

How To Reinvent The Station When The Station Won't Stay Put: L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Poetry's Strategies of Resistance

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This paper is called How To Reinvent The Station When The Station Won't Stay Put and it deals with the group of mainly American writers known as the Language poets. The title refers to a line from a poem by one of the language poets, Barrett Watten and, in fine literary fashion, I use that line as an epigram for the paper. The line is: "The train ceaselessly reinvents the station." Most critics discuss this line in a simple linguistic way, substituting *parole* for train and *langue* for station. As a backdrop for this paper, I'd like to suggest an expanded and indeterminate reading of the line in which train could be the speaker and station could be speech; or the train could be words and the station could be the speaker; or the train could be the individual and the station could be culture; or the train could be an opinion and the station could be the consensus.

I'll try to give you a sense of the organization of the paper, so you'll have a better sense of where we are at any given moment and of how far we are from the end. The paper has five parts. In the first I make an effort to introduce the Language poets and to locate them in their sociohistorical milieu within

twentieth century American poetry and within larger trends in literature and poetics. Part two concerns the Language poets' diagnosis of the disease of the particular variety of capitalism of their moment – roughly from the end of the Nixon presidency to the middle of the Reagan presidency. The third section deals with the cures the Language poets suggested for this capitalistic disease. In part four some problems with the program of Language poetry are discussed. And the fifth and final section engages a reading of Language poetry as a minor literature in the Deleuzian sense. This engagement necessitates some retrofitting of both the Language poets' self-defined project and of Deleuze and Guattari's definition of minor literature as proposed in their book on Kafka.

Okay, avanti.

Part One: Introducing the Language Poets

To introduce the Language poets – a group of young poets clustered on the North Eastern and North Western coasts of the United States from the mid-1970s to the mid-1980s – I'd like to start with a short piece of a short poem by Frank O'Hara, who was not a language poet, by the way, and, mercifully, perhaps – for them or for him or for us, didn't live to witness their arrival. It is called "Why I Am Not A Painter" and it begins like this:

I am not a painter, I am a poet.
Why? I think I would rather be
a painter, but I am not.

He then goes on to illustrate, but not to explain, why he is not a painter, but a poet.

Same goes for me and philosophy. I will spend the next 45 minutes illustrating why. And, just so there's no confusion, and, I suppose, by way of

defense, I would like to point out that later in the same poem, O'Hara says:
"It is even in / prose, I am a real poet."

The best thing I can say about Frank O'Hara is that he was not hypothetical. O'Hara's poems could only exist as facts, not as possibilities. The Language poets' poems, on the other hand, constitute nothing more than possibilities and flutter away or disintegrate when a hand or a net...well, let's be straight and call it what it is: a sensibility stretches out to enfold them.

This is not the same type of fluttering or disintegrating that a poem like O'Hara's might do. O'Hara's poem stymies the encapsulation of paraphrase. That's why I call his poems facts rather than hypotheses. In a Saussurian mode one might think of them as signifieds and think of any attempted paraphrase as an arbitrary signifier. Language poetry, contrarian by nature, accepts paraphrase gladly; seems to activate in the petri dish of explanatory airs. The facticity of Language poems, though, is a tough nut to crack. Returning to a Saussurian mode, a Language poem often functions as a signifier of the signifying activity itself. I warned you it was intransigent.

Let me go at it another way. Here's a small piece of a book-length poem called *Ketjak* by Language poet, Ron Silliman:

Those curtains which I like above the kitchen sink. Imagined lives we
posit in the bungalows, passing, counting, with another part of the mind,
the phone poles. Stood there broke and rapidly becoming hungry, staring
at the nickels and pennies in the bottom of the fountain. Dear Quine,
sentences are not synonymous when they mean the same proposition.
How the heel rises and ankle bends to carry the body from one stair to the
next. This page is slower.

