From Innovation to Renovation:
Formal Practice and the Politics of Absorption in
American Language Poetry

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Innovate, *vt.*: to change (a thing) into something new; to bring in something new the first time; to bring in or introduce novelties; to make changes in something established …

Renovate, *vt.*: to resume; to revive; to repair, to restore by replacing lost or damaged parts; to refresh …

> *-----Oxford English Dictionary*

The forms are thus «constitutive» of our whole experience of the world…. Language is a primordial form, which is both expressive of man and revelatory of the nature of reality.

> -----Ernst Gassirer, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*

Forms convince by implicit self-reference. They propose themselves…. Form refers to the context that poses the problem and to itself at the same time. It presents self-difference and self-identity together.

> -----Niklas Luhmann, *Essays on Self-Reference*

Characterized by Jerome McGann as a radical critique of culture and society «at those fundamental levels of consciousness industries: communication, writing, textual production»,[1] American Language poetry, arguably the most significant avant-garde poetry movement since the 1960s, foregrounds formally innovative writing practices that call into question language itself as the form constitutive of socio-political «capabilities and uses» on the one hand, and of the «cognitive» and «epistemological» paradigms on the other.[2] In its joined attempts to «[chart] worlds otherwise hidden or denied or, perhaps best of all, never before existing»,[3] and to investigate the «invention of 'realism'» as an «illusion of reality» in which the «appearance of the world» is conjured up through the «disappearance of the word».[4] Language poetry calls attention, from diverse critical perspectives, to «Not meaning per se but the conditions of meaning», as Bruce Andrews makes it clear, to the mechanisms of sense-making;[5] and it succeeds in actualizing this objective by a distinctively «formal» practice that stages what Lyn Hejinian calls the «incapacity of language to match the world».[6] The result is a dynamic plethora of writing practices that break away from all conventional rules governing, among others, «vocabulary, grammar, process, shape, syntax, program, or subject matter»,[7] thus presenting their aesthetic, socio-political, and philosophical gestures through a linguistic inaccessibility manifested in a language-textual opacity, illegibility, or outright unintelligibility.

That, however, was then. In recent decades, one has begun to hear talks and statements and to witness the publications of poetry works by Language poets with noticeable changes, evidenced, in particular, in an authorial re-positioning followed by corresponding formal-textual practices oriented more toward linguistic accessibility, showing, to various degrees of course, a vested interest in language transparency, legibility, and intelligibility.[8]

Hence the question, especially from a conceptual perspective:[9] How to understand this shift from inaccessibility to relative accessibility in terms of poetic form and formal innovations? Or, «What is the meaning of this language practice», as Charles Bernstein himself asked back in 1986, «What value does it propagate; to what degree does it encourage an understanding, a visibility, of its own values or to what degree does it repress that awareness»?[10] The answer lies, it seems, in a paradox; it resides, that is, in none other than what is, perhaps, the most avant-garde purchase on the part of Language poetry.

Central to the overarching poetics of Language poetry is, as clearly signified by its seemingly redundant name, the concept of language itself. More importantly, it is language understood as the poetic form, which in turn is conceived as practice or activity. Poetry is, as Ron Silliman has stated explicitly, «the *philosophy of practice in language*»;[11] and in this sense, language, itself the poetic form, «is not a fixture but an activity», which is specified further by Hejinian as «formal».[12] Language-centered, formal innovations in Language poetry are thus the innovative practices in language, of language, and on language; language, that is, perceived as the constitutive medium in and through which human activities are constructed. It is precisely on this pivotal point, where the potential of a radical break-through is perhaps the strongest and most immanent, that the risky and alienating thrusts of innovation are retrograded into the safe and familiar rituals of renovation. And this regression can be seen as having resulted, at least in part, from a conceptual «frame lock»[13] from which the Language poets, rather paradoxically, do not seem to be able to free themselves.

Regardless of the various perspectives from which it is approached, the concept of language and its formal innovations as such in Language poetry is predicated, in principle, upon three branches of thinking configured in tri-centric circles all sealed off to any conceivable

exteriority.[14] On the very outside is Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy, and his theorem that «*The limits of my language* mean the limits of my world»,[15] together with his concept of «language games», provides a formal grounding for meaning as generated in contextual use, in the «actions into which [language] is woven».[16] On the very inside is the formalist aesthetic, and its privileging of the poetic language orchestrates similar language games facilitated by its techniques of de-familiarization. In the middle and, in a sense, linking Wittgenstein's philosophy and the formalist aesthetics, is the systems theory of Niklas Luhmann who, through his further appropriation of George Spencer-Brown's theory of form, presents a gestalt account of form in terms of operation, theoretically as well as methodologically, in light of which, however schematically outlined below, the formal practices, the textual difficulties of all sorts, and the regression from innovation to renovation evidenced in Language poetry can be properly explained and critiqued.

