

Some thoughts on *Stochastic Poetics* for the Poetry and Poetics Workshop,
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Stochastic Poetics is a work of theoretical, conceptual, poetics. Its core question is how the figure of poetics— aesthetic form— emerges from the general field of language. How do we know when we are looking at a poem? Nowadays in particular, when the forms and formats are fallen from their stanzaic-quatrain-tercet grace? The poetics of exception has become so inclusive that lists, prose, appropriated this and that of all kinds are just the usual inventory of techniques, not radical innovations. The unoriginal, uncreative, unwritten, and un-composed all conform to a long-standing disregard for rules that might govern inclusion or excommunication from the fold. Mostly we know what's a poem by where we meet it, who makes the introduction, what the conditions and terms are. But still, we can still have moments of identity crises, moments when we have to deal with the anxious inquiry about (the) noise (of) culture as the context in which we work, in which aesthetic expression has to be perceived.

Los Angeles is hot in July, the downtown streets hold the sun's thermal radiance after hours, exhaling heat from asphalt. In summer 2010 LA was still new to me, its neighborhoods and zones not yet clear from a map or knowledge of its institutions. The poetry reading I went to was held at L.A.C.E. on the eastern end of Hollywood Boulevard, a few blocks beyond the strip of tourist meccas, Grauman's Chinese Theater and the Walk of Fame. The night was warm and the full indoor-outdoor continuum linked the noisy street and the brightly lit gallery. A constant flow of people drifted in and out, their attention caught on the nodes of attraction. A man on an exercise bike with a microphone spouted a non-stop self-promotional monologue hawking the paintings he was making while he cycled and spoke. The crowd around him replenished itself, pausing for a moment, then moving on only to be replaced by others in a small cluster whose attention was bid for by a large, sad, slow-moving Superman impersonator in a suit slack from wear who was complaining about police harassment on the sidewalk in front of the Theater. Kids in t-shirts, skinny jeans, their hardware catching the light, earrings, nose rings, other visible metal studs reflected the gallery spotlights even as they stood outside on the street. A large food truck, part of a performance, was parked across several metered spaces in front and the gift shop in the front of the exhibit space was filled with bling and hip tshots, ceramics, posters, buttons, notebooks, and cards with slogans

that sketched a discourse of transsexual-vegan-anti-consumer-lifestyle in hot colors and shiny surfaces. The scene was non-stop, intense, its participants lively and quick, but also, slightly mesmerized by the shift from outdoor dark city night in a dense urban space to the bright interior. In the block with L.A.C.E. are sex costume shops and stores selling “I Heart Hollywood” paraphernalia. The businesses pander to a transient population, temporary visitors, the people who want to go home with a t-shirt studded with Hollywood in rhinestones across their chests or a pair of ruby slippers on a keychain. Trafficked and filthy the area is hardly more than a corridor into which tourist busses dump their passengers for an hour or two before moving on to other sites. A CVS drugstore, a Subway, local dives and convenience stores are about all there is, except for the shadowy but essential parking lots in the alleys behind. A superficial hype and a lingering, never-fully-absent sense of futility are combined—so why not squander the night wandering around, seeing what is going on, picking up on stuff and not worrying too much what it is because none of it is serious or going to last and anyway you don’t live in the neighborhood but somewhere else, everybody does. Because no one lives here, or feels connected, or attached, the transience is all pervasive, a constant flux of energy and currency exchange, in small units of change, that just reinforces the low-level vibe and fringe feeling of the place.

L.A.C.E. is an experimental site, dedicated to alternative art activities that don’t suit the agenda of the commercial galleries on Wilshire, in Culver City, or clustered in Bergamot Station in Santa Monica. The literary publisher, Les Figs, is partnering with them to do a year of installation projects and poetry readings, works that deal with contemporary language, visual expression, and that cross between site specific ephemeral works on the walls and on the page. In the first round of installations an A-list group of three poets has been offered the opportunity to make a work on the walls. *Not Content* is the title given to the Les Figs contributions to a larger *Over/Under* wall painting project, and the poets of the launch are Vanessa Place, Douglas Kearny, and Divya Victor. Each has pitched their work at the highest possible emotional note—with projects focused on testimony of sexual abuse, on the racist aspects of recent oil spill ecological disasters in the Gulf near Louisiana, and on the holocaust survivor narratives recorded by Charles Reznikoff. *Statements of Facts*, *Coverage*, and *Hellocast* are the titles of the pieces. Each has its own wall in the gallery. The *Statements* have been transferred typographically to the surface of plumbing plaster, placed at a child’s eye level where the accounts of rape, sodomy, beatings, and other violent acts are delicately, elegantly rendered. *Coverage* is a dramatic pour of pitch black paint, its protests scrawling, screaming, suffocating under the thick

oil-like substance that puddles on the floor below. *Hellocast*'s participants copy the holocaust testimonies into the enormous shape of a Hello Kitty projected on the wall, their uneven handwritten transcriptions gradually filling in the enormous iconic shape.