As Bob Perelman, another Language poet – they were a close-knit bunch –
writes of this fragment: "It is arbitrary, driving a wedge between any

expressive identity of form and content.” In this, according to Perelman, Silliman is going “directly against the grain of the poetics of ‘Projective Verse,’ where Olson gives primary place to Creeley’s statement ‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.’ In Silliman’s case, form is clearly primary.” I’m not so sure about that. It seems to me that Silliman’s fragment foregrounds two things not normally included in the content/form debate, that is: process and mechanics. And this is what I mean by functioning as a signifier of the signifying activity itself. Silliman’s fragment is not primarily about its content (though that’s not to say it doesn’t have any), nor is it primarily about its form (which it also has), but that it is primarily about – in the sense of attracting the attention of a reading toward – the process of signifying and connoting within its various fields of activity (literature, language, poetry, even philosophy) and it is about the mechanisms which facilitate these signifying and connoting processes. Roman Jakobson indicates one aspect of what this aboutness can be about when he writes: “The reader of a poem or the viewer of a painting has a vivid awareness of two orders: the traditional canon and the artistic novelty as a deviation from a canon. It is precisely against the background of the tradition that innovation is conceived” (46). In the case of Silliman’s poem *Ketjak*, the emphasis is on what Silliman himself dubbed “The New Sentence,” a notion we will return to shortly. For the moment, though let’s rewind the ball of my yarn.

I’ll try to catch us up very quickly on three things taken for granted thus far: 1) the Language poets – to paraphrase Spinal Tap, who they were and what they were doing; 2) Frank O’Hara, who was not a language poet; and 3) Projective verse and Charles Olson and Robert Creeley. I’ll start at Projective verse and work my way back (or chronologically forward) to the Language poets

Projective Verse was a poetics – that is, a theory of poetic practice – inaugurated, preached and practiced by Charles Olson beginning in the early 1950s. Olson’s most well-known acolytes were Denise Levertov, Robert Duncan, and Robert Creeley. These poets, associated with Black Mountain College in North Carolina, adopted Olson’s poetics in which one image or phrase generates the next. As a result, we have Creeley’s often repeated dictum: ‘FORM IS NEVER MORE THAN AN EXTENSION OF CONTENT.’ Projective verse is process-oriented, process-generated writing. One famous Olson poem/manifesto announces ‘one perception must must must MOVE, INSTANTER, ON ANOTHER!’ The Language poets appreciated that the Black Mountain poets made no distinction between theory and practice and adopted this non-distinction, this merging of premise and praxis as their own.

Frank O’Hara who was not a Language poet was part of the New York School, a loose affiliation (as these things tend to be) of poets and writers working in New York City in the late-fifties through the mid-sixties. Other names frequently mentioned in association with the New York School would be: Kenneth Koch, Leroi Jones (who later changed his name to Amiri Baraka), and most prominently, John Ashbery. The New York poets can comfortably be thought of as the chronological precedent for the Language Poets. Unlike the Beats (whom I assume require no introduction), the New York poets were, as their name would imply, a stationary lot, working and living in the vigorous art and literature scenes of mid-century Manhattan. O’Hara was a curator at the Museum of Modern Art and a frequent contributor to art journals. The New York poets were clearly intellectuals. They did not, like the Beats, consider themselves men of action (or at least motion). But both the Beats and the New York poets distinguished themselves from the highly academic Black Mountain poets. The New York poets, immersed in the heady moment of abstract expressionism and engaged with French literature ranging from: Barthes, Tel Quel, and the Nouveau

Romain, to Mallarme, Roussell, and Lautremont, adopted a poetics which combined common and heightened varieties of language in often disjunctive or abstracted ways.

But I don't want to spend too much time outlining the poetries and poetics to which Language poetry reacted. So let's move on to the Language poets themselves. What became known as Language poetry or, more generally as Language writing, began to coalesce in the early 1970s in two cities: New York and San Francisco. The names associated with the movement are: Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews, editors of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, the magazine which gave the movement its name; Lynn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, editors of *Poetics Journal*; Ron Silliman, and Bob Perelman. A slew of other writers were more or less committed to and involved with the Language project, publishing in journals like *Hills*, *This*, and *Sulfur*. By the late 1980s, Language poetry as a movement with a consistent, interacting membership and regular publications had ceased to be. Many of the writers continue to write, often from within the confines of an academy which once spurned them and which once struck them as confining.

