

THE “WORK” OF POST-CONCEPTUAL WRITING: THE STRANGE CASE OF ÉDOUARD LEVÉ¹

David Vichnar and Jean Bessière

*This article explores the differences, if not incompatibility, between the para- or even post-conceptual work of Édouard Levé, and the sort of canonical Conceptualism promoted in Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's anthology, *Against Expression*, as well as the practice of three contemporary American Conceptualists. The exploration takes place on the basis of an historical excursus into the various Conceptualist traditions, a theoretical exploration of media-based conceptual theory, a discussion of the work of three 'staple' contemporary Conceptualists, and finally a detailed probe into Levé's writing career based on a comparative reading with Goldsmith's Conceptualist practice. The article makes a case against simple appropriation of the oeuvre of Edouard Levé for the Conceptualist cause by showing how his first text exhibits an explicit conceptual intention but thwarts its accomplishment, and the other three perform a rewriting of conceptual tenets that entails a break from Conceptualist aesthetics and poetics.*

According to his own first-hand account, Craig Dworkin coined the phrase “conceptual writing” as “a flexibly generic term to straddle [various] traditions,” meant “both to signal literary writing that could function comfortably as conceptual art and to indicate the use of text in conceptual art practices.”² A boldly international undertaking, the monumental 2011 anthology of conceptual writing *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, which Dworkin co-edited

¹ This work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund Project “Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World” (No. CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734).

² Craig Dworkin, “The Fate of Echo,” *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, ed. Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011) xxiii.

with Kenneth Goldsmith, is a testimony to how broad the straddling was. A veritable literary Baedeker of the twentieth- and twenty-first-century conceptual literary landscape, its 650 pages feature over a hundred writers from Aasprong to Zykov, from Finland to Japan, from China to Armenia. To be sure, some of the co-option of the twentieth-century avant-garde writing from France into *Against Expression* occurred with considerable liberties. Nearing the limits of exhaustiveness, the anthology includes French avant-gardists from all walks of literary life (the surrealist Aragon, the cosmopolitan modernist Cendrars, the symbolist Mallarmé, the Oulipians Grangaud, Perec and Queneau, the maverick Roussel, and the Dadaist Tzara), even with a special cameo by Denis Diderot.

Given the anthology's bulk and inclusiveness, one omission might seem, then, all the more striking: that of Édouard Levé and his four para-conceptual works, each of which undertakes a particular, and particularly explicit, rejection of "expression." Levé's exclusion might of course be of a practical rather than programmatic nature, due to the simple fact of his relative obscurity in the Anglophone world: the first of his texts appeared in English only in 2011, the year of the anthology's publication. But this article argues that, far from haphazard or wilful, the omission of Levé bespeaks some fundamental differences – or even incompatibility – between his para- or even post-conceptual work and the sort of Conceptualism promoted in Dworkin and Goldsmith's anthology. This incompatibility will be explored on the basis of an historical excursus into the various Conceptualist traditions, a theoretical exploration of media-based conceptual theory, a discussion of the work of three 'staple' contemporary Conceptualists, and finally a detailed probe into Levé's writing career based on a comparative reading with Goldsmith's practice. The article will make a case against simple appropriation of the *oeuvre* of Edouard Levé for the Conceptualist cause by showing how his first text exhibits an explicit conceptual intention but thwarts its accomplishment, and the other three perform a rewriting of conceptual tenets that entails a break from Conceptualist aesthetics and poetics. This rewriting undertaken by Levé shall enable us to specify the importance of the play upon text and context and their asymmetry in conceptual writing and to interpret it as an original literary practice of the sublime.

Conceptualism: An Historical Excursus

The historical excursus follows some well-trodden paths. A retrospective co-option for the rubric of Conceptualism of early twentieth-century works in the arts and letters centres on a limited yet stable set of isolated reference points, starting with modernist predecessors such as Mallarmé's spatial writings, Apollinaire's

calligrams, Satie's musical experiments with repetition and boredom, and Picabia's mechanical drawings, and – pivotal among these – Duchamp's "ready-mades." These quotidian objects inscribed with a cryptic title and displayed as art immediately lend themselves to a Conceptualist reading, not so much by what they *are* but by what they *say* they are: their insistence on being considered as art, their provocation that "context is content." Regarded as similarly proto-conceptual has been some of the fiction of Duchamp's contemporaries: Stein's experiments in unreadable syntactics, Pound's multilingual collages, as well as Joyce's exploration of the night-/nought-language in *Finnegans Wake*, and the many other reactions to the changed conditions of the medium of print in what Walter Benjamin termed the era of mechanical reproduction. These challenges and concerns gave rise to the double lineage of conceptual and Dada art and writing, the one rethinking art as performance, the other seeking to abolish the category altogether.

Two movements crystallised after World War II as reactions to these provocations. The one was Concretism, with its, perhaps defining, idea that the receiver/interpreter need not read the text to be able to understand it. Concrete writing proposed to achieve this by heightening the indexical factors of textual presentation, by treating as much of its "message" as inherent to its medium:

We aim to treat 'space' and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition through organic interpenetration of time and space [...] atomization of words, physiognomical typography; expressionistic emphasis on space [...] the vision, rather than the praxis [...] direct speech, economy and functional architecture.³

The other was the Situationist practice of *détournement* and *dérive* as theorised by Guy Debord, which consisted in changing one of the determinant conditions of a socio-cultural message or situation, and thereby unmasking and critiquing its ideological motivations and agenda. In Debord's well-worn definition, *détournement* is an open embrace of authority-defying plagiarism as opposed to the authority-confirming quotation:

Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author's phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it

³ Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari and Haroldo de Campos, "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry" (1958), *Concrete Poetry: A World View*, ed. Mary Ellen Solt (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970) 71-72.

with the right one. Détournement is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation.⁴

Taking cue from the Concretists and Situationists after the advent of widespread print and imaging technology in the 1960s, various movements such as *musique concrète*, Oulipo and Fluxus were picking up the thread. Fast forward twenty years, and by the mid-1980s, under the combined influences of the "uncreative genius" of Andy Warhol and the "composer of silence" John Cage, artistry had turned into appropriation. To hear Goldsmith tell it,

Sherrie Levine was busy rephotographing Walker Evans's photos, Richard Prince was reframing photographs of cowboys taken from Marlboro ads, Cindy Sherman was being everyone but Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons was encasing vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas. Music of the period reflected this as well: from hiphop to plunderphonics to pop, the sample became the basis for much music. Artifice ruled: inspired by the voguing craze, lip-synching became the preferred mode of performance in concert.⁵

But the 1980s Conceptualists need not have looked as far back as the 1960s Concretism and Situationism to find theoretical substance for their praxis, as theory – both of literature and media – turned its attention away from "content" to "context." This can be exemplified by two of the most comprehensive accounts of photography and literature of the 1980s.

