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In the museyroom: a speculative genealogy of post-criticism

Abstract:

This paper explores the compositional processes of this post-critic, his errant and wandering trajectories, as he faces a crisis of academic genre. Addressing a parodic tone recently adopted in critical writing, it performatively enacts what Ulmer terms 'post-criticism', a strategy of textual demonstration (explanation, exposition, exhibition; but also protest) and détournement (a critical copying and correction, remixing; morphological mimicry as textual transgression and politico-poetic subversion) which applies the devices of modernist art to critical representations. The narrative conceit of an imaginary museum exhibition is deployed to demonstrate this more oblique style, exemplary, dramatic, performative, tracing its speculative genealogy through some convergent twentieth-century avant-gardes.

Biographical note:

Stephen Abblitt is a literary philosopher, queer theorist, and post-critic. He received his PhD from La Trobe University (Melbourne, Australia) in 2011 for a critical-creative work examining Jacques Derrida's writings on James Joyce, and has since published widely in the fields of literary studies, gender studies and queer theory, and critical-creative writing. He is Managing Editor of the interdisciplinary open-access gender, sexuality and diversity studies journal, *Writing from Below,* and Commissioning Editor for the new GLBTIQ press Stein & Wilde Publishing, specialising in creative non-fiction and experimental prose.

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Exordium: the academic revolution (admire the economy)

I am the post-critic. I write otherwise. I work by example. I demonstrate; I exposit, I exhibit, and I protest. I 'write with the discourse of others (the already-written)' (Ulmer 1985: 95). Everything is always already retro, and 'every new theory is a reworking of already existing theories' (1990: 100). I remix. I beg, borrow, and steal. 'For the moment I am cutting and pasting. Admire the economy' (Derrida 1987: 41). My poetics and politics, theories and praxes, are recombinant, dynamic and generative. I am a collagist, 'transfer[ing] materials from one context to another' (Ulmer 1985: 84), 'lift[ing] a certain number of elements from works, objects, pre-existing messages, and … integrat[ing] them in a new creation in order to produce an original totality manifesting ruptures of diverse sorts' (Group Mu 1978). I write, and '[e]verything I write, I believe instinctively, is to some extent collage. Meaning, ultimately, is a matter of adjacent data' (Shields 2010: 115). In writing, I copy, I quote, I cite, and I graft: 'To write … means to graft. It's the same word' (Derrida 1981: 355). I mix genres too. I live by the law of the law of genre, which is one of an 'unnatural' mixing, cross-contamination and cross-fertilisation, the law-deconstructing, strategically straddling *physis* and *techné*, deconstructing a generic law which 'engenders so many classificatory vertigines when it goes about classifying itself and situating the classificatory principle or instrument within a set' (1980: 61). I tend toward hybridisation and genetic mutation, and unclassifiable textual monstrosities, morphological mimicry as textual transgression and politico-poetic subversion, rebelliously overloaded narratological and interpretive strategies resisting the straightjacketing of genre. I curate ideas and actions and artefacts. I exhibit. I theorise, in practice. I abhor an exegesis, so much ridiculous posturing. I dislike being forced to explain myself, or the strange, disappointing self-censorship that comes along with forcing myself to explain myself. Says the post-critic, facing a crisis of academic genre: we should '[f]ocus for now on the concrete experience of this story, as a simulation of a more abstract practice to be tested at another time' (Ulmer 1990: 96). This is thus an attempt to demonstrate, to exhibit or expose, post-criticism, and to '[l]et the commentary be the text itself' (Barthes 1981: 44). You cannot expect perfect coherence, nor ready conclusions, for '[a] more oblique style, modelled on the umbrella with its veils and shaft, parodic rather than demagogic, seems best suited to the academic revolution' (Ulmer 1982: 557). But this is also a matter of much more than style; what is at stake is a critical capacity to speak and write and be beyond convention; what compels this resistance is that what is at stake is precisely the possibility of resistance – the possibility of resistance to generic laws of *physis* and *techné*, but also of *bios*, *zoé*, *epistḗmē* … As I write and you read, synapses fire, transmit, transmute, reboot – neuroplasticity incited by affective textualities. Generic bonds are unsettled, ruptured, and we are protean, always already a potential site of bio-logico-medico-judicial resistance. Admire the economy. Let me show you.