So, what made Language writing Language writing. Why does it deserve this capital L and 45 minutes of your time? On an historical level, we can think of the Language poets as the next link in a chain of American poetry that started with Whitman, continued through Ezra Pound and the Objectivists, branched left to William Carlos Williams and right to T.S. Eliot, rejoined a formal, Poundian project with Olson and Projective verse, bohemianized and mobilized with the Beats, and joined a cohering American avant-garde with the New York school. There's some cozy historicizing for you. But the Language poets' provocation – and it was a provocation, practically a scandal at the time – was not historical, but formal. To start to get a grip on their poetics, I'll co-opt Michael Davidson's capsule description:

The response of language poetry to expressivism [Black Mountain, New York, and Beat poetry] has taken several forms, most notably a deliberate flattening of tonal register and extensive use of non-sequitur. Experimentation in new forms of prose, collaboration, proceduralism, and collage have diminished the role of the lyric subject in favor of a relatively neutral voice (or multiple voices). Language poets have endorsed Victor Shklovsky's notion of *ostranenie* or 'making strange' by which the instrumental function of language is diminished and the objective character of words foregrounded...far from representing a return to an impersonal formalism, language poetry regards its defamiliarizing strategies as a critique of the social basis of meaning, i.e. the degree to which signs are contextualized by use...By thwarting traditional reading and interpretive habits, the poet encourages the reader to regard language not simply as a vehicle for preexistent meanings but as a system with its own rules and operations. However, since that system exists in service to ideological interests of the dominant culture, any deformation forces attention onto the material basis of meaning production within that culture. Michael Davidson (quoted in *Poems For The Millenium*, vol. 2 , Introduction to 'Some "Language" Poets'. p. 662 –663)

While I accept this as a concise explanation of the Language poets' modes and motivations, I want to focus on the phrase "any deformation forces attention onto the material basis of meaning production within" and, in particular, on the word "any". I think, in many ways, the entire program of the language poets turns on one's acceptance or rejection of – the veracity of – this little word "any". I'll return to this idea when I discuss some problems with the Language project at the end of this paper.

Nevertheless, Davidson does identify Language poetry's two primary and intertwined regions of concern: those being, ideological resistance and linguistic defamiliarization. Firstly, the Language poets sought to resist the prevailing ideology of Nixon to Reagan America. This ideology, built on and supported by a foundation of free market capitalism as a liberating force, saturated all aspects of American life. Language as the primary vehicle of

ideology could not be accepted as currently constituted and had to be challenged and called into question. Just as there is no being outside of language, there is no language outside of ideology. In short there is no outside. Resistance must take place from within. As Andrew Ross points out in his essay, “The New Sentence and the Commodity Form” ““Rather than eschew the world for a better idea of it, the aim of much of language writing, in agreement with Shklovsky’s proposition, would be to return us to the world in different ways, through a series of cognitive-perceptual shocks.” (Ross, “The New Sentence and the Commodity Form”)

Viktor Shklovsky was a Russian formalist critic, associated with Roman Jakobson, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Velimir Khlebnikov, Aleksei Kruchenykh, the Russian Futurists and the Zaum poets.

In his ‘formalist’ interpretation, the core activity of the *Futurist* is one of estrangement (*ostranenie*), one which “wrests the concept from the conceptual set in which it stood and transfers it, with the help of a word or a trope, to another conceptual set.’

Ron Silliman, who among the Language poets, proved to be the most polemical of its many theorists, spoke to the political and ideological exigencies of their poetics: “Much, perhaps too much has been made of the critique of reference and normative syntax inherent in the work of many of [these] writers, without acknowledging the degree to which this critique is itself situated within the larger question of what, in the last part of the twentieth century, it means to be human.” –Ron Silliman (quoted in *Poems For The Millenium*, vol. 2 , Introduction to ‘Some “Language” Poets’. p. 662 – 663)

Language poetry was always a poetry of resistance. As a movement which more or less came of age, or, at least, came to the attention of the literary and

academic establishments, right at the dawn of the Reagan era, Language poetry did not have a specific seminal event to which it could or should respond: no war, no economic crisis, no criminal investigation of the White House. All these events were of the recent past. What the Reagan administration came to represent was a stabilization of American domestic life, foreign policy, and economy, all facilitated by a renewed faith in the great democratic virtues of the free market. There were substantial material ramifications to the Reagan doctrine (industrial deregulation, the AIDS epidemic, and trickle down economics, among them), but what the Language poets reacted to were the ideological assumptions which underpinned policy and, increasingly, came to formulate the conventional and acceptable answer to Ron Silliman's question about what it meant to be human. What the Language poets resented above all about capitalism wasn't capitalized ownership of the means of production, it was the rampant infection of all forms of choice, communication and communion by selling's meaning and m.o.