As early as 1983, Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* notes how photography is "robotising all aspects of our lives, from one's most public acts to one's innermost thoughts, feelings, and desires."⁶ This robotising occurs through the interplay of an ensemble of functions useful in describing not only photography sub specie 1983, but prescient also of digital imaging technologies and their online uses. These include the "apparatus" (which changes "the meaning of the world," as opposed to what Flusser calls "[t]ools and machines" that work to change the world itself⁷), the "functionary" (the photographer or operator of the

⁴ Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Ken Knabb (London: Rebel Press, 2005) 113-14.

⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?," *Against Expression* xxi.

⁶ Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Press, 2006) 71.

⁷ Flusser 25.

camera who is bound by the rules it sets – “[f]unctionaries control a game over which they have no competence”⁸), the “program” (which “contains within it chance and necessity” and combines “the same elements over and over again”⁹) and finally the “technical image” (created in order “to liberate their receivers by magic from the necessity of thinking conceptually, at the same time replacing [...] the ability to think conceptually with a second-order imagination”¹⁰). Flusser’s major focus in this work is the critical and philosophical need to understand the 1980s media culture in terms of the larger forces at work in an increasingly technical and automated world. But instead of analysing the *what* of photography, Flusser dwells throughout with the *how*, dealing with photography from a completely technical standpoint. As Flusser sees it, the mimetic content of photographs becomes utterly submerged within the techno-political and socio-industrial apparatuses that surround and thereby delimit it, and it is only by understanding those that we may attempt a critique of this dominant cultural mode.

Written four years after Flusser’s masterpiece of photographic Conceptualism, Gérard Genette’s *Paratexts* is a study of the “liminal devices and conventions, both within and outside the book, that form part of the complex mediation between book, author, publisher, and reader.”¹¹ In focusing on “titles, forewords, epigraphs, and jacket copy” as textual tools of “a book’s private and public history,” Genette analyses all the textual apparatuses and mechanisms that provide a book’s “meaning” and cultural status. Genette quotes J. Hillis Miller on the polysemy of “para” that is “a double antithetical prefix signifying at once proximity and distance, similarity and difference, interiority and exteriority [...] something simultaneously this side of a boundary line, threshold, or margin, and at the same time beyond it.”¹² To convey the core elements of this relationship, Genette formulates a simple algorithm that governs the whole of *Paratexts*: “Paratext = peritext + epitext,”¹³ where “peritext” is all textual material “around” the text in space (within the book), and “epitext” is “around” the text in time (and outside the book). The paratext thus poses intriguing problems for any speech-act analysis, situated as it is between the first-order illocutionary domain of the public world and that of the second-order speech-acts of fiction. Charting a topology that abounds in precisions (and neologisms) and repeatedly drawing distinctions

⁸ Flusser 28.

⁹ Flusser 76-77.

¹⁰ Flusser 17.

¹¹ Gérard Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*, trans. Jane E. Lewin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997) 1.

¹² J. Hillis Miller, “The Critic as Host,” *Critical Inquiry*, 3.3 (Spring 1977): 441. See Genette 1.

¹³ Genette 5.

reminiscent of high Structuralism (spatial: peritext/epitext; temporal: original/later/delayed, etc.), Genette goes beyond taxonomic mappings, instead studying each element as a literary function.

Thus, Genette does for literature what Flusser does for photography: what makes a book into literature – just as what makes a picture into photography – are the threshold texts/apparatuses around and behind them. For Flusser, the specific apparatus of photography (the camera) and what it produces (photos) are technically and visually linked to the innumerable and vast apparatuses of the visual and their productions, to their "subliminal magic" and "infinite regression."¹⁴ For Genette, any literary work is literally defined by its paratext, again inseparable from the infinity of its surroundings. Both Flusser and Genette wrote about and from within an essentially analogue- and print-based culture, shortly before the emergence of the internet raised the bar of the ease and pervasiveness of conceptual borrowing in literature and photography to a new level. The creative potential of the contexts surrounding photography and literature in the mid-1980s, which Flusser and Genette could only divine, was fully explored in post-2000 Conceptualism.

Three Contemporary Conceptualists: Goldsmith, Place, Bök

In his own editorial preface to *Against Expression*, Goldsmith makes the by-now popular claim that "with the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography," meaning that in "a situation similar to that of painting upon the invention of photography," after which "the field had to alter its course radically," writing too "needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance."¹⁵ Echoing Flusser's work, Goldsmith insists that in the internet era, "it appears that writing's response will be mimetic and replicative, involving notions of distribution while proposing new platforms of receivership. Words very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated."¹⁶

Elsewhere, Goldsmith revisits and updates Flusser, claiming that his observation regarding photography's apparatuses rings even more relevant in terms of our twenty-first-century digital online than the 1983 analogue environment. How technology "robotises all aspects of our lives" is particularly evident from how social media (Twitter, Facebook, Instagram) function as apparatuses that

¹⁴ Flusser 19, 45.

¹⁵ Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing?" xvii.

¹⁶ Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing?" xxi.

change the meaning of what it means to inhabit a world. Twitter, like Flusser's photography, is a "programme" with rules to be obeyed in order to play. Whenever we tweet, not only does the 140-character constraint determine the form of our content, forcing us to adjust our "production" in order to comply with the Twitter "apparatus," but more importantly, "the more we tweet, the more we enrich the program, thereby increasing its standing within the larger social media apparatus and boosting Twitter's share price," insists Goldsmith adding that "it doesn't really matter what we tweet (content); it just matters that we keep tweeting (apparatus)."¹⁷ Unsurprisingly, Goldsmith's own practice of "uncreative writing" over the past two decades has engaged with textual practices that are automated as in Flusser, and deal with transcriptions of liminal illocutions à la Genette.