I. Curatorial Practice

Fig. 1. Bust of Aristotle. Marble. Roman copy after a Greek bronze original by Lysippos. c330BCE. Ludovisi Collection, Palazzo Altemps, National Museum of Rome.

The façade of the museum is faintly reminiscent of Sir John Soane's Museum, in London: a stunning symmetrical neoclassical façade, grey brick with stone facing, stone cornices and gothic brackets, and classical Coade stone figures. Over the course of two decades, roughly between 1792 and 1812, the architect Soane acquired, demolished and rebuilt three houses in succession on the north side of Lincoln's Inn Fields – numbers 12, 13 and 14. He lived there for the remainder of his life, and the residence became a sort of architectural laboratory as he continually remodelled the interiors. The museum was founded during Soane's lifetime by an Act of Parliament in 1833, which took effect upon his death in 1837. The Act required that the museum be maintained 'as nearly as possible' to the state in which it was left at the time of the architect's death, and this has largely been done. I first visited in 2009, to experience first-hand, after reading so much about it, the wondrously cluttered interior of this 'Grotto of Antiquities,' as described by the official guidebook (cited in Bloomer 1988, 61), the intricate sequence of ornate rooms and the maddening maze of objects in which to get lost. But curatorial practice has changed since 1837, and I cannot guess what I'm about to experience. I step inside.

I am greeted by the post-critic, the curator of this exhibition of twentieth-century avant-garde oddities. I'd emailed ahead, and explained my current research project, a purely speculative genealogy of post-criticism, traced in an aleatory and haphazard way through some convergent twentieth-century avant-gardes. We'd arranged a meeting, a guided tour, hopefully provocative, fruitful to my research. But he explains that he is pressed for time, and so I should head in myself and check out the exhibition. 'I need say nothing, only exhibit' (Shields 2010: 6), declares the post-critic as I enter the museyroom – and '[m]ind your hats goan in' (Joyce 1939: 8.9). He might find me later, he adds.

Through the looking glass, I am in the first gallery. It contrasts starkly with recollections of the interior of Sir John Soane's Museum: it is bare, almost empty, its walls a dull white. There is just one object in the room: a bust of Aristotle (Fig. 1), a Roman copy in marble, made after a Greek bronze original. In his *Poetics*, Aristotle is the first to posit the distinction between theory (that is, abstract thought) and praxis (synonymous with action, the application of skill, the presentation and embodiment of theory), and then between praxis and poiesis (creation and fabrication, production, a transformative 'bringing-forth'). Hannah Arendt recovers this distinction between praxis and poiesis in *The Human Condition*, asserting that Western philosophy has always been far too focused on theory. The post-critic similarly hopes to recover praxis and poiesis, maintaining the important distinction between action and production, as a meaningful post-critical manoeuvre – without relying on the traditional explanations and exegeses of theory alone. The uneven, unsteady balance and flow between the three elements of the artwork – theory, praxis, and poiesis – is crucial to the composition of post-criticism.

I move on to the next gallery.

II. Found Objects

Fig. 2. Marcel Duchamp. 1917. *Fountain*. Porcelain. Photograph by Alfred Stieglitz.

Fig. 3. James Joyce. 1929. Found photographs of driftwood, published under the title 'Fluviana.' In *Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment*, 16/17: between 296 & 297. Photographs by Adolph Fischer.

The second gallery contrasts second-hand images of found objects. The walls are plastered in black-and-white copies of photographs, some original, but most torn from the pages of books, newspapers, magazines, periodicals, the occasional academic journal or other scholarly publication.