The challenge they took on was enormous, unwieldy, Utopian. As Andrew Ross puts it: "In an age in which the established roles of an avant-garde no longer exist, or have been stripped of all progressive meanings (an age in which the countercultural gestures have all been played out, and the traditional refuge of 'poetic license' or 'art for art's sake' is no longer politically desirable), how does the old necessity of producing some kind of oppositional response *come into conflict with* the new necessity of recognizing or coming to terms with a massive commodification of experience governed by a rationality that increasingly insists that all culture now is mass, or popular, culture?" (Andrew Ross, "The New Sentence and the Commodity Form")

Part Two: Capitalism, the Disease

To facilitate a route of ingress into a discussion of Language poetry and Reagan-era capitalism, let's begin, for the sake of argument, by accepting, conditionally, Colin MacCabe's definition of Modernism and Frederic Jameson's definition of the 3 stages of capitalism. MacCabe refers to Modernism as *the period during which art had to contend with the influence, manipulation and competition of a mass media*. Jameson refers to the 3 spaces or stages of capitalism: 1) market capital, 2) monopoly capital (or what Lenin called the "stage of imperialism") and 3) the moment of the multinational network (or what Mandel calls "late capitalism"). Nick's paper dealt with the period of transition from Jameson's first phase to the second. Mine deals with the period of transition from the second to the third. As a first notion of why Nick and I are sharing today's session, I might suggest that we are both dealing with the volatile and uncertain ideologies of capitalism's transitions.

It would appear that MacCabe's Modernism corresponds neatly with Jameson's second phase of capitalism. If Modernism is the period of art's engaging the forces of the mass media in battle, then Postmodernism could conceivably be thought of as the moment of the arts' collective capitulation or at least their defeat, evidenced by what Jameson calls the "relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty spaces." As someone who has worked in retail, I can vouch for the fact that there's nothing capitalism hates more than an empty space. In retail – the trenches of capitalism's battles – we could easily replace the axiom "time is money" (which actually means empty time is lost money – opportunity cost as the economists say) with the new formulation "space is money", meaning empty space is lost money.

If we're inclined to believe Guy Debord, the idea of Capitalism fighting to conquer all empty spaces brings poetry back into the picture. In *All The King's Men*, Debord writes: "Poetry is becoming more and more clearly the

empty space, the anitmatter, of consumer society, since it is not consummable (in terms of the modern criteria for a consumable object: an object that is of equivalent value for each of a mass of isolated passive consumers).” So poetry eludes the clutches of exchange value, the encroachment which Jameson describes as “...the slow colonization of use value by exchange value.” Now Debord is certainly no subtle or detail-oriented critic of capitalism, but what may have looked, at one time, like a comically broad caricature, has begun to look more like photorealism. In popular culture – which by now includes Damien Hirst, Adorno’s beloved Schoenberg, and Noam Chomsky – the process has become self-fulfilling. The culture requires certain spaces on the Bourdieuean game board to be filled and hordes of, more or less, willing aspirants are anointed to fill them. But the cord which tethers the figure to his or her social role (if it ever existed in the first place) is often (if not always) severed. As Jameson puts it, “...in the process of becoming an image and a spectacle, the referent seems to have disappeared, as so many people from Debord to Baudrillard always warned us it would.” (Jameson, *Cognitive Mapping*)

As an example, one would need to think no further than the image of Che Guevara printed on racks full of t-shirts in Camden market, or worse yet, the mind-boglingly perverse fact of the swanky restaurant/bar in the ground floor of the Economist Magazine headquarters, called “Che” and decorated with Guevara’s image and a tasteful yet provocative motif of red stars on a khaki green background. Perhaps the Wall Street Journal should consider opening a bar called Guy Debord’s in their New York headquarters.

In this capacity, capitalism begins to resemble and function like a religion. All its gestures and acceptances being little more than acts of faith. Jameson points out that “It has been affirmed that, with one signal exception (capitalism itself, which is organized around an economic mechanism), there

has never existed a cohesive form of human society that was not based on some form of transcendence or religion.” (Jameson, “Cognitive Mapping”) But is it true that capitalism is bereft of a form of transcendence? I think not. Capitalism’s promised transcendence is a material transcendence or, more accurately, a transcendence *of* material. People who engage capitalism fully, worry about money with the intention of someday not worrying about money. This is capitalism’s messianism.

Capitalism is a particularly flimsy, yet flexible belief system. Its promises, its teleology are not metaphysical and, therefore, don’t ask the faithful to consider anything outside the one rule of its game. The capitalist need not inquire as to how one gets to heaven. In capitalism, having money (so as not to worry about it) is heaven (the telos of its teleology) and the way to get to having money is by making money.