The concept of form as practice or activity in Language poetry resonates, rather significantly, with Spencer-Brown's definition of form as an operation of «[drawing] a distinction» (or making an observation),[17] an operation that consists of the observer observing herself drawing the distinction, the drawing of distinction itself, and the simultaneous emergence of two «states» named respectively as the «marked» or «indicated» and the «unmarked» or «un-indicated» (*LF*, pp. 4-5). The function and purpose of this drawing a distinction, also referred to by N. Katherine Hayles as «[making] a cut»,[18] is to satisfy one's «Faustian longings» that takes the form of «The 'rage to know'».[19] It is «to tame the noise of the world by introducing a distinction, [….] a boundary between inside and outside» (MC, 137), between a marked or indicated state and an unmarked or un-indicated one, but with only the former emerged and recognized. Moreover, the marked state, as the space of taming the noise, is always the «space that has already been cut, a cut space that allows further

cuts to be made»,[20] and hence the site where the observer, «By making a distinction», is able to «[reduce] the unfathomable complexity of undifferentiated reality into something she can understand» (MC, 160) with the help of site-specific networks of codes of signification and a built-in structure of self-reference, both readily available for constructive and reconstructive activities. It is thus the «space of constructions that are contingent on time and place, dependent on specific women and men making situated decisions, partly building on what has gone before and partly reaching out toward the new» (MC, 161). In other words, the operation of drawing a distinction is fundamentally asymmetrical in its execution in that it is always carried out on the side of the marked state. The unmarked state, on the other hand, unfolds a space in which «an undifferentiated complexity exists, impossible to comprehend in its noisy multifarious-ness» (MC, 137), thus embodying a «reality that remains unknown», as Luhmann puts it (TD, 128). More specifically, it stays «included, but as excluded» (TD, 87) in the scheme of the operation, functioning to provide a servitude of the negative that facilitates the dialectical manœuvre toward the positive, the marked and recognizable state.

As such, form, as the operation of drawing distinctions, pivots on a «blind spot» in its cognitive and epistemological functioning thanks to its own «operative unity» that «[guarantees] reality», whatever that reality might be (TD, 145). The blind spot in question refers to the phenomenon that the distinction drawn «cannot be observed» (TD, 145) because, by Spencer-Brown's account, drawing a distinction, indicating the marked side, and the person drawing the distinction or making the observation «are not only interchangeable, but, in the form, identical» (LF, 76). Stated differently, «the world marked or indicated by the first distinction is identical with the observer»[21] and, as such, the formal operation of drawing a distinction «emerges simultaneously with the world» (TD, 145) already

marked and recognized. Hence Luhmann's famous theorem: «Reality is what one does not perceive when one perceives it» (TD, 145).

Such an operation is described in cybernetics and systems theory as the first-order observation, whereby the observer, by virtue of the blind spot, only «sees the world» --- i.e. the marked state---but «does not see the difference between the unmarked and the marked world» (SRL, 31). In order to observe the first-order observation, and in order to see the observer in the world observing the world, a second-order observation has to be carried out by introducing another distinction, a second observer, with her own blind spot; hence a «infinite regress», and a continuing production and unfolding of a paradox in that «The world observed is always the world in form» (SRL, 30, 32, 33). This introduction of a second-order observation, or a second distinction, is called the «re-entry (of the form) into the form» (LF, 69).