On one wall, I notice a famous photograph of a famous artwork, now destroyed but still exemplary of the anti-art anti-aesthetic movement Dadaism: Marcel Duchamp's *Fountain*, photographed by Alfred Stieglitz (Fig. 2). I stand before the image. I know the story well. In 1917, Duchamp found and presented a standard porcelain urinal, laid flat on its back rather than upright in the usual position, and signed 'R. Mutt 1917,' to an exhibition organised by the Society of Independent Artists. They had claimed to accept all members' submissions, but took exception to Fountain and refused to exhibit it. As an early post-critical gesture, the object of the readymade – 'an ordinary object elevated to the dignity of a work of art by the mere choice of an artist' (in Obalk 2000), the most ordinary, everyday manufactured objects selected, modified and presented as art, situated in the context of the art institution – critically interrogates the institutional parameters of art, renouncing the possibility of any purely ontological definition. Theory intervenes into art (praxis *and* poiesis); the borderline blurs. The readymade – *Fountain* in particular, not so much for the shock value of this *pissoir* or its potentially urolagnic bent, but for its assertion that everyday life is worthy of artistic consideration – reframes what art is and can be, and the relationship between art-as-aesthetics and art-as-ideas, through its 'interpretative elasticity' (Hopkins 2002, 255), the openness of its critical reception. It foreshadows in art a hermeneutic gesture later incorporated into literary studies in the form of Roland Barthes' writerly text, whereby 'the goal of literary work … is to make the reader no longer a consumer, but a producer of the text' (Barthes 1974: 4):

> The writerly text is a perpetual present, upon which no *consequent* language … can be superimposed; the writerly text is *ourselves writing*, before the infinite play of the world … is traversed, intersected, stopped, plasticised by some singular system … which reduces the plurality of entrances, the opening of networks, the infinity of languages (5).

Just beneath this image of *Fountain* sit two small A4 pages (Fig. 3), torn from an old copy of the periodical *Transition: An International Quarterly for Creative Experiment*. It was founded in 1927 by the poet Eugene Jolas, intended as an outlet for modernist, surrealist, expressionist and Dadaist art and artists, taking a particularly keen interest in experimental and innovative writing. The four images on these two pages are much less well known than *Fountain*. They depict pieces of driftwood, 'shaped and smoothed by moving water to resemble animals' (Lerm Hayes 2004: 14).

They are presented beneath the heading 'Fluviana,' and the artist is credited as James Joyce, the high modernist author of *Ulysses* and *Finnegans Wake*. Joyce neither collected the objects, nor photographed them, nor even commissioned the photography. But the images appealed to him.

> The river pictures published in this number were discovered by Mr. James Joyce during a visit in Raitenhaslach, Austria, last summer. They represent tree-roots collected by a resident from the mass washed up in the Salzach River. Some of the names he has given these curious formations of nature are: "Serpent which seduced Eve"; "Nine-headed Hydra"; "Seadog"; "Sea-Spider"; "Leech"; "Gazelle-Head"; "Mammoth-Head"; "River Eel"; "Club-Foot"; "Flat-Foot"; "Staff of the Wandering Jew"; "Lizard"; "Sand-Viper"; "Snail"; "Nail of Noah's Ark"; "Sea-Miss"; "King Serpent with Little Golden Crown"; "Pig's Ear"; "Pincers"; "Sea-Lobster". He also collected stone formations washed up in the river and gave them such names as these: "Adam's Shoe-Last"; "Eve's Flat Iron"; "Heart (Lost in Heidelberg)"; "Stone of the Wise". They were photographed by Adolph Fischer of Salzburg (Jolas 1929).

'[D]isplacing the photographs of already displaced objects' (Lerm Hayes 2004: 15), Joyce mimics Duchamp's readymades, more than a decade after the original gesture, late, too late, to similarly critique the boundary separating-without-separating art from criticism. And yet there is a further witty post-critical gesture here, in these double found objects, pieces of driftwood found to be photographed, photographs found to be published, and the critical context almost maddeningly open.