Of course, many of capitalism’s underlying mechanical assumptions are eminently challengeable. If poked in just the right places, accepted concepts and mechanisms such as scarcity, demand, and the invisible hand deflate like speculative balloons. Economists do so much bracketing out that their models often exclude such inconveniences as people, nature and the law. Certain lazy dichotomies deserve to be called into question, emanating as they do, from the same misguided, blunt, unquestioning kind of thinking. For instance, the binary model of use value vs. exchange value – are there no other forms of value? From what source does an amulet derive its value? What is the source of value of a broken, heirloom pocket watch or a kitsch Niagara Falls ashtray? Is the worker/management opposition still as clear today as it was in the 1850s? Even the most basic relationship of capitalism, that of producer to consumer has been blurred. But we still take these truths to be self-evident. Not so long ago, we accepted John Stuart Mill and Jeremy Bentham’s utilitarianism.

Sorry, that's a lot of crappy armchair economics to throw haphazardly onto the table. But, remember, I'm a poet. I'm just trying to paint a picture.

As a system built on faith, capitalism must invest its symbols with consistent meanings and find ways to co-opt renegade signs for its purposes. It is this meaning-making and co-optation that mattered most to the Language poets. And although they made reference to philosophers including Marx, Hegel, Althusser, Derrida, Benjamin and others, the philosopher their own critiques always most resembled, in tone and content, is Baudrillard.

In a review of Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production*, Charles Bernstein, the most philosophical and prolific of the Language poets, wrote: "Baudrillard calls into question the Marxian projection of the primacy of labor as value, which creates a valorization of production as the 'meaning' of human being." And, later, "A change in the control of production that does not call the value of production itself into question is of no benefit since the real tyranny or 'terrorism', is the concept of Product as Value. *Revolt*, in contrast, is always in the present and consists of what Baudrillard calls 'symbolic', i.e., non-instrumental, non-finalized exchanges." But Charles Bernstein's investment is not in revolt in general, but in revolt via language, thus he critiques Baudrillard's use of conventional modes of discourse to make his argument: "Baudrillard's style of writing can be critiqued on the same grounds as his attack on Marx for not breaking with 'rational discursiveness' and the 'logic of representation – of the duplication of its object' (Baudrillard, 50)."

Bernstein, engaging in a bit of ad hoc deconstruction, hoists Baudrillard with his own petard. He seems to believe that a revolution that doesn't drag language along with it or which isn't dragged into being *by* language isn't worth having, because for Bernstein at his most dogmatic, there cannot be a revolution of ideology without a revolution of language; language being the

phenotypic manifestation of ideology's genes. In the end, Bernstein grants some use value to Baudrillard's book, calling it, quaintly, "along with the new Situationist anthology, the quintessential theoretical document of the best of the spirit of Paris '68."

Charles Bernstein "In the Stadium of Explanation" in *Content's Dream: Essays 1975 – 1984*. L.A.: Sun and Moon Press, 1986. (review of Baudrillard's *The Mirror of Production* p. 196 – 198)

Andrew Ross, writing about the Language poets, also draws comparison't to Baudrillard: "...it is not just the commodity object itself but the whole system of objects, or its *meaning*, that is consumed at every turn. Baudrillard therefore extends Marx's critique of political economy to a critique of the economy of signification, which semiotics has provided as an analytic code for explaining all systems, and finds the same logic of exploitation and domination at work there. To put it crudely, signifier and signified correspond to exchange value and use value." (Andrew Ross, "The New Sentence and the Commodity Form")

If we were to pursue this semiotic line of questioning all the way to connotation and denotation, we might find ourselves closer to a basis for other forms of value: nostalgia, love, the heirloom, etc. These values don't partake of use and exchange. They are not points on either of these continuums. Perhaps certain types of value fall on the same continuum as a parent's love for a child. This continuum does not go by the name of use or exchange. What is this continuum called?