Meanwhile a local artists group has set up a food scavenging game, sending willing participants out to forage in the community for ingredients in a meal they will make in the space on a rolling table and stove top. No money can change hands and esoteric elements have to be located and returned to the group within a set space of time. Cakes decorated to suggest celebrities are placed on pedestals amid the milling crowd, black icing with scarlet trim for O.J. Simpson and so on. Nothing can hold attention long, the crowd moves with vague collective energy, not so much random as indeterminate in its focus. When it is time for the reading, no chairs appear and the host mounts the low platform at the center of the room with a microphone to call attention to the reading. I'm with friends, including a very senior, highly renowned, critic and scholar, who needs a chair as well as wanting one to mark the reading protocol as distinct from the other blur of activity. We find her one, but she is the only person sitting, and between her and the reader the crowd blocks her view as surely as the noise from the outer gallery interferes with the acoustics. It's impossible to hear, see, or even register the reading. But it happens anyway. The senior scholar protests, her outrage registering as little as the poetry, and the texts come into and out of perceptual range against the field of noise. What is the capacity of aesthetic experience to register in the broader culture? Is this indicative? Symptomatic? Anomalous?

Anecdotal accounts of founding instances have their own retrospective mythology. The narrative form seems more explanatory and causal than the actuality. Something occurred. The issues that have been part of my thinking about art and aesthetics are catalyzed again. *Sweet Dreams*, "Aesthesis," "Art Criticism Now," and responses to the new notes on Conceptualism contain their own formulations of contemporary aesthetics, the synthetic relation to and distinction from the monoculture. The identity of aesthetic objects is not a matter of old modern binarisms, "high" and "low," of where a work sits in a class-based system of cultivated taste, sophisticated knowledge, or capacity for difficult and esoteric work. The monoculture extends to all realms of production. The academicization of fine art production is as integral to the formulaic, institutionalized systems of thought as the creation of so-called "culture industry" products branded by the corporate forces that pump them into the world. The biennials and critical discourse that surround the esoteric projects of the museum and gallery circuit are as predictable as the

new line of product tie-in toys. The claims are different, the pretense quite different, the claims and stances and posturing have a high style intellectual gloss, but most of what is produced in the high art world is product as surely as what is made in the industrial one. The challenge of aesthetic engagement is to produce a space for experience apart from the monoculture. In that sense, the project has not altered from that outlined by Theodor Adorno, but his work and thought have been corrupted through appropriation to serve a superficial cause—the defense of unconsumable work in a fine art realm, a pseudo-politics expressed in slogans and formulaic pronouncements. High art monoculture is more insidious than the commercial brand because it disguises itself as thought. No moral value attaches to *thought*. The idea is not that thinking is more significant than making, but thought is not equivalent to product. The provocation of aesthetic objects is experiential, unresolvable into product and/or objects, instead—the production of a generative condition of engagement, aliveness, awareness of being. Philosophically? At the place where subject-object distinctions can't be maintained. Politically? At the place where absorption and alignment into singularities and solutions are not feasible and where the irritant of irresolution produces insight and desire for change. Personally, in the condition of re-imagining where this-and-that contradiction and complexity, ambiguity and uncertainty, are not only tolerable, but pleasurable. Synaptic firings. Mind massage. Brain storms and delightments. Pleasures of the flesh and eye's mind, body's knowledge. Embedded and embodied, not transcendent or universal. Contingent, transient, complicit in the sense of acknowledging we are all part of the cultural conditions of production in which we work.

Every work of art is an argument about what art is and how it functions. Knowingly or not, any aesthetic expression expresses that argument. This is what an essay is. That is what a poem might be, or a painting, or a form of expression. Epistemological defamiliarization remains the strongest tenet of modernism, the persistent principle on which some distance from habits of thought can be created. Why? For what purpose? We return to William Blake, to the founding moments of modernism in Romanticism—to open the doors of perception. Not towards some aim or purpose, not for political or apolitical aims, not for any aesthetic position or cultural or ethnic or ethical one either—but because the very fundamental task of aesthetics is to open a space for experience, to allow us to ask, again, what it is to have experience—and then to offer experience directly. Mediated, machinated, flawed, fallen, inadequate, and yet—unique it is capacity. That is what art, aesthetic work, takes back from the monoculture. Art is the space we make so we can have space—the space of experience, of knowing, of being. Romantic?

A fallen romanticism, without the optimism of utopian dreams here replaced with the conviction that life is lived within the world's conditions, and art is the expression of that experiential condition, not a way out of it.

Aesthetics is the branch of philosophy concerned with perception. But perception as we understand it in contemporary cognition is not mechanistic, not a response to stimuli produced predictably in a response organism. Nor is it the mere processing of the world into image or knowledge, as the *representationalist* approach suggested by those believers that vision, for instance, produces a "picture in the head" of the world already "out there." If we understand *aesthesis*, aesthetic knowledge, through the *constructivist* approach, then the processes of knowing move to the fore. Processes and systems, not perception of things, become the central elements of aesthetic knowledge. Perception understood as construction posits a codependent relation between self and world. Distinctions of subject and object loosen. Knowledge is always embedded in acts of knowing.