Fidget (2000), Goldsmith's performative Bloomsday experiment, is a recording-cum-transcription of all (or as many as recordable) movements made by his body on a single day, an experiment with a range of interesting consequences, not least of which being the realisation that telling the "truth" may be the biggest "fiction" of all, it being "humanly impossible to track all of one's bodily movements,"¹⁸ as clearly exemplified by the opening of Goldsmith's text:

Eyelids open. Tongue runs across upper lip moving from left side of mouth to right following arc of lip. Swallow. Jaws clench. Grind. Stretch. Swallow. Head lifts. Bent right arm brushes pillow into back of head. Arm straightens. Counterclockwise twist thrusts elbow toward ceiling. Tongue leaves interior of mouth passing through teeth. Tongue slides back into mouth. Palm corkscrews. Thumb stretches.¹⁹

Fidget was followed by *Soliloquy* (2001), an unedited record of every word Goldsmith spoke during a week in April 1996, from the moment he woke up on a Monday morning until the time he went to bed on Sunday night:

It's her, Marjorie Perloff and [...] I'm going to get her, I hope, to write a blurb for the back of my book and promote it. It should I'm very you know I'm really excited about having lunch with her. She's in from Stanford so

¹⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith, "It's a Mistake to Mistake Content for Content," *Los Angeles Review of Books*, 14 June 2015, <https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/its-a-mistake-to-mistake-content-for-content/> (accessed 20 October 2020).

¹⁸ Marjorie Perloff, "'Vocable Scriptsigns': Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget*," Kenneth Goldsmith, *Fidget* (New York: Coach House Books, 2000) 91.

¹⁹ Goldsmith, *Fidget* 1.

that's what I'm doing today. And tonight I'm going to a party for John Newman. He's a nice guy actually, he's a really nice guy. He really is, yeah. Yeah, he shows at, uh, really formal sculpture. Yeah, something like that. I mean, It's very formal. It's very formal work. Yeah yeah yeah yeah.²⁰

Finally, Goldsmith's *Day* (2003) is a complete transcription of the entire edition of the *New York Times* from Friday, 1 September 2000, predicated on the constraint of uncreativity, with which he spent an entire year systematically working through each page, reproducing all the words, letters, or numbers found anywhere in the paper, typesetting them in the same font, without the use of styling such as bold or italic:

"All the News That's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

New York: Today, mostly cloudy, high 83. Tonight, warm and muggy, low 73. Tomorrow, cloudy with a few showers, high 80. Yesterday, high 83, low 72. Weather map is on Page A20.

VOL. CXLIX . . . No. 51, 498

Copyright © 2000 The New York Times

NEW YORK, FRIDAY, SEPTEMBER 1, 2000²¹

The result is a levelling of information to text, which is stripped of hierarchy and design: 900 pages of information recontextualised as inseparable and in fact indistinguishable from noise. As fellow-editor Craig Dworkin has observed regarding *Day*, "Goldsmith's work, for its part, entered into a century-old rivalry between poetry and the newspaper and an arena already divided – in Truman Capote's famous quip about Jack Kerouac – between 'writing' and 'typing.'"²²

Another re-contextualising Conceptualist is Vanessa Place, writer and criminal appellate attorney, whose *Statement of Facts* from 2010 is an appropriation of the briefs that Place wrote as a lawyer specialising in representing indigent sex offenders. Place never alters the original document other than removing specific witness and victim information as necessary measures to protect their identities. In transferring the briefs from the legal framework to the literary, Place intentionally sets forth a line of questioning addressing issues of labour, value,

²⁰ Goldsmith, *Soliloquy* (New York: Granary Books, 2001) 1.

²¹ Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003) 11.

²² Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo" 42.

surplus, expenditure, and context: what she has conceived of as “uncompromising realism”:

Counts 5, 6, 7, 8 and 9: Jane Doe 52: Barbara B.

On May 13, 1998, Barbara B. was fifty-eight years old, living alone on Elliot Lane, in Long Beach. By about 10:30 p.m., Barbara B. had fallen asleep with the television and light on; she woke feeling a weight on the bed, then a hand over her mouth. A man said, “I don’t want to hurt you.” Barbara B. testified he spoke in a whispery voice she “probably wouldn’t recognize again.” (RT 913-915) The man had Barbara B. roll onto her stomach, she said she had a bad back, he had her roll onto her back, her nightgown pulled over her head. She could not see, “and didn’t want to.” Barbara B. felt the man against her; it felt as if he was naked. The man kept saying things like, “I don’t want to hurt you; I just want to make love to you.” Barbara B. thought she’d try to cry, but the man’s voice got harsh, and he told her to stop it; she decided it was best to “get it over with as soon as possible.” (RT 915-917, 925, 1490)²³

Starting in 2013, Place has been at work on a series of performances called *If I Wanted Your Opinion, I’d Remove the Duct Tape*, consisting entirely in her reciting a set of rape jokes, much to the ill-ease of many of her co-performers and audiences. In 2015, Place caused controversy with a Twitter art project where she retyped the entire text from Margaret Mitchell’s 1936 novel *Gone with the Wind*, in an effort to call attention to the novel’s inherent racism, as part of a larger project, *Gone with the Wind by Vanessa Place*, designed to raise questions of copyright, the ownership of cultural fictions, and the ongoing nature of the white imaginary. According to Place’s own statement about the project: “The book’s true love story is not between Rhett and Scarlett but white America’s affair with self, a self that can only exist through owning property as the primary means of white supremacy.”²⁴

On her account, under white supremacy, all white people – regardless of what they intend – inherently participate in the racism of the position they occupy. Thus, Place’s recontextualization of Margaret Mitchell displays the latter as a creator of vile stereotypes, to which end she also exploits the physical situatedness

²³ Vanessa Place, *Statement of Facts* (Ubu Editions, 2008) http://www.ubu.com/ubu/unpub/Unpub_042_Place.pdf (accessed 20 October 2020).

²⁴ “Artist’s Statement: *Gone With the Wind* @VanessaPlace,” *Genius*, 19 May 2015, <https://genius.com/Vanessa-place-artists-statement-gone-with-the-wind-vanessaplace-annotated> (accessed 20 October 2020).

of nineteenth-century Southern slaves. Although speaking the same words from the same subject position, by recontextualising *Gone with the Wind* sub specie 2015 Twitter, Place's appropriation shows how identity-based racism hinges on the performative acknowledgment of guilt, and thereby paradoxically agrees with her accusers, avowing the guilt that she implicitly shares with Mitchell.