In 1986, when I was enrolled in a Bachelor of Fine Arts program in creative writing at Emerson College in Boston, I took a seminar taught by Bill Knott, who, in the 60s and early 70s, had been a fairly well-known experimental poet, loosely connected with the William Burroughs end of the Beats. By

1985, though Knott's star had sunk pretty low and was threatening to dip below the horizon. Even lowly Emerson College wasn't sure they wanted him around. On the first day of his seminar, Knott declared that there would be only one textbook for the class. He held it aloft in his right hand: a substantial volume entitled, *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets*. He passed the book around for examination. I read the back cover which bluntly proclaimed that most of the included poets fit a profile: they were, by and large, male, white, between 30 and 45, employed in academia or publishing. None of the Language poets were included (they were too experimental, working outside the academy, only publishing in their own boutiquey journals). The New York poets, the Beats, the Black Mountain poets were all excluded for being too old. *The Morrow Anthology of Younger American Poets* represented the next wave of well-heeled, professional poets; these were Reaganite poets, making poems for well-heeled, professional journals like the New Yorker, Harper's, the Atlantic Monthly and Playboy. I asked Bill Knott why we were using this book; why we wouldn't be looking at the work of poets outside the mainstream. Bill Knott's frustration was not buried deep below the surface, it only took this one little dig to release it into the open air. With a spit-riddled venom, he proclaimed, "Because these are the poets who sell! If you don't want to sell your poems, don't read this book and get out of this class."

The pervasiveness of the ideology that worried and motivated the Language poets had reached the last empty space: poetry. And Bill Knott, clinging to the fraying tether still barely connecting him to the art to which he'd dedicated his life, could not contain his humiliation and anger. Apparently, he had reconciled himself to playing their game, but he couldn't muster the energy to pretend he liked it. It was a chilling moment.

The backlash against the Language poets started before there was much of a forward lash. In an article from 1979 entitled "Language and Narcissism," *Poetry Flash* contributing editor Alan Soldofsky wrote, "the flight from emotional feeling is both characteristic of the language poets and our age. These writers are consciously refusing to make literature that performs the intuitive and emotional work poetry has done in the past. Though they insist on the linguistic and intellectual importance of their writing, semiotics lies outside the concern of primary poetry tradition." The establishment, such as it was in such an un-establishment pursuit as poetry, perceived the Language poets' encroachment as a threat to their stronghold on the dominant aesthetic. To the Language poets, this aesthetic was nothing more than a parroting of the dominant ideology of the burgeoning era of late capitalism. Americans were buying into the suped-up version of the American dream promised by the unrestricted market. The prevailing ideology promoted capitalism's messianism, preferring to live in a dream and a promise of an always-imminent future, ignoring the material reality of the present. Ideology, as Althusser famously put it, is 'the Imaginary representation of the subject's relationship to his or her Real conditions of existence.'"

Part Three: Language Poetry's Suggested Treatment

Language poetry's poobah, Charles Bernstein, summed up the Language project's goal in its most fundamental form: "Since the U.S. is the dominant English language (as well as Western) nation in the political, economic and mass-cultural spheres, its monopolizing powers need to be cracked – from the inside and outside..." This seems to be contradicted by the statements of some Language poets and Language-sympathetic critics, such as Andrew Ross, "Clearly, it is this metaphor of inside/outside that has had to be rethought, for there is no more of a position 'outside' ideology and commodification than there is a place 'outside' language." There is a distinction to be made here. While Bernstein is not suggesting one can live

outside of ideology, he is recognizing that one can, for the time being at least, live outside of the dominant ideology. That is, there are still cultures, scattered around the globe where a thorough adoption of Rationally-informed, democratic, American-styled, free market capitalism has not yet achieved the status of an inescapable ideology. Bernstein, living and working in the United States, fully inculcated, recognizes that his critique, his “cracking,” as he put it, must be done from the inside. This would imply that Language poetry, working from the inside, is a uniquely American form and practice. Although, by now, I imagine there are Canadians, Britons, perhaps even Germans, Italians, and soon Iraqis, who will be entitled to become Language writers and to work from inside the dominant ideology. Welcome, my friends, to the so-called, “community of nations.”