If Spencer-Brown and Luhmann have thus provided a theoretical and methodological blueprint of the conventional use of language as a formally recursive operation whereby to construct the world, they have also beckoned, albeit inadvertently perhaps, to certain openness in its operational closure.[22] Hayles, for one, has argued that one such «trapdoor» in Luhmann's theory is his introduction of an agency --- i.e., the observer ---and her «reflexivity» into the system «at a foundational moment» (MC, 160, 157). The significance of such an agency is manifested, as Roberts contends, in her capability of a «*self*-observation», which, still functioning as second-order observation, nevertheless «operates by means of the distinction between self-reference and external reference» (SRL, 30). In addition, «The self-reference of self-observation (as opposed to the self-reference observed by a second observer)» is called «self-reflection», Roberts clarifies further, «since it involves the difference between observation of observation from outside and self-observation from inside» (SRL, 30). As such, self-observation presents the observer's critical faculty

directed both to herself and to the world, articulating her critical awareness of the blind spot at work, whereby the infinite regress of observations can be «halted» or «contained» (SRL, 30). Furthermore, it enables the observer to make choices. Having drawn the distinction, for instance, the observer can either «call» the distinction, as Dirk Baecker puts it, whereby to «confirm its value» and recognize the marked state as the site of re-constructions, or «cross» or «cancel» the distinction, whereby to look into the unmarked state, which ends up «with empty hands»,[23] as the unmarked state articulates «a value that the terms involved (in the marked state) did not yet have».[24]

That said, the question regarding Language poetry's retreat from innovation to renovation needs to be reformulated more concretely: To what extent is Language poetry, itself a conscious avant-garde movement, whose critical objective is frame-locked in its own contemporaneity, able and willing to revolt against the marked state in its practices? Or, to what extent are Language poets, given their critical engagements with language, are able and willing to entertain the question «What *is* language when it is no longer in the service of meaning»?[25] The answer seems to be anything but positive.

An interesting case in point is Charles Bernstein, perhaps the most articulate theorist of Language poetry and its poetics, whose work can be seen as having followed a three-phrase trajectory of language practice from innovation to renovation and finally to the standardization of language.[26] Bernstein establishes his poetic position of innovation early in the 1980s with his critical insight formulated as «language control = thought control = reality control», which, he argues, «must be de-centered» and «taken out of the service of the capitalist project» (CD, 60). To do so, he identifies and proposes a different practice of language in his reading of Zukofsky. «Rather than making the language as transparent as possible», he states explicitly, «the movement is toward opacity / denseness---visibility of

language through the making translucent of the medium» (CD, 70). And he pursues the same approach in his own poetry writing. Published in 1983, the title poem in his *Islets/Irritations*, for instance, begins the book as follows:

> to proper to   behindless   weigh in a   rotating
> rectilinear   our   plated,   *embosserie   des   petits*
> *cochons*
>   pliant feint   insensate, round   bands   of
> immense
> release   fell, a crudity   form   of   the
>   assignment—
> increase   by venture   populace animated by
>   appeal
> to which ends, almonds, lacquered unguents
>   embrasure
>   matter articulate as trails   percolated, pertinent
>   graceless simulation   beak in otherwise pleasant
>   up
>   ….[27]

A textual and physical embodiment of an innovative formal practice in language, of language, and on language, the above poetry excerpt demonstrates what Bernstein calls the «anti-habitual ordering» of language (*CD*, p. 71). «Any given presentation of order, realization of measure, suggests a world view», he explains, «In the act of writing, order and structure become integrated into the 'text,' into the experiential realm, where they exist as a part of that totality» (CD, 76). In this sense, Bernstein's anti-habitual use of language stages a second-order observation carried out in an operation of drawing a distinction on the standardized use of language and of its properties of instrumentalities. It signifies a conscious choice, assisted by self-observation and self-reflection, whereby

the poet crosses the distinction rather than calls it; and by making language opaque and unintelligible, he ushers in a different world, bringing into visibility the unmarked state, a state where, as Luhmann would argue, «nothing has happened» (TD, 102). That is to say that the experiential realm of the unmarked state materialized in such a language practice exhibits, both literally and artistically, things that are «in advance of our capacity to received it» (CFMAAT, 232). In addition, it insists on its own avant-garde status of the unmarked state with its characteristic unintelligibility by issuing a warning against any attempted interpretations, a waning best stated, perhaps, by Theodor Adorno when he thus writes:

> Essential to such a text is the shock with which it forcibly interrupts communication. The harsh light of unintelligibility that such a work turns toward the reader renders the usual intelligibility suspect as being shallow, habitual, reified…. To translate what appears alien in qualitatively [avant-garde] works into current concepts and contexts is something of a betrayal of the works themselves.[28]

But the 1990s begins to witness some fundamental shift of Bernstein's avant-garde position. In the feature essay titled «Artifice of Absorption», which is collected in his *A Poetics* and published by Harvard University Press in 1992, he addresses, in a rather self-conscious fashion, the issues of «absorption» and «anti-absorption», with the latter also referred to as «impermeability», and the relations between them in reading and writing.[29] With a rather masterful comprehensiveness, he thus defines these two terms as follows:

> By *absorption* I mean engrossing, engulfing completely, engaging, arresting attention, reverie, attention intensification, rhapsodic, spellbinding, mesmerizing,

hypnotic, total, riveting, enthralling: belief, conviction, silence.