Finally, Christian Bök also made his name at the turn of the century with his serial lipogram *Eunoia* (2001), which in addition to a number of other constraints – thematic, syntactic, typographic – restricts each of its five main chapters to only one of the five vowels. The chapters, dedicated to Hans Arp, René Crevel, Dick Higgins, Yoko Ono, and Zhu Yu, respectively, are meant to prove that "each vowel has its own personality, and demonstrates the flexibility of the English language."²⁵ Although inspired by the Oulipian constraint writing, what makes the work decidedly conceptual is its encyclopaedic drive with which it attempts to incorporate all of the eligible univocalics (in the end, Bök manages around 98 percent of the potential univocal lexicon).

Ten years later, in April 2011, Bök launched his "Xenotext" bio-art project: an attempt at a "living poetry." The "Xenotext" project is an attempt at translating a "short verse about language & genetics"²⁶ using a chemical alphabet:

The Xenotext consists of a single sonnet (called 'Orpheus'), which, when translated into a gene and then integrated into a cell, causes the cell to 'read' this poem, interpreting it as an instruction for building a viable, benign protein – one whose sequence of amino acids encodes yet another sonnet (called 'Eurydice').²⁷

This DNA sequence is in turn implanted into the genome of *Deinococcus radiodurans*, a bacterium notable as one of the most radiation-resistant organisms known, chosen by the project as an archive of a certain idea of poetry, a poem actually alive, one that would likely endure longer than any reader or any concept of poetry. With the genome as muse and medium, Bök's *Xenotext* is a real attempt at writing a "DNA text":²⁸

²⁵ "Beautiful Vowels," *BBC Today*, 30 October 2008, http://news.bbc.co.uk/today/hi/today/newsid_7697000/7697762.stm (accessed 20 October 2020).

²⁶ Christian Bök, "The Xenotext Works," *Poetry Foundation*, 2 April 2011, <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/the-xenotext-works> (accessed 20 October 2020).

²⁷ Christian Bök, *The Xenotext – Book 1* (New York: Coach House Books, 2015) 150.

²⁸ Bök, *The Xenotext – Book 1* 87.

Cytosine

H
H Y D R O G E N
D
C A R B O N
A O
H Y D R O G E N
Y B E I
D O N I T R O G E N
C A R B O N R
A O O
H Y D R O G E N O X Y G E N
B E E
O N I T R O G E N
N

Bök includes a whole “Vita Explicata” section with the *Xenotext*, in which he introduces readers to the concepts of this experiment and its foreseen evolution: a paratext, then, for a text yet to come. However, as detailed by Joshua Schuster, “the poem was not going to be the verbal icon, and not the book either, but the work of the poem in its trying to get made,” that is, “the computer programming, grant writing, art exhibits, promotional tweets, interviews, preposterous claims, raised eyebrows, and bioethical murmurings,”²⁹ i.e., all of the paratextual paraphernalia that for Genette make the literary possible. Instead, the printed book consists of five sections containing a mix of prose and poetry, whose form and content are structured in varying degrees by some aspects of genomics.

Whether in Goldsmith’s recordings and transcriptions of the physical and the mundane, in Place’s provocative rewritings of the legal and the ideologically subversive, or in Bök’s exhaustive linguistic combinatorics and genomic/textual replications – one finds the principles of Flusser’s photographic and Genette’s

²⁹ Joshua Schuster, “On Reading Christian Bök’s ‘The Xenotext: Book 1’ Ten Thousand Years Later,” *Jacket Magazine*, 17 February 2016, <https://jacket2.org/reviews/reading-christian-boks-xenotext-book-1-ten-thousand-years-later> (accessed 20 October 2020).

paratextual analysis everywhere at work. Goldsmith, Place, Bök and the Conceptualist writing project at large upgrade McLuhan's medium is message, or "content of any medium is always another medium."³⁰ Their upgrade is along the lines of "the content of any medium is always the series of apparatuses that produced it."³¹ Writing in the twenty-first century, for these, is a performance of an inherently technological nature, circumscribed but also limitless by virtue of its paratextual paraphernalia.

Levé the Conceptualist Photographer

Against this background, then, the parallels and differences between the four published textual works³² of Édouard Levé and post-2000 'canonical' Conceptualism will be most easily drawn out.

Paralleling Goldsmith's formal training and education in the fine arts is Levé's career in photography, his four para-conceptual works paralleled by his four photography books – still remarkably text-based. His sets of photographs come centred around a theme or subject matter which 'conceptualises' their visual content, sometimes to unsettling and subversive effects. In his book *Angoisse* (Anxiety, 2002), Levé presents a set of surprisingly idyllic snapshots of a French country-town of the name, complete with the particularly jarring picture of a sign 'welcoming' the visitor 'to anxiety.' Two collections of photos called "Rugby" and "Pornography" share a similarly striking motif: "positions" (sporting and sexual alike) realised by "models" fully-dressed (in "Rugby," men in business attire, in "Pornography," men and women in business-casual) with as inert and expressionless faces as humanly possible. *Amérique* (America, 2007) includes snapshots of backwater towns in the USA named after some of the major world centres, from Prague to Lima, from Stockholm to Calcutta.

Most conceptually 'clean' is Levé's 1997 series of photographs *Portraits of Homonyms*, where Levé produces a survey of photographs of ordinary people who

³⁰ Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (1964) (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1994) 8.

³¹ Goldsmith, "It's a Mistake to Mistake Content for Content."

³² Édouard Levé, *Œuvres* (Paris: Éditions P.O.L, 2002); *Journal* (Paris: Éditions P.O.L, 2004); *Autoportrait* (Paris: Éditions P.O.L, 2005); *Suicide* (Paris: Éditions P.O.L, 2008). English translations: *Works*, trans. Jan Steyn (Champaign, IL/Dublin/London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2014); *Newspaper*, trans. Jan Steyn and Caite Dolan-Leach (Victoria, TX/Dublin/London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2015), *Autoportrait*, trans. Lorin Stein (Champaign, IL/Dublin/London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2012); *Suicide*, trans. Jan Steyn (Champaign, IL/Dublin/London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2011).

happened to share their names with those of cultural celebrities (Raymond Roussel, Georges Bataille...). In "No. 77" of *Oeuvres*, he describes the process as follows:

77. Des homonymes d'artistes et d'écrivains trouvés dans l'annuaire sont photographiés. Sous le tirage couleur du visage, cadre comme sur un portrait d'identité, une plaque métallique indique leur prénom et leur nom. Se trouvent ainsi juxtaposés deux signes d'identité contradictoires: le visage, inconnu, et le nom, célèbre.³³

Thus, Levé introduces a disturbance in the reference by means of a split within the proper name, diverting the usual channels linking ostension and appointment. The fixed name/referent link is not entirely undone – since the people in Levé's directory *are* André Bretons, *are* Yves Kleins – but it becomes parasitised by an alternate reality, the multiplication of the potentialities attached to the proper name, which no longer refers exclusively to a single referent, blurring the process of identification. Levé's images counteract the singularity of the proper name by opening themselves up to plurality of its references, inviting the viewer to contemplate this strange coexistence of two contradictory terms. The derailment of reference, oscillating between the mental association drawn from the common culture and the image perceived on the photograph, freezes the image and its viewer in an unreal suspense.