Joyce is still the master, and *Finnegans Wake* – with its polyphonic glee, its radical openness and critical excess, its hermeneutic and semantic twists and turns through words and semes signifying it so many directions all at once, its reliance on puns and portmanteaux undoing the stability of language itself – is still the model: 'The book is a construction of innumerable fragments of culture spattered, disseminated, upon a fuzzy symbolic armature, an armature of overlappings, tears and holes, strange loops' (Bloomer 1987: 8). It's raucous, seriocomic, parodic tone is also a crucial component of its messy modernism – as indeed is the general self-awareness and constructive sensibility of literary modernism, its subjectification and complexification of epistemologies that again foreshadow Barthes' writerly text.

I wander deeper into the museum.

III. In the Museyroom

Fig. 4. Joseph Beuys. c1962. Untitled Installation ('*JOYCE*'). Originally part of the installation *Arena (Work in Progress)*. Photograph by Eva Beuys-Wurmbach.

Fig. 5. Joseph Beuys. 1974. *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art Oxford.

I am fascinated by the German sculptor, performance artist, theorist and pedagogue Joseph Beuys, and in his conceptual performance of the role of the artist as he creates and curates his artworks, the way he so explicitly inserts a certain presence into his artworks, a certain performative autobiographical trace. The proper name, the

signature, signifier of a singular identity and supposed marker of authenticity, is crucial to post-criticism – or, more accurately, the disruption and slippage of the proper name is crucial to post-criticism as an academic genre. As I move into the next gallery, the transgression by Beuys of the borderline separating-without-separating his own artistic identity and that of his antecedent Joyce becomes apparent – 'Identity has always been a fragile phenomenon' (Shields 2010: 33). In his 1973 installation *Arena*, originally subtitled *(work in progress)* after Joyce's own working title for *Finnegans Wake*, Beuys performs Joyce:

> Beuy's work *Arena (work in progress)* … is a professional curriculum vitae or portrait of the artist in photographs, mounted in grey metal frames. … The original title refers to Joyce's *Work in Progress*. Furthermore, a frame with a work from 1962 takes pride of place, because it contains the only clearly decipherable writing: the large capital letters "JOYCE." It is a cardboard sign with attached wire that echoes Brancusi's cardboard and wire Portrait of Joyce, which Beuys undoubtedly knew (Lerm Hayes 2004: 97).

That exhibition consisted of a hundred frames and a stack of copper plates arranged in a circle, following 'a Viconian or Joycean change from one age to the next, a cyclical worldview, represented in *Finnegans Wake* by the "thunder words"' (ibid). Beuys constructs a material, sculptural version, a translation, of *Finnegans Wake*, and this is what confronts me as I enter the gallery: a replica of *Arena*, replete with large painted banner bearing the singular word 'JOYCE' (Fig. 4), the only proper name appearing in the entire installation.

But Beuys goes further. At the far end of this gallery, intruding on the perfect verisimilitude of the replica installation, sits a small glass cabinet, containing a single book. In the often cryptic text *Life course/Work course*, Beuys claimed to have received a posthumous request from Joyce to extend his novel *Ulysses*. Beuys compiled six notebooks of drawings, which constituted two further chapters. This continuation of *Ulysses*, which Beuys called his *Ulysses-Extension*, eventually becomes a series of charcoal drawings, collected in a book beneath the heading *The Secret Block for a Secret Person in Ireland* (Fig. 5), an unstated and oblique but nevertheless noticeable reference to Joyce, extending Joyce's works in a different medium, borrowing and remixing Joyce, critically copying and correcting Joyce.

IV. Detour

Fig. 6. 3D-printed action figures of Guy-Ernest Debord. 2013. Designed by Peer Hansen for McKenzie Wark.

Lately I have been rereading the theorist and founding member of the Situationist International movement Guy-Ernest Debord: 'All of life presents itself as an immense accumulation of spectacles,' he writes, and '[e]verything that was directly lived has moved away into a representation' (1983, §1). Such a spectacle represents 'a world vision which has become objectified' (§5), revealing 'the heart of unrealism of the real society' (§6), positing an almost hyper-real disconnection between reality and representation, the 'affirmation of appearance and affirmation of all human life,

namely social life, as mere appearance' (§10). It 'philosophises reality' as 'the concrete life of everyone' is 'degraded into a speculative universe' (§19), and reality only 'partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation', 'the autonomous movement of the non-living' (§2). Debord's response to this reduction of reality to the spectacle is the performative construction of the situation, a disturbing, temporary, singular, unrepeatable unity of space and time, 'a moment of life concretely and deliberately constructed by the collective organization of a unitary ambiance and a game of events' (1958). The situation is a critique (theory), an action (praxis) and a production (poiesis) that jolts us out of the false consciousness controlling our boring modernity (boredom is counter-revolutionary, control by self-control), liberation from the commodification and alienation of everyday life.

