overwhelming visual code, one that obfuscates at the same time that it displays. Rankine clearly wants her readers to experience this obfuscation, to consider the troubling slippage between the desire to *encode* the body in poetry, to manifest bodily life as language, as an aesthetically communicable form, and the ways in which bodies are *coded*—tagged, categorized, and passed over. With the lines, "….words encoding the bodies / they cover. And despite everything the body remains," Rankine tacitly repudiates *Citizen*'s ability to communicate bodily life (69). But then, if Rankine's body-book analogy invests in its failure to register anything vital, it would be a mistake to "see" or "feel" real bodies in *Citizen*. And yet, as we shall see, there is an aspect of truth in this mistake; it is a mistake that Rankine even encourages. In other words, the question of the body-book analogy (its real force or self-conscious failure) hinges on how we understand the parameters of a body—its contours as well as indeterminate regions, its experiences as well as its unlivable contents.

What I want to suggest, then, is that the overwrought quality of *Citizen*'s body-book analogy duplicates the problem of hypervisibility thematized throughout the work. "Sometimes," Rankine writes, "no amount of visibility changes how you're perceived," which is why *Citizen*'s essays on celebrity athletes Serena Williams and Zinedine Zidine feel disturbingly continuous with the poems that memorialize the erasure of black lives—citizens whose anonymity does nothing to shield them from the police-state's violence: "And you are not the guy and still you fit the description because there is only one guy who is always the guy fitting the description" (108). These lines encapsulate the paradox of a racialized visibility, a way of seeing and being seen, that collapses the very difference between invisibility and visibility, notability and ordinariness. Thus, if the body-book analogy "fails," if its overtness actually covers the bodies we imagine we see, we must understand this failure as a kind of accuracy insofar as it reproduces an optical situation that is so intensely codified—in Rankine term's, "ad copy," in Ellison's, a schoolyard "jingle"—as to be invisible.

But for all that, *Citizen*'s visual appeal is undeniable. Its minimalist design aesthetic, coated matte paper, rectilinear prose poems, not to mention the inclusion of full-color images of contemporary media and fine art—all of these aspects confront the reader with a richly visual reading experience. Indeed, reviews of *Citizen* testify to the way readers have become attached to

the book's visual dimension, with one blogger confessing her guilt over keeping the book's white cover and pages clean:

> *Citizen* is printed on heavy, luxurious white paper stock, and I've been carrying it around in my bag. One day, recently, I was rubbing away at black marks that had accumulated on the cover and pages—becoming suddenly aware of my action, I stopped. The pristine appearance of whiteness depends on the constant, ceaseless erasure of any history that might call whiteness into question, and so black lives, past and present, are made to disappear. (Crawford n. pag.)

This admittedly bizarre practice of forming an ethical relationship with *a book cover* cuts two ways: It appears, on the one hand, as a naive extension of *Citizen*'s white-black symbolism (a symbolic act that, unlike Rankine's, is unaware of the overwrought, coded quality of the particular symbols it trades in). On the other hand, it is an intriguingly wholehearted acceptance of *Citizen*'s body-book analogy, that is, a way of relating to the book's mediality as a socio-political entity, a formation that actually shares in the politics of pigmentation. Either way, the reviewer, like many others who have responded to *Citizen*'s compelling politicization of visual aesthetics, seems strangely unaware of the problematic status of coding race optically as color; under the spell of *Citizen*'s enticing design aesthetic, it is easy to imagine the gap between page and body has disappeared.