As Levé's texts engage with ideas *as* ideas and explore different kinds of objectivity (the 'textual' eye of his photographs, the 'neutral' descriptions of his books), they are doubtless responsive to conceptual writing while implying reservations on Conceptualism. This duality is paradoxical because Levé never explicitly dealt with conceptual writing. Contrary to Levé's customary pigeonholing, the succession of his literary works should be viewed as a move away from a paradoxical conceptual writing, which relies on the mimesis of conceptual art, to a specific form of Post-Conceptualism. This change enables the writer to abandon allusions to conceptual art and to make a conceptual radical objectivity congruent with, on the one hand, extensive references to the world and

³³ Levé, *Œuvres* 41. "People bearing the same names as artists and writers are found in a telephone directory and photographed. Colour prints are made of their faces and framed like ID photos. Two contradictory signs of identity are thus juxtaposed: the face, unknown, and the name, famous." (Note: Currently the Dalkey Archive edition of the English translation of *Works* is out of print and unavailable. Due to this, all translations in the footnotes are by the authors.)

individuals – so the most public discourses (newspapers) appear relevant to anyone anywhere – and, on the other, with highly personal and subjective mentions in his self-portrait and evocation of a friend's suicide, so one's subjectivity is made manifest without recourse to personal expression, or 'impersonalisation.' Levé's four 'literary' texts explore similar ambivalences entailed in 'describing' with words, 'determining' texts as belonging to genres, and 'addressing' an absent addressee.

533 Projects: *Oeuvres*

Oeuvres/Works is at once the librarian's dream and the writer's nightmare, for all narrative art aspires to the condition of the 'non-paraphrasable' and 'not-to-be-summarised.' *Works* shortly describes 533 possible works, or "projects" as Levé calls them – paintings, photographs, films, architecture, writings, and readings – and gives their "prescriptions," i.e., indicates the materials, ideas, procedures and actions needed for their production. These "projects" are *conceptions of works*. The last three "projects" describe the performative presentations of the 530 preceding ones: these should be rewritten with pencil from memory, and made into objects of aleatory public readings. Consequently, *Works* is to be characterized as a conceptual literary work, or as the conceptual exemplification of what this kind of work should be; in other words, it is a literary mimesis of a conceptual work of plastic arts – an exhibition catalogue presented as a work in its own right – or a literary concretisation of a possible museum of works that remain merely virtual. More succinctly and more conceptually, *Works* is the transcription of an idea (the idea of "œuvres" – in the plural) about plastic artworks.

This is the most direct reading of the idea of *Works* that can be proposed. However, the idea cannot be dissociated from its form. The form is sequential from "project 1" to "project 533," and consequently observes the textual and conceptual autonomy of each "project," while at the same time highlighting the importance of the initial and final identifications (its title, its last three "projects," its alphabetical index of poetic and aesthetic notions) and the mutual links among individual "projects," as implied by the performative presentations and the index.

To disregard the play between the series of the "projects" – each being an idea – and the sequential form and its final identifications should lead one to discount, first, the equivocal relation between the title and the "projects," and second, the implications/consequences of the indications of performative presentations. The equivocal relation of the title and the "projects" and their final performative presentations point to what Levé sees as the limits of extensive conceptual literary works. In principle, concepts, ideas and their abstractions form closed definitions

and consequently are their own references. Whatever extensions and applications they might have, their exemplifications should be viewed as self-sufficient and cohesive or coherent with their conceptual sources. Extended conceptual literary works – *Works* is 221 pages long – cannot keep their conceptual cohesiveness or coherence continuous, and run the risk of ruining their own conceptual intention.

The title *Works* – a single word, never recurring in the text – designates a series of “projects” which the book then embodies, and consequently invites their mutual links. However, this is misleading: these pieces are “projects,” not “works.” The title would be spot-on only if these “projects” were called “works”; only if we could imagine – in a Borgesian sort of way – that *Works* as a literary work should refer to an idea which is not the property of its author, but of another mind: this mind would have conceived of a book which should include the nominal duality of the title and the texts. Following from that, a unitary ontology of the arts could be imagined: *Works* and its “projects” could appear as unified by the generality and abstraction of this ontology. No proposition in *Works* can be viewed as supporting any of these imaginations. Referring in its title to an idea or ideas which lie beyond the scope of the whole book, the index of *Works* offers a list of categories, an alphabetical classification, external to the “projects,” it actually suggests a regressive, reflexive, codified and possibly rational reading of the whole of the “projects,” that is to say, the antithesis of their performative presentations, and the erasing of the identification of the book as idea/ideas. *Works* highlights the specific difficulty of any conceptual literary work: allying the notations of ideas of works and the work – “*l'œuvre*” – to which these notations should be identified, proves to be impossible.

To view the whole of *Works* as a multiple object to be performed and to characterise the performance(s) to be produced could exemplify the alliance of ideas of works (the “projects”) and their realisations. But this view can be only one more idea/project listed in *Works*. The “projects” of performative presentations at the end of *Works* are prescriptions which define *possible concretisations* of the written “projects.” The blind writing and drawing from memory which define these “projects” are remarkably ambiguous in at least two ways. First, the writer/draftsman is supposed to be at once able to memorise the written projects as fixed projects, or ideas, and free to alter them. The importance of the ideas which identify the “projects” is highlighted and erased. Second, by playing upon blindness and memory, the performance of *Works*’ “projects” is connected with the erasing of visibility, and consequently with the possibility of hallucination. The final importance which is accorded to these presentations does suggest that any concretisation of the “projects” is useless: they are ideas which can result in private fantasies only. Such deconstructive paradoxes of its mimesis of conceptual art and

writing do not mean that Levé's *Works* rejects the link between literary works and ideas or concepts. What it does refuse is that Conceptualism should result in derealising literature and reducing readings to imaginary or hallucinatory concretisations of words. These paradoxes also enable one to view this link as functional, and to assess the applicability of this post-/conceptual work, its acceptability and receivability.