Bernstein expressed his concern regarding the ideological standardization of America in an essay called “Poetics of the Americas,” written in 1996: “Tony Cowley, in *Standard English and the Politics of Language*, points to two senses of ‘standard’. A standard is a rallying point for the forward movement of an ideology or group, by means of which a unity is invoked, as for example a flag in battle. But a standard is also an objective unit of measure and regulator of uniformity, and as such a product of normalization and averaging. Standard American English involves both these senses: it is a sociohistorical construction, embedding class, ethnic, and racial preferences, that serves to build national unity; and it is also a regulator of language practices, serving to curb deviance. Under the aegis of standardization, problems of social coherence are displaced onto questions of linguistic correctness.” (from Bernstein’s “Poetics of the Americas”)

Bernstein named the journal of poetics which he co-edited with Bruce Andrews L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E. The title announces the intentions and strategies through which the Language poets would attempt to resist the

influence of the dominant ideology. Their intention was to unmoor language from its typical connection to the dominant codes. This involved a formal disorientation of or reorientation to some of the ideas and techniques initiated by the formalists in the early decades of the 20th century. This involved a skeptical employment of language which insisted on engaging language and words as material objects. Roman Jakobson wrote, "Poeticity is present when the word is felt as word, and not a mere representation of the object being named or an outburst of emotion, when words and their composition, their meaning, their external and inner form, acquire a weight and value of their own instead of referring indifferently to reality" (Jakobson, "The Poetry of Grammar, the Grammar of Poetry," 378). The Language poets saw their methods as a new relation to the notion of realism. Their's was a realism that refused to take the reality of capitalism on faith, to agree to the assertion of things as they are, ideology as it was currently comprised. Instead they proposed the materiality of language, its referential quality loosened from certainty to mere potential. This kind of realism represented a belief in the material level of language's presence and a deep skepticism about how its connections are formed to objects and ideas. As Andrew Ross put it (in 1988): "...the realism of writers today is that they can engage this sense of form on its own terms, in order to expose the universality of its codes. Realism, in this sense, is not at odds with a conception of formalism but rather with other, 'unrealistic' attempts to construct a subversive space completely outside commodity formalism." (Ross, "The New Sentence and the Commodity Form")

The name of Bernstein and Andrews' journal brings this materiality to the forefront of the reading and writing experience. As Bob Perelman puts it: "L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E...presents a...problem, as anyone who has ever had to type it more than once will understand. The labor of materially producing writing: uppercase L, lowercase equals, uppercase A, lowercase equals,

uppercase N, and so on. If the equal signs are focused on, then there seems to be a general functional equivalence, L equals A equals N – a letter is a letter. A Saussurian poetics, perhaps, where sign equals nothing more than its difference from every other sign.”(Perelman, *Marginalization of Poetry*) This focus on materiality allows unconventional relationships to come forward in the use of language. To start to get a feel for this, let’s look at Bruce Andrews’ poem “Confidence Trick.” In the packet I’ve distributed, I’ve included a few pages of what is a longer poem. For our purposes today, I’d like to focus on just the first three stanzas (or paragraphs if you prefer). As a way to start reading this poem, I scanned it very casually, looking for words which stood out and began to define a constellation of shared concern. In the first three stanzas, I picked out: the words *Belfast*, *Capetown* (this was written in the mid-80s), *anarchy*, *demographics*, *aesthetics*, *equality*, *abortion*, *Peacock throne*, *history*, *christianity*, and *I.R.A.* I’m engaging the materials of the poem, ignoring the paradigmatic plane (as Barthes, among others, has called it), the plane on which language moves sequentially, establishing the meanings of words, phrases, and sentences by their relationship to those which precede or follow them. I’m ignoring that. I get to the word *Ulcer* (with a capital U). And it seems odd. Why the capital U? My non-paradigmatic scan supplies some clues and suggests a feasible reading of *Ulcer* with a capital U: given the references to *Belfast* and *I.R.A.* and to *christianity*, *history*, *abortion*, *Peacock throne* and *anarchy*; given the mention of *Cape Town*, another site of bloody conflict over questions of who is in control, *Ulcer* with a capital U suggests *Ulster* with a capital U. It’s a defensible reading. But why? What is Andrews saying about Ulster, Northern Ireland, bloody conflicts over who is in control? It’s difficult and a bit misguided to try to say what a Language poem is about. Not because Language poems aren’t about something – actually one criticism of Language poems is that they’re all about the same thing – the problem is in what we mean when we say “about”. “Confidence Trick” isn’t about a story or a

journey from a to b. It's not about a scene and characters and action or a dilemma and a resolution. Nor is it about the depiction of a set of materials outside the poem: a city called Belfast, a procedure called abortion, etc. We can talk about what this poem is about by talking about the words themselves: about words called *Belfast* and *abortion*, about the assumptions that come with their use. In this context, *Ulcer* with a capital U draws our attention to its misplacement. What's an ulcer doing here and why with a capital U? The word rattles its cage. An analysis like this can start to get punny: the word tries to burn a hole in its encasement, disrupting, paining the body in which it lives. See what I mean? It can seem a bit offhanded. But that's part of the materiality of words too. They suggest each other, resonate with each other; they overflow their boundaries sometimes, leave stuff out, invite uninvited stuff in. This is language operating on what Barthes called the paradigmatic plane, where *parole* maintains a connection to *langue*, to its mechanical/material reality as a system of signs.. So is Ulcer with a capital U a reference to Ulster? Sure, why not? if it strikes you that way.