Poiesis is making. The making of experience into form is one aspect of poetics, the making of form into experience is the other. Construction, not representation, is at work in both instances. Aristotle's foundational text weaves through *Stochastic*, recast with the terms "tragedy" and "comedy" swapped out for "gravity" and "levity." These are the two great forces in the cultural universe. Of the first we know something, of the second, not enough. As forces in a poetic system, they establish a dynamic between inward and outward, constrictive and expansive, concentrating and diffusing and other dynamics that organize the constant flux of language formations. They are not opposites. They are merely two forces, distinct and distinguished from each other.

The deformed text of Aristotle's *Poetics* interweaves with one about stochastic processes, non-deterministic, non-mechanistic, and non-linear systems. Complex systems have unpredictable outcomes. Modelled and put into action, their results have to be observed, they cannot be projected. In stochastic systems, the parameters according to which the system is modeled alter as well. A complex system can be designed and then run. A stochastic system continues to emerge as a system, its parameters altered in process. So this line of texts is adapted and modified, from theories of chaos, complexity, and stochastic processes, from observation of the poetry scene and participation in readings. Weather, waves, other fluid dynamic systems are stochastic. Systems theory has been

applied to art, to social institutions and conditions, to various cultural phenomena. Poetics, of course, is a stochastic system. All play, in spite of the tone of this essay.

The poems in the piece are pastiche works, culled and gleaned from readings and events, reworked in the composing stick, and then, altered in the lock-up on the press. The book is set entirely by hand, in letterpress. No two copies of *Stochastic Poetics* are alike. The edition is a completely inconsistent edition. Each sheet went through the press numerous times and the placement, while not random, was not controlled by any register marks or jigs. So the dynamic effect on the pages differs depending on how the sheets fell. Every bit of the book is set in letterpress, with metal spacers for justification and lock-up. No plaster, adhesives, or other non-traditional materials were used in the production of the work. The book took two years to write, compose, and print.

As I said at the outset, *Stochastic Poetics* has a single question at its core: How does the figure of poetic language emerge from the general field of language? Taking this into a contemporary frame, the book asks how aesthetic expression can register against the competition of our current noise culture. Does aesthetic and/or poetic expression have any value? Can it? The question to be asked about a work of art is not what *is* it, but *how* does it work.

Poetics. Poiesis. Making. Human making, we say. The expression of thought in form. And yet the notion of what constitutes a poem, is allowed to be and be called a poetic expression, changes over time. These changes are instantiated in examples. Their legitimacy is argued, gives rise to debate. But the systems of communication through which ideas circulate is nowhere circumscribed in all of its particulars. Poetics is a system, expressed and instantiated through persons and their works. We say. The radical shifts register. Shockwaves defined the old modern era. Forms exploded. Where and how those forms came into being we can track, in the history of the ode, the epic, the lyric, and sonnet, in sestinas and couplets and other configurations. Who holds the idea of the ode in mind? And how? New conceptions of poetics do not compete for territory – aesthetic activity makes space—critical battles are not turf wars, but struggles for legitimacy for the poets as well as the works. I know. I've been in the poetry wars.

Poetics. Making. The system of discourse and argument seeks its own kind of flow expression according to forces not explicitly linked to forms, to examples. We reference ideas as ideas, held in collective mind, passed on. Who knew to know what was allowed

or not? Every poem, every work, is an argument for or against a particular conviction about what a poem is. Can be.

How to situate this work? A conceptual work, culled and distilled, but also, written and composed in more traditional ways. A work that executes an idea, according to certain protocols, but the protocols are inconsistent, and can't be strictly articulated. An un-conceptual work, not procedural precisely, and not precisely procedural either, but not random. Intervened at every point by the author-agent-printer, a graphic work that takes its first inspirations from Mallarmé and its later inspirations from Oyvind Fahlstrom. The work is spatialized across the book, non-linear as a print event, not cumulative and sequential, but coming and going—elements developed in the middle are part of beginning and end motifs, vortices and nodes of graphical activity that configure and then deconstruct. A book as a whole, not a series of pages with works, but a set of movements, that are, again, spatialized rather than sequential. Not onomatopoeitic, and not representational – no iconic images occur, and no pictures of persons, places, things or references to the conventions of pictorial compositions in landscape, portrait, or genre scenes. The modern “languages of form” investigations have their place in the formation, the works of Kandinsky and Klee, whose modes of composition were ordered in order to embody principles articulated elsewhere. The difference is in my shift towards diagrammatic writing, emergent properties of complex systems, rather than a static language of rules and results. A theoretical work of particle poetics, a general poetic relativity, in which the figures influence each other at a distance across the spaces of gutters, turnings, and distributed areas of activity. The graphical field allows the poetic to demonstrate principles of composition, perform them. Or perhaps it is just well-printed assortments of pied type.

So what is poetry now? How is it allowed to be? I say a poem is an event space in the discursive field, a momentary configuration of linguistic po(e)tentiaity. A work is an emergent and transient phenomenon, dependent on systems of production and reception for its existence. In the of case *Stochastic*, it is also, literally, what happened on the pages.