Its plural title, *Works*, implies that the concept of "œuvre" should have multiple and distinct applications. However, this multiplicity questions the applicability of the title: is the word "works" (in the plural) meant to designate a 'real' book entitled *Works*, and virtual paintings, photographs, films, which are, however, kinds of concrete "works" because of their written descriptions? In other words, this conceptual literary work, *Works* (and any conceptual work), interrogates the relevance of its propositions – from its central concept ("works," in the case of *Works*) to its many words, sentences, other concepts, and the designation of any object which is to be referred to these semantic identities. In *Works*, the discontinuity between the "projects" and the title makes the latter challenging: it questions the whole book and the properties of each project, while its plural indicates that the book's semantic fields are legion. The discontinuity between the title *Works* and the book's "projects" is functional: it challenges the broad applicability of the work; reading or performing this work always returns us to this questioning and to the decision regarding the status of each "project." The performative presentations are equivocal because of the uncertain enunciative status of *Works*: Levé uses the word "author" in "project 533," but one cannot decide if this "author" is Levé or an unnamed "author." More importantly, because of this impossibility, the word "author" depersonalises the individual who is supposed to 'actualise' the "projects": they might be anyone. *Works*' lesson is explicit: abstractions should not be associated with any identified person, but are open to becoming singularised by anyone anywhere in the world. Abstractions can be accepted by anyone.

Levé's critical approach to conceptual writing in *Works* implicitly defines the poetics of post-conceptual works. These should have a clear, general or 'universalisable' concept as their source; this concept should enable the writer to handle many kinds of propositions with extended possible references; thanks to these extended references, these works should serve (at least partially) a documentary function, and through their documents, balance the universal and the singular: the only duality which makes concepts and abstractions concrete. Moreover, they should always point towards an individual life: the only way to exemplify multiple applications of works and their concepts. The duality of the universal and the singular should command an objective and neutral style,

impersonal or anonymous identifications of agents, places and actions, and consequently, a continuous and ubiquitous readability. Post-conceptual works have a cognitive function: because their abstractions are parts of broad horizons, they can be tools of identifying multiple realities. *Works* does not comply with this function because of its tautology and performative presentations, but many of its “projects” do. See, for instance, projects 224, 227, 237:

224. Un homme vit durant une semaine en suivant des indications recopiées dans des pages d’agendas lues dans des publicités. Dans un style neutre, il consigne le récit de ses actions sous la forme d’un journal de sept jours.³⁴

227. Des photographies sont accompagnées d’une légende qui, bien que probablement vraie, est invérifiable.

Quatre femmes: une voiture noire à vitres sombres passe sur une route.

Autoportrait: une foule vue de haut.

Cinq hommes en file indienne : un homme grand et gros vu de face.

217 349 : un coffre-fort dont les 6 chiffres affichés sont : 988 751.

Eclipse : un paysage sombre.

À Bordeaux : une maison dans une ville.

Monsieur et madame Gentioux : plusieurs couples dans une salle de restaurant.³⁵

237. Un artiste dessine un objet imaginé d’après un mot du dictionnaire dont il ignore la signification. L’œuvre se compose du dessin, juxtaposé à une photographie de même taille représentant l’objet réel.³⁶

³⁴ Levé, *Œuvres* 106. “A man lives for a week following directions copied into diary pages read in advertisements. In a neutral style, he records his account of his actions in the form of a seven-day journal.”

³⁵ Levé, *Œuvres* 107. “Photographs are accompanied by a caption which, while probably true, is unverifiable. *Four women*: a black car with dark windows passes on a road. *Self-portrait*: a crowd seen from above. *Five men in a single file*: a tall, fat man seen from the front. *217 349*: a safe whose 6 digits displayed are: 988 751. *Eclipse*: a dark landscape. *In Bordeaux*: a house in a city. *Mr and Mrs Gentioux*: several couples in a dining room.”

³⁶ Levé, *Œuvres* 111. “An artist draws an imagined object from a dictionary word whose meaning he does not know. The work consists of the drawing, juxtaposed with a photograph of the same size representing the real object.”

News That Stays News: *Newspaper*

The title of *Newspaper* is to be read literally: it is an abstraction which applies to *any* newspaper, and to *all* journalist texts. Levé copies, rewrites and shortens daily news from various newspapers, turning them into semi-abstractions by deleting all specific identifications of information sources, persons, places and dates. Explicitly identified or identifiable details would be contrary to the abstraction of the book's title and restrict the balance of the universal and the singular and the possible continuous and extended reading of *Newspaper*. As no location is quoted and numerous topics are addressed, *Journal* construes a worldwide readership. Although *Journal*'s 'articles' are stripped of dates, locations and sources, all are of a concrete and documentary kind – many pieces of information characterise their topics – and they appear classified according to their kinds of sub-abstractions, the conventional sections and columns typical of the regular newspaper. While these 'articles' evoke institutions, states, situations, actions and agents, i.e., all aspects of human societies, they designate no totalisation, negate no individual's rightful place, and make their abstractions and semi-abstractions congruent with the newspaper's specificities.

Newspaper is every sociologist's dream come true in that it offers a plausible representation of the social while excluding any reference to the concept of society: the only overall envelope of our group actions is "le journal" ("the newspaper"). Its compliance with post-conceptual poetics is evident. *Journal* has a clear source concept, uses abstractions that do not contradict objecthood, unites the singular and the universal, evokes specific situations in the world and focuses on peoples' lives without giving vent to expressions of any specific 'self.' Since Levé uses a specific type of archive – a medium whose manifest function is to manage and transmit fluxes of information – *Newspaper* may be viewed as a restricted and written mimesis of this flux; its 'articles' feature amplest contemporary phenomena just by reproducing their segmentation and miming their overload through the erasure of proper names, etc. This mimesis presupposes that one single writer's mind can become the locus of information flows and overload. Levé is aware that these flows constantly pass through him and that he *embodies* them while he is writing and rewriting news clippings.

Levé's text shares this literary appropriation of the newspaper medium with Goldsmith's *Day*, while remaining indifferent to the latter's managing of existing information and uncreative practice. Goldsmith's repurposing of the newspaper through 'mere' typing presents a kind of *embodiment* and a delivery of series of information. Levé's hard stare at contemporary newspapers, or what remains of them, focuses not on newspapers *as* newspapers but on their *concept*: interests of

the time and the time of the reader's interest. Unlike Goldsmith's *Day*, which exactly duplicates an entire issue of *The New York Times*, Levé's *Newspaper* is manipulated, arranged, invented – in a word, *détourned*, using tropes and stereotypes common to journalism but to an estranging and bewildering effect.