Impermeability suggests artifice, boredom, exaggeration, attention scattering, distraction, digression, interruptive, transgressive, undecorous, anti-conventional, unintegrated, fractured, fragmented, fanciful, ornately stylized, rococo, baroque, structural, mannered, fanciful, ironic, iconic, schtick, camp, diffuse, decorative, repellent, inchoate, programmatic, didactic, theatrical, background muzak, amusing: skepticism, doubt, noise, resistance. (AP, 29-30)

More importantly, Bernstein makes explicit two issues at heart of his theory of poetics insofar as the practices of the artifices of absorption and anti-absorption are concerned. First, he acknowledges candidly that the idea of artifice of absorption and anti-absorption is nothing new, and that, in fact, it has been very much the essential strategy of any types of composition as one knows it. With examples ranging from Jerome McGann, William Wordsworth, Edgar Alan Poe, Emily Dickinson, to mention only a few, he admits that «Absorption and anti-absorption are both present / in any method of reading or writing, although / one or the other may be more obtrusive or evasive» (AP, 22). Secondly, he shows a changed position regarding poetry and poetic writing practices from «*aversion of conformity* » (AP, 1) to alliance with conformity, which, as Bernstein himself has made it clear, foregrounds as well as facilitates absorption. «As in much of my own work», he thus admits, «anti-absorptive / techniques are used toward / absorptive ends».

Bernstein's privileging of poetic absorption in these terms is grounded in one issue, which is his inability to understand language dispensed with meaning, or his unwillingness to accept language when it is no longer in the service of meaning. His preoccupation with meaning is

emphatically stated, for instance, in his contrast on this issue between Derrida and Wittgenstein, the difference between whom he considers as «fundamentally irreconcilable»:

> What Derrida ends up transforming to house of cards---shimmering traces of life insubstantial as elusive---Wittgenstein locates as *meaning*, with the full range of intention, responsibility, coherence, and possibility for revolt against or madness without. In Wittgenstein's accounting, one is not left sealed off from the world with only 'markings' to 'decipher' but rather *located* in a world with meanings to *respond to.* (CD, 181)

With his poetics thus «neutralized»,[30] Bernstein's poetry enters then the second phase, which is the phase of renovation; and his poem «The Lives of the Toll Takers», which is collected in *Dark City* and published in 1994, presents itself as an example. Take the first page of the poem:

> There appears to be a receiver off the hook. Not that
> you care.
>
> Besides the gloves resided a hat and two
> prinky rings, for which no
> finger was ever found. Largesse
> with no release became, after
> not too long, atrophied, incendiary,
> stupefying. Difference or
> *differance:* it's
> the distinction between hauling junk and
> removing rubbish, while
> I, needless not to say, take
> out the garbage
> (pragmatism)[31]

What is presented on the first page of the poem is a collage of diverse pieces of information. However fragmented, these pieces of information are not only absorptive but also absorbable because they are familiar as everyday («a receiver off the hook. Not that / you care», etc.), cultural («beside the gloves… a hat and two / prinky rings», etc.), and intellectual («Difference or / *differance*», «(pragmatism)», etc.) phenomena. From time to time, there indeed also appear what could be considered as anti-absorptive language strategies, which function, indeed, only to further enhance the textual absorbability. The exaggerated use of the verb «resides» to describe the location of the «hat and the two / prinky rings», for instance, pokes fun at what seems to be the solemn formality of certain social decorum, the stylized sarcasm of the distinction between «Difference» and «*differance*» voices a popular disdain for Derrida and his theory of deconstruction, whereas the playful spin of the cliché «needless to say» as «needless not to say» puts a smile on one's face as the result of a shared culture of humor. As anti-absorptive as it may seem, this excerpt of the poem nevertheless provides discernible semantic threads and graspable syntactical units sufficient enough for an absorptive reading of it as a clever commentary on contemporary culture.