It is most commonly realised in the psychogeographical tactic of the dérive, the 'practice of the city as at once an objective and subjective space' (Wark 2011: 27), revealing 'a new kind of knowledge, reached primarily in the dérive' (28). The dérive is described by Debord as 'a mode of experimental behaviour linked to the conditions of urban society: a technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances' (1958). Excavating 'other uses for space besides the functional' (Wark 2011: 25), it is a drifting through 'the lineaments of intersubjective space', and 'a practice of play and strategy which invents a way of being' (28), a passionate practice of play and strategy that is also a stinging performative critique. This critique-by-practice is not confined to the urban spaces of the modern city, but occurs textually and discursively; it occurs in, for example, Duchamp's *Fountain* or Joyce's *Fluviana*, the parodic passages in the thirteenth Cyclops episode of Joyce's *Ulysses*, or Derrida's deconstructionist works such as *The Post Card*, as he turns and returns to, and nervously circles around, an argument he can hardly make let alone clearly state, instead working by example, excavating new routes toward new knowledges in a genre-bending literary-fictional-autobiographical writerly practice and critique of the everyday life of this theorist-as-artist.

'Ideas improve,' continues Debord: 'The meaning of words participates in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress implies it. It embraces an author's phrase, makes use of his expressions, erases a false idea, and replaces it with the right idea' (1983: 207). Progress only occurs hand-in-hand with copying, plagiarism, and the subtle but meaningful correction of previous theories and arts and everyday practices. 'All culture is derivative,' and any considered critique hoping to affect change must begin with the 'destruction of the ownership of the sign' (Wark 2011: 37). All art is theft. The textual and discursive corollary to the dérive is the détournement, a term meaning 'to detour, to hijack, to lead astray, to appropriate' (35), critical copying and correction. 'Repeated, the same line is no longer exactly the same, the ring no longer has the same centre, the origin has been played' (Derrida 1978: 296). Debord describes it as 'the integration of present or past artistic productions into a superior construction of a milieu' (Debord 1958), subversively sifting through 'the material remnants of past and present culture for materials whose untimeliness can be utilised against bourgeois culture' (Wark 2011: 39), attacking 'a kind of fetishism, where the products of collective human labour in the cultural realm

can become a mere individual's property' (40), an act of 'unauthorised appropriation' thrusting the past back into the present.

Looking through a long glass display cabinet in another gallery, I see a 3D-printed action figure depicting Debord (Fig. 6). It was commissioned by McKenzie Wark, and the blueprint designed by Peer Hansen, an apparent gimmick to help publicise his 2013 study of the influence of the Situationist International after 1968, *The Spectacle of Disintegration*. This is an exemplary post-critical invention or intervention, a highly productive détournement, and a provocative critique of the tense relationship between theory, praxis and poiesis as it plays out in contemporary cultural criticism, the dominance of the former over the latter two as if action and production couldn't possibly be such intensely critical endeavours. (Either that or it's just another cheap toy.) While interestingly provoking us to ponder the relationship between the high culture of abstract theory and the popular (I hate to say 'low') culture of the superhero action figure, the piece also performs a contestation of the hierarchy critical/creative, the former generally privileged over the latter as a method of knowledge production. The design morphed, detoured, and the figures took on an afterlife of their own. One grew an ear on its back in homage to the performance artist Stelarc, and bunny ears atop his head after the biological artist Eduardo Kac. Others just became warped, distorted, and malformed. I want one.

V. A More Oblique Style

Fig. 7. *Borghese Hermaphroditus*. Marble. Roman copy after a Greek bronze original. 2nd century CE. Musée du Louvre, Paris.