Its thematic arrangement dabbles in the aesthetics of the collage, while its elision of all proper names performs a typically peculiar alienating effect of a situationist *détournement*: consider some of the 'stories' in the first two sections, "INTERNATIONAL" and "SOCIETY":

APPROXIMATELY TWENTY PEOPLE have died in a suicide bombing at a seaside resort hotel. [...]

AN OUTBREAK OF THE PNEUMONIC PLAGUE has caused four deaths in the south of the country. [...]

TWO CANDIDATES in the presidential election have each claimed victory. They are both "governing" with their respective cabinets. [...]

FOLLOWING THE PUBLICATION of incorrect data, the president has just learned that his country is in economic trouble. [...]

OVER THE COURSE OF A LIFETIME, one woman in every five becomes a victim of domestic violence. [...]

A MAYOR OF A MAJOR CITY HAS WRITTEN A DECREE aimed at expelling all homeless people from his city. [...]

A COURT HAS CONVICTED the organizers of a rave held in an abandoned paper mill, the attendees of which numbered over four thousand. [...]

"WE HAVE A LITERARY TRADITION that's damaging our country, and then we have a tradition that is beneficial to our nation and ought to be promoted by the government," announced a youth organization linked to a far-right leader.³⁷

And so on, and so drearily forth: whether banal or vaguely amusing, these are skin-and-bones messages stripped of their content-value, boiled down to their generic structures because lacking in specificity. As in his photography, Levé again ponders the status of a proper name ("Which" president? What mayor of which city?) in the context of the "information value" of any message. Would 'news' *détourned* and stripped of concrete content still be deemed news? While the reports on crimes, massacres, catastrophes, etc., still 'work' as news – the sad fact remaining that victims usually go nameless – Levé's *détournement* of the newspaper

³⁷ Levé, *Newspaper* 5, 14, 17, 21, 27, 30-31, 36.

comes into its own in the "SPORTS" section, where information is reduced to a series of mindless results, nameless achievements, statements with no reference: "AN EIGHTEEN-YEAR-OLD TENNIS CHAMPION has won a championship title with a two-set victory against her opponent, beating her with a score of 6-2, 6-2" or "A MAN HAS ACHIEVED the final victory in a four-person team ski-jumping tournament that counts toward the world cup."³⁸ An exercise in exhaustion similar to that of Goldsmith's concept, *Newspaper* is still markedly different: where Goldsmith copies and retypes, Levé re-arranges and modifies; where Goldsmith re-medialises, Levé *détourns*; where a silent Goldsmith lets his material do the talking, Levé passes judgment on a media-created world focused on duplicity and destruction.

Limits of Auto-, Limits of Author: *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*

Levé applies the writing procedures of *Newspaper* to his self-portraiture, *Autoportrait*. He refuses any explicit self-expression, as if immersed in his own personal information flux. He turns his biographical data, actions, memories, and feelings into a flow of information and objectifies them by sticking to the use of the first-person pronoun as the whole ensemble of information is *his own*. The published edition of *Autoportrait* offers a typographical figuration of this flow: it comprises 1400 sentences based on first-person verbal phrases, without any paragraph, subparagraph, without any particular identification of any single line or word. Consider its opening and its closure:

When I was young, I thought *Life A User's Manual* would teach me how to live and *Suicide A User's Manual* how to die. I have spent three years and three months abroad. I prefer to look to my left. I have a friend who gets off on betrayal. The end of a trip leaves me with a sad aftertaste, the same as the end of a novel. I forget things I don't like. I may have spoken, without knowing it, to someone who killed someone. [...]

I don't know why I write. I prefer a ruin to a monument. I am calm during reunions. I have nothing against New Year's Eve. Fifteen years old is the middle of my life, regardless of when I die. I believe there is an afterlife, but not an afterdeath. I do not ask "do you love me." Only once can I say "I'm dying" without telling a lie. The best day of my life may already be behind me.³⁹

³⁸ Levé, *Newspaper* 90.

³⁹ Levé, *Autoportrait* 5, 104.

Because the mimicry of the public information flow is applied to an individual's sense of privacy, it aligns the universal and the singular and invites to return to the personal 'real.' This allegiance has its semantic and stylistic translation featuring an often-used duality: affirmation and negation are here associated. The former evokes Levé's actions, decisions, feelings, etc.; the latter quotes arbitrarily another kind of facts not Levé's own, frequently referring to social abstractions; it is to be read as the counterpart to Levé's identifications which it circumscribes and implicitly universalises. The title *Autoportrait* is paradoxical. Although self-portraits as genre are paintings, *Autoportrait* is neither a painting, nor its metaphor. *Autoportrait* as a self-portrait is as invisible as the flux of personal and impersonal information due to its extension, overload and continuity.

Again, such conceptual foregrounding of an 'I' may invite a parallel with Goldsmith's *Fidget* and/or *Soliloquy*, both famous records of 'his own' bodily and verbal activities, pretending – and actually unmasking the pretension inherent in – any endeavour to "tell it all." But unlike Goldsmith, who is after a Warholian "mechanical realism" and Joycean "encyclopaedism," Levé's undertaking deals with the supplemental nature of the universal and the particular in a linguistic rendering of any personality. Every one of his 1400 sentences in *Autoportrait* is about himself, i.e., a personal statement regarding a singularity, but at the same time their status as signs of the singular hinges on their general, impersonal character. If Goldsmith can be said have performed and thus to 'own' each and every bodily movement in *Fidget* and statement recorded in *Soliloquy*, then Levé's *Autoportrait* works against this self-obsession by reminding us, if reminders are needed, that all signatures necessarily end up being both our own and markedly alien to us.

Finally – famously submitted to P.O.L. ten days before he committed his own – Levé's *Suicide* deals with a friend's suicide, i.e., a manifest, definable and singular act and a mystery, according to Levé's word. *Suicide* returns to the questioning of the power of words and abstractions, which aim to restore both the information load – all that can be said about the man who killed himself – and the flow of accumulated time, the time of a whole life and its broadest extensions: how to release this flow and make time happen? A long poem, a self-portrait, presented as written by the unnamed man who killed himself, closes *Suicide*. As a sample quotation shows, "To please pleases me / To displease displeases me / To be indifferent is indifferent to me,"⁴⁰ each line is a quasi-abstraction and a concrete self-characterisation, going against expression. *Suicide* tries to build the time of a

⁴⁰ Levé, *Suicide* 103.

whole life, that is, to make Levé's thoughts and abstractions about this man concomitant with the series of his own life's moments.