But the language poets did not aspire to arbitrariness. You can read in Andrews poem a clear intention, a consistent set of concerns, and a rational design. It just doesn't happen to be a design based on narrative or syntagmatic mechanics. The words in Andrews poem were not used as non-referential materials. The Language project was not about stripping writing of reference. For all the utopian-leanings of their politics, the Language poets, as poets, remained pragmatists, "...the idea that writing could be stripped of reference is as troubling and confusing a view as the assumption that the primary function of words is to refer, one-on-one, to an already constituted world of "things." (Bernstein and Andrews in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E)

One of the Language poets' techniques of estrangement, was the employment of *parataxis* or "the placing together of clauses or phrases one after another

without coordinating or subordinating connectives.” (Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary). Such parataxis was achieved most often and most successfully through the use of what Ron Silliman dubbed “The New Sentence.” It seems to me now, some fifteen years down the road, that the New Sentence was probably the most fully-realized and sustainable idea of the Language poets’ poetics. Silliman was hardly the only Language poet to employ the technique. And it was a much-discussed formal element in the critical debates of the day. Bob Perelman, writing in the nineties described the New Sentence this way: “A new sentence is more or less ordinary itself, but gains its effect by being placed next to another sentence to which it has tangential relevance: new sentences are not subordinated to a larger narrative frame nor are they thrown together at random. Parataxis is crucial: the autonomous meaning of a sentence is heightened, questioned, and changed by the degree of separation or connection that the reader perceives with regard to the surrounding sentences.” (Perelman, *Marginalization of Poetry*)

The New Sentence was not without precedent, but, in her exhaustive essay on the Language poets politics, poetics and community, Eleana Kim suggests that there is an equal measure of similarity and difference between the New Sentence and its precedents. Ultimately, she concludes, the New Sentence had to be viewed as a true literary innovation. The precedents which shed some light on the New Sentence include, most prominently, William Carlos Williams’ *Kora In Hell*, a long prose poem and Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. But, as Kim points out, “whereas Williams and Stein use the prose poem as a means of ‘cubist portraiture,’ the work of poets such as Carla Harryman, Bob Perelman, Barrett Watten, and Silliman himself are not concerned with capturing phenomenological perception in the way suggested by a ‘portrait,’ but with constructing linguistic spaces around the absences inherent in signification.” In other words, Williams and Stein, for all their

linguistic ingenuity and their own interest in a certain kind of estrangement, still see their writing as a depiction of a material reality or of object impressions. Aspiring poets in the 80s were bludgeoned with William's maxim: "No ideas, but in things." The Language poets, on the other hand, might have said, no things, but in words. The New Sentence wasn't about beating around the bush of some absent object; not an attempt at reconstruction or representation. The New Sentence was a thing unto itself, activated and made meaningful by and through its relation to other New Sentences. Without pushing this analogy too far, the New Sentence's ontology could be described as Heideggerian, a Being-with; a Being-in-the-linguistic-world.

Ron Silliman took great pains to theorize the New Sentence and to verify its necessity. He points out the neglect of the sentence as a meaningful lexical unit in Saussure's privileging of speech over writing. I'm borrowing a line of thought from Eleana Kim, who points out Silliman's use of the linguistics of Ferruccio Rossi-Landi, who hypothesized that higher orders of meaning, such as emotion can occur only in the syllogistic movement which takes place above the level of the sentence. As Kim puts it, "Silliman formulates the defining features of the New Sentence, a fundamental property of which is the control or limitation of syllogistic movement of the sentences composing a paragraph. Thus, the reconfiguration of the relationship between part and whole, or sentence:paragraph:complete work allows for these disjunct elements to engage in new, diverse contexts, revealing relationships between lexical units within the syntactic structure of the sentence, as well as illuminating other structures through its relationship to adjacent sentences."

As an example of how the New Sentence works, of how it feels, let's look at Barrett Watten's