Fig. 8. *Un chant d'amou*r. 1950. Dir. Jean Genet. Running time: 26 minutes. France.

There are more galleries, so many objects on display. I feel overstimulated by the semantic possibilities, and the potential directions for my research project. I find my way, eventually, to the final gallery. Its space is dominated by a massive marble statue, a copy of the *Borghese Hermaphroditus* (Fig. 7). I know all about 'Hermaphrotide himself,' as Derrida oddly says (1987: 145). The Greek god Hermaphrodite, a minor deity of bisexuality and effeminacy, the child of Hermes (fleet-footed messenger, quick and cunning, god of transitions and boundaries) and Aphrodite (goddess of love, beauty, pleasure, and procreation), hence the portmanteau name – a sort of hermaphroditic linguistic remix. Born a remarkably handsome boy, Hermaphrodite was transformed into an androgynous being after, at the age of fifteen, encountering the water nymph Salmacis, who in some accounts raped the boy, and the gods, in their infinite wisdom, with whatever divine logic, merged the two bodies together.

A common type of marble sculpture, the *Borghese Hermaphroditus* portrays a life-sized sleeping deity, an androgynous body face down, in this version the left breast and cock and balls visible from the front, a shapely, feminine yet boyish arse from the back – although there is no trace of the cunt. Confusing genders, confusing kinds, styles, sorts, of anatomies, of bodies, of texts, Hermaphrodite portrays the question of genre, the question 'of generation in the natural and symbolic senses, of birth in the

natural and symbolic senses, of the generation of difference, sexual difference between the feminine and masculine genre/gender, of the hymen between the two, of a relationless relation between the two' (Derrida 1980: 74), expressing the desire for and love of genre, of course, but also the necessity of testing the limits, genre-bending. The demarcation of a limit and at the same time the gathering together of a corpus (i.e. the genre known as the 'novel'), genre is an act and action of normalisation and limitation. This is why we find the Borghese Hermaphroditus laying here, in the museum of post-critical curiosities, exposing her- or himself to passers-by: responding, willingly or not, to this conservative, totalising force, the reluctant transgressor Hermaphrodite represents so many potential generic anomalies and impurities, the mutability of gender and genre.

And then, opposite this monumental Hermaphrodite, projected onto an otherwise blank gallery wall is a still from Jean Genet's 1950 short black-and-white film *Un chant d'amour* (Fig. 8). Set in a French prison, this homosexually explicit film centres on an unconsummatable love affair between two prisoners in adjacent cells, and a prison guard who takes voyeuristic pleasure in observing them perform masturbatory sexual acts. It concludes with the guard beating one of the men in his cell, an act of jealousy at the intensity of the relationship between the prisoners. As he is being beaten, the prisoner drifts off into a fantasy where he and his beloved joyfully roam the French countryside. There is no dialogue in the film; instead, Genet focuses on the body, on faces, armpits in particular, and penises – although perhaps the most iconic scene comes when one man shares his cigarette smoke with his beloved through a straw, blown through a small hole in the cell wall. The smoke permeates the wall; love finds a way. Theoretically and practically, here we are, in that place, between a concrete distinction and a dreamy permeability, that place in which Derrida situates the genre-bent texts works of his friend Hélène Cixous – performing, as she does, 'without exception, every kind of literary writing' (Derrida 2006: 18), 'there where it is impossible for the reader to decide between the fictional, the invented, the dreamt event … and the event presented as "real"' (17).

Derrida writes in *The Post Card*: 'I wanted to write to you, otherwise' (1987: 183). I have something to say to you that must be said otherwise, that can only be said otherwise. He expresses a desire in one column of the bifurcated essay 'Tympan' to learn 'to write otherwise' (1982: xxiv), to find a way to write otherwise, and I hear this desire echoed in the words of Cixous as she addresses him in the dreamy stream-of-conscious work of mourning Insister pour Jacques Derrida: 'If I wrote the way I would like to write, between the coldly analytic passages there would be some utterly fantastical outbreaks' (2007: 8) – utterly fantastical outbreaks (prison breakouts, real or dreamed), reproducing genre 'as internal division of trait, impurity, corruption, contamination, decomposition, perversion, even cancerisation, generous proliferation, or degenerescence' (Derrida 1980: 57), as, always already, 'a principle of contamination, a law of impurity, a parasitical economy' (59), generic disruption, contamination by repetition, a repetition which breeds a difference, the sort of 're-marking', iterability or repeatability, quotation and citation, which is 'absolutely necessary for and constitutive of what we call art, poetry, or literature' (64).