As in *Autoportrait*, some of the comments voiced in *Suicide* invite a biographical reading, as when he raises the issue of in/coherence:

Only the living seem incoherent. Death closes the series of events that constitutes their lives. So we resign ourselves to finding a meaning for them. To refuse them this would amount to accepting that a life, and thus life itself, is absurd. Yours had not yet attained the coherence of things done. Your death gave it this coherence.⁴¹

Or when he posits the dramatic 'effect' of this 'inverted biography': "Your suicide has become the foundational act... Your final second changed your life in the eyes of others. You are like the actor who, at the end of the play, with a final word, reveals that he is a different character than the one he appeared to be playing."⁴² Here is Levé's translator Jan Steyn overselling *Suicide*'s effects:

Suicide seems to suggest that neither *Amérique*, in its full material embodiment, nor the 532 other oeuvres, still in their embryonic conceptual form, were truly fixed before October 15, 2007. Levé's death retroactively changed the significance of all of his works. As Sartre famously argued, an oeuvre, with the death of its author, gains a certain coherence.⁴³

However, just because Levé's *Suicide* found its real-life 'counterpart,' one should not unquestioningly embrace such regressive reading of Levé's works as posited by Steyn. The ultimate 'conceptual' moment in Levé's 'oeuvre' resists any such attempt at imaginary completion. Neither *Œuvres* nor *Amérique* are to be completed: they are complete works, published by Levé. His 2007 suicide does not change the written or visual status of either book. To have a retrospective view of these works because of Levé's suicide does not change what they are. Even if Levé's works display a certain degree of 'death drive,' they are to be interpreted first within his practice of conceptual writing and the many of its 'obsessions' with exhaustiveness/exhaustion.

The implied post-conceptual poetics of Levé's *Works* finds its development in *Newspaper* and the application of one of its basic principles, "against expression,"

⁴¹ Levé, *Suicide* 21.

⁴² Levé, *Suicide* 30.

⁴³ Jan Steyn, "Afterword," *Suicide* 109.

in two works, *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*, which focus on subjectivities. This constitutes one more paradox in Levé's literary production, which is made possible by the extension of *Newspaper's* mimesis of the media – an explicit part of the conceptual and post-conceptual projects – and their flow of information into 'personal' works. Levé's evolution from Conceptualism to Post-Conceptualism entails a move from an abundance of imagined conceptual originalities, which cannot be accounted for even by abstractions (*Works* and its "projects" as abstract conceptions), to his manipulation with the information flow, which leads to a kind of abstraction because of its overabundance (*Newspaper*). *Autoportrait* allies originality (the singularities of the author) and unoriginality (the flow of social discourses and their abstractions) and invites a levelling of both. *Suicide* goes beyond self-expression in concerning itself throughout with an addressee: a friend who committed suicide, whom Levé addresses as "tu." Levé narrates his friend's life to his deceased friend; paradoxically, in some way, as writer, he impersonates, embodies his friend's life. By addressing the Other (*tu*), Levé becomes invested with the deceased's life, but that is quite probably the limit that the link between *Suicide* and Levé's own last stand should not exceed.

Conclusion: Unmasking Conceptualist Mystification

In conclusion, reference should be made to Louis Armand's article on Christian Bök and his *Xenotext*, which is read – via a reference to Jacques Rancière – as an "autocritique of a 'conceptualism' that mystifies itself as means of art to construct a 'system of [...] internally coherent signs', in which a residual Humanism persists in its attempts to produce the real."⁴⁴ Armand sees the limits of conceptual writing in its possible mystification that cannot be dissociated from the importance assigned to the "concept": a kind of semantic and cognitive system in itself, an abstraction always ready to apply itself universally, and the direct or indirect means of many kind of constructions.

In principle, conceptual writing restricts the uses of concepts because conceptual works should be only singular exemplifications or concretisations of concepts. This singularity should prevent these works from delineating a system. Levé's *Works* shows that, conceptual works being innumerable, this reduction of the uses of concepts does not necessarily thwart construing or imagining a system of conceptual works. The possible mystification starts at this point. In *Works*, many conceptual projects are imagined and are finally identified to a plural work

⁴⁴ Louis Armand, "The Conceptualist Ends of Writing and the End of Conceptualism," *CounterText* 6.1 (2020): 76.

(*Works*), characterised as a kind of system (numbering of the "projects," memory of their sum, index of aesthetic and poetic notions) and the exemplification of the human power to create. Levé's texts following *Works* can be seen as performing a deconstruction of this mystification by using concepts which exemplify contexts while being limited by them (the overload of information in *Newspaper* and of auto/biographical facts in *Autoportrait* and *Suicide*) with the exclusion of expression: *Autoportrait* objectifies the 'I' of Levé's and does not present any formal confession – it is, we should repeat, an impossible or invisible self-portrait – and *Suicide* attempts the 'externalisation' of the deceased friend's thoughts, in other words, the conjectural context of the suicide.

The first sections of this article highlight the contextual importance: their verbal materialisations are essential components of conceptual works and preclude any systematisation or mystification in their use of concepts. Goldsmith, Place and Bök do attempt to confront the immensity of their work's contexts. Remarkably, Levé refuses this confrontation as shown in his *Newspaper*, and turns to the limited contexts of subjectivities (*Autoportrait*, *Suicide*), which eschew systematic writing and privilege contingencies. The parallels and contrasts between Levé and these conceptual writers enable another final characterisation of their works. A single literary work can face and handle what surpasses it – the media flow, the extensions of the internet, the continuous sequences of any single life, the broad public implications of any discourse even if merely reiterated (cf. Place's *Gone with the Wind* on Twitter), etc. Conceptual writing is to be viewed as invested in the "subliminal magic" in the writing of our time: its abstractions enable writers to designate the "infinite regression" as experienced in our reading the *New York Times*, browsing the internet, and repeating/simulating/ appropriating any and all discourses that are our immersion. Conceptualism attempts neither to unmask the power of this sublime nor to designate it explicitly, contending itself with letting the sublime infinity of the (social) media, the internet, the social and literary discourses, etc., "speak." This type of sublime infinity is the subtext of Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* and Genette's *Paratexts*, and its power is the ultimate target of the sort of unmasking attempted in the "work" of Levé's Post-Conceptualism.