But if we look closely at how image and text interact, for instance, at Rankine's use of the Ligon painting, the rift between body and aesthetic object reappears. I have suggested that Rankine's use of black text against white background doesn't so much reference aspects of human embodiment as it recreates the dynamic by which hypervisibility turns to invisibility—like Ellison's "Optic White" Liberty Paint, the metaphor is ultimately self-referential: it shows us very little beyond its own structure. The Ligon painting works in a similar way, at least in Rankine's interpretation of it. As she points out, Ligon "transform[s] [Hurston's] words into abstractions." The untitled painting, like the other paintings in Ligon's seminal series, *Door Paintings* (1990-92), begins at the top of the panel with a clearly stenciled phrase—in this case, "I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background." But as Ligon repeats the stencil, moving down the panel, the words decrease in legibility until they must be seen rather than read. In other words, the painting begins as a piece of conceptual art, but it ends in abstract expressionism. This movement from the text-based aesthetics of conceptual art—a deskilled aesthetics, in which the work of art is divorced from its sensuous presentation—to the more visceral aesthetics of abstract expressionism is relevant to how Ligon's painting functions within the broader context of *Citizen*. It is tempting, but ultimately misguided, to understand the relationship between Rankine, Ligon, and Hurston as follows: Ligon uses the medium of painting to accentuate the force of Hurston's remark by providing a visual representation of what the words say (this is possible because color has an aesthetic significance in painting that it doesn't usually have in print), and Rankine duplicates Ligon's gesture by using the black-against-white motif as a non-incidental, aesthetically-significant aspect of her book's design. The problem, though, with this understanding is that it ignores the conceptual framework that Ligon's painting begins in. In Ligon's work, the medium of painting only comes into existence toward the bottom of the panel, once the words are no longer legible. Strictly speaking, he never "paints" Hurston's words since the emergence of the paint's opticality and texture—its

palpability as a specific medium—coincides with the disappearance of the words. If the work ends with an invocation of Jackson Pollock (one of Ligon's heroes), an ending that invites us to see paint sensuously as an index of the artist's physicality, in the beginning, the conceptual framework works to dissipate the power of perception and image, suggesting that despite the cleverness of his painterly appropriation of Hurston's statement, we should be wary of the assumption that racial bodies have optical correlates. Seeing black-on-white in the art world is something different than, not an amplification of, the racial relationship described by Hurston. Thus, Rankine is in fact duplicating Ligon's gesture, but we can only say this if we understand the complexity of Ligon's work—namely, its intense ambivalence concerning an art object's ability to resemble, index, or stand-in for the human body.

Citizen's appropriation of Ligon's appropriation of Hurston shares in this ambivalence. Which is to say, Rankine's materialization of whiteness and blackness as page and typeface only maps bodies if we take account of its overwrought metaphoricity, that is, if we understand the entire conceit, like the black bodies described in the poems, to be caught up in a hyper-visibility that is equally an invisibility—a codified state, a color that codes rather than encodes, a trope that refers to its own structuring force. Insofar as Rankine's body-book analogy hinges on a regime of visibility that actually erases bodies, it is inappropriate to describe *Citizen* as a vital text. But, on the other hand, the book *does* materialize bodies, if we are willing to consider the body as Rankine asks us to: a formation "that can't hold the content its living." The 80# coated matte paper does not encode skin color in the sense of the pigmentation of organic matter. The whiteness it refers us to operates through but also beyond organic bodies. As Berlant remarks, the pages in *Citizen* "[act] as a kind of art gallery playing out the aesthetics of supremacist sterility, each segment being like a long, painfully white hall we're walking down" ("Claudia Rankine" n. pag.). Which is to say, *Citizen* encodes bodies that are already coded, aestheticized, in-formed. But in so doing, it asks us to consider these coded formations, these inorganic bodies, neither as discursive or symbolic coverings, which obscure and commodify real flesh and blood, nor as signifiers whose pure artificiality appears so preposterously empty that they fail to capture the very bodies they aim to label. Instead, *Citizen*'s pages mark out an aporia in racial embodiment. That is, they mark the point at which the exteriorization of life into pages, canvases, halls, and mass mediated images becomes indistinguishable from the erasure of life—not because these objects and images empty or obscure the bodies they trace, but because they merge with them all too well, their extra-corporeal status being precisely what enables them to absorb unlivable content.

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