In 'This strange institution called literature', having described the types of literature which attracted him as a young reader, Derrida expresses a desire 'to determine or delimit another space where we justify relevant distinctions between certain forms of literature and certain forms of …', he hesitates: 'I don't know what name to give it, that's the problem, we must invent one for those "critical" inventions which belong to literature while deforming its limits' (1992: 52). Earlier, in his nominal thesis defence delivered at the Sorbonne on 2 June 1980, he speaks of his work moving 'towards textual configurations that were less and less linear, logical and topical forms, even typographical forms that were more daring, the intersection of corpora, mixtures of genera or of modes, changes of tone … satire, rerouting, grafting, etc., to the extent that even today, although these works have been published for years, I do not believe them to be simply presentable' (1983: 36). We witness this in his more literary textual experiments, works such as *Glas* and *The Post Card*, where, changing the tone of critical writing, breaking the laws of genre, with a more oblique and dramatic style, he 'takes up in criticism the functions with which literature began' (Ulmer 1982: 544), writing, and performing, 'critically, and sometimes fictionally, for instance by telling stories while making his philosophical arguments' (Muecke 2002: 108), presenting a discourse which 'is no longer epistemological, but dramatic' (Barthes 1979: 7). Critical writing is thus 'transformed in the same way that literature and the arts were transformed by the avant-garde movements in the early decades of [the last] century' (Ulmer 1985: 3). Emergent especially in French post-structuralist and deconstructionist critical writings prevalent since Mai '68, (Barthes, Cixous, and Derrida are exemplary), this is what Ulmer terms 'post-criticism', critically genre-bent texts 'constituted precisely by the application of the devices of modernist art to critical representations', a more oblique style, exemplary and performative, affective, working by example and demonstration (explanation, exposition, exhibition, but also protest), maintaining 'a distinctive relationship with knowledge – it mentions without asserting knowledge' (Ulmer 1982: 558), and refusing to advance 'a signifiable object of discourse' (Derrida, *La carte postale*, ctd in Ulmer 1985, trans Ulmer). Above all, it is generative, 'knowing as making, producing, doing, acting' (94). I know, and I make, I produce, I do, I act; my theories become actions become production.

VI. 'Of a parodic tone recently adopted…'

I exit the final gallery, step out into the day-lit foyer of the museum. I spot the curator; he sees me, walks over. He laughs, and this '[l]aughter casts a glance, charged with the mortal violence of being, into the void of life' (Bataille 1985: 176). He shakes my hand, looks me in the eye, asks how I found the exhibit, but rushes away before I respond, arm generous around the shoulders of another museum patron.

Leaving the museum, I recall Kant, who writes that 'laughter is an affection rising from the sudden transformation of a strained expectation into nothing' (1951: 117). But I also recall Bergson suggesting the subversive nature of laughter: 'The rigid, the ready-made, the mechanical, in contrast with the supple, the ever-changing and the living, absentmindedness in contrast with attention, in a word, automatism in contrast with free activity, such are the defects that laughter singles out and would fain' (2005:

64). The post-critical text, 'beside and in opposition to another work' (Rose 1979: 104), follows 'the parodic principle of deconstruction' (Ulmer 1982: 554), and as it 'mimes its object of study' (Ulmer 1985: 91) this exaggerated mimicry affects a powerful critique. The post-critic, drawing on this rich avant-garde lineage, singles out and contests the automatism of traditional academic genres, with a wry parodic tone and a raucous burst of laughter.

Postscript

I am the post-critic. I write otherwise. Let me show you.

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