From this perspective, the poem represents the instantaneous emergence of the marked state as the result of the poet's asymmetrical formal operation of drawing a distinction in language, of language, and on language. It delineates a familiar realm into which the poet has re-entered by accepting and conforming to its values, unfolding a space of construction where, as Katherine Hayles has pointed out earlier, «what has gone before» offers itself as the building material for practices of renovation by inviting various reconstructive operations that are contingent on one's time and needs, dependent on specific women and men making situated decisions, and predicated upon the established codes of signification, on the existing mechanisms of taming the noise. Written now

not «on some outermost brink» but «at the center of a cheering mob», as John Ashbery puts it in his description of the contemporary avant-garde artists, Bernstein's work in this phase becomes highly ironic, as its innovative postures belie renovating practices, practices in which «it is safest to experiment».[32]

The third phase in Bernstein's poetry writing in the 2000s is characterized, to a considerable degree, by an increasing poetic practice in the realm of standardized use of language, one that he vehemently critiqued in the first phase of his writing. In his most recent poetry book *Girly Man* published by the University of Chicago Press, for instance, one finds poem after poem of straightforward narratives, the primary poetic intention of which is to showcase a wide range of tonal and emotive expressivity, and the language of which is journalistically transparent. Take the poem titled «Today Is the Next Day of the Rest of Your Life». A personal and emotional response to a contemporary event, it is composed entirely in plain and descriptive language:

> all of a sudden tonight the smell of burning plastic
>
> pervades our apartment, making eyes smart. is it
>
> something in the building? no, a neighbor explains,
>
> that's the smell coming from downtown.[33]

In a similarly fashion, the poem «Thank You for Saying Thank You» takes a step further, presenting itself almost as a parody of the poet's own early avant-garde endeavors, making a mockery of anyone who would even try to imagine any avant-garde implications embedded in it:

> This is a totally
>
> accessible poem.
>
> There is nothing
>
> in this poem
>
> that is in any
>
> way difficult

to understand.

All the words

are simple &

to the point.

There are no new

concepts, no

theories, no ideas to confuse

you…. (GM, 7)

In light of a critical survey of American Language poetry four decades after its inception, one finds in it a classical avant-garde movement. Its typical evolutionary trajectory from innovation to renovation in its writing practices is accompanied by a change from the combative to the cooperative in attitude, from the deconstructive to the (re)constructive in intention, from the theoretical and philosophical to the cultural in objective, from the critical to the hermeneutical in methodology, and from content to style in manifestation. As any other avant-garde movements before it, it is inevitable that American Language poetry, as nothing more than «the leading edge of the mainstream»,[34] has, by its own logic, to retreat to the center of the cheering crowd.

As a poetry movement, Language poetry now enjoys an indisputable success in every way; but to the extent that it is an avant-garde movement, «Nothing fails like success».[35]

NOTES:

[1] Jerome McGann, «Language Writing», *London Review of Books*, 9:18 (15 October 1987), 6-8.

[2] Bruce Andrews. *Paradise and Method* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1996), 47, 38.

[3] Charles Bernstein. *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), 1.

[4] Ron Silliman. *The New Sentence* (New York, NY: Roof Books, 2003), 7, 10.

[5] Andrews, 52.

[6] Lyn Hejinian. *The Language of Inquiry* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2000), 56.

[7] Bruce Andrews and Charles Bernstein eds. *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book* (Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1984), ix.

[8] The phenomenon of backing-off by some Language poets from their initial claims, be they socio-political or ideological, was observed and vocalized as early as, if not earlier than, 1996. While it generated heated debates among poets at «Assembling Alternatives: An International Poetry Conference and Festival» hosted by the University of New Hampshire in 1996, for instance, it has since then been embraced and appropriated with increasing enthusiasm by the mainstream. A more recent example is the 2007 Modern Language Association Annual Convention. In a panel on poetic form, one panelist explicitly welcomed such backing-off, arguing to the effect that it was fine if those poets held onto the claims they made, but even better if they did not. The rationale behind such a position is a temporal one. More specifically, it is a belief in the present, a privilege of a «now» moment, in the sense that less language-oriented poetry presents more possibilities for (re)constructive performances that can be individualized in one's immediate context.

[9] The critical discourse on avant-garde and its fated socio-historical evolution is by now both rich and extensive, to which Language poetry turns out to be just another all too familiar example. While it certainly is a book project to synthesize all the specificities that have determined the conditions of the evolutionary trajectory of Language poetry (biographical backgrounds, sub-cultural formations, intellectual ambience, academic interventions, institutional impacts, career aspirations, and institutional gravitations, etc.), this paper intends to examine, in a rather limited scope, only some concepts, which, by underlying its practices either explicitly or implicitly, either consciously or unconsciously, have eventually led Language poetry from a poetry of innovation to that of renovation.

[10] Charles Bernstein. *Content's Dream: Essays 1975-1984* (Los Angeles, CA: Sun and Moon Press, 1986), 224. Henceforth cited in the text as CD with page reference.

[11] Silliman, 17. Original emphasis. Unless otherwise noted, all forms of emphases are to the original.

[12] Hejinian, 47, 56.

[13] Charles Bernstein. *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1999), 90. The term «frame lock» is also the title of a Bernstein's essay in which he critiques various types of institutional frame locks. For more details, see 90-99.

[14] The coinage of the term «tri-centric circle» is inspired by Bruce Andrews's use of the term «concentric circle» in his critique of the system of the sign in relation to social context. For more details on Andrews's use of the term, see *Paradise and Method*, especially 43-53, 260.

[15] Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1961), §5.6, 56.

[16] Ludwig Wittgenstein. *Philosophical Investigations* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., INC., 1958), §7, 5e.

[17] George Spencer-Brown. *Laws of Form* (New York: The Julian Press, INC. Publishers, 1972), 3. Henceforth cited in the text as LF with page reference. This essay makes only limited and selective use of Spencer-Brown's theory.

[18] N. Katherine Hayles, «Making the Cut: The Interplay of Narrative and System, or What System Theory Can't See», in William Rasch and Cary Wolfe eds., *Observing Complexity: Systems Theory and Postmodernity* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), 137. Henceforth cited in the text as MC with page reference.

[19] Hejinian, 52.

[20] William Rasch, «Introduction: The Self-Positing Society», in William Rasch ed., *Theories of Distinction: Re-describing the Descriptions of Modernity* by Niklas Luhmann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2002), 10. Henceforth cited in the text as TD with page reference.

[21] David Roberts, «Self-Reference in Literature», in Dirk Baecker ed., *Problems of Form* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1999), 29. Henceforth cited in the text as SRL with page reference.

[22] For recent studies on this topic, see, for example, Johannes Fehr and Petr Kouba eds., *Dynamic Structure: Language as an Open System* (Prague: Litteraria Pragensia, 2007).

[23] Dirk Baecker, «Introduction», in Dirk Baecker ed., 3. For Luhmann's brief account of this point, see TD, 102.

[24] Georges Bataille, «Friendship», in *Parallax*, 7:1 (January to March, 2001), 7.

[25] Gerald L. Bruns, «On the Conundrum of Form and Material in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory», in *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 66:3 (Summer 2008), 230. Henceforth cited in the text as CFMAAT with page reference. I am indebted to Gerald Bruns for calling my attention to certain passages in Adorno's work that are pertinent to my argument in this paper.

[26] For Bernstein early critique of the standardization of language in the expository and other types of official discourses, see CD, especially 1-39.

[27] Charles Bernstein, *Islets/Irritations* (New York: Roof Books, 1983), 1.

[28] Theodor W. Adorno. *Notes on Literature*, Vol. II (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), 95.

[29] Charles Bernstein. *A Poetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1992), pp. 9-89. Henceforth cited in the text as AP with page reference.

[30] On this point, see Adorno, who writes, «Works are usually critical in the ear in which they appear; later they are neutralized, not least because of changed social relations. Neutralization is is the social price of aesthetic autonomy», *Aesthetic Theory* (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 228.

[31] Charles Bernstein, *Dark City* (Los Angeles, CA: Sun and Moon Press, 1994), 9.

[32] John Ashbery, «The Invisible Avant-Garde», in Gioia, Mason, and Schoerke eds. *Twentieth-Century American Poetics: Poets on the Art of Poetry* (New York, NY: McGraw-Higher Education, 2004), 287-288, 290.

[33] Charles Bernstein, *Girly Man* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), p. 20. Henceforth cited in the text as *GM* with page reference.

[34] Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-Garde* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 13.

[35] Cary Wolfe, *Critical Environment: Postmodern Theory and the Pragmatics of the "Outside"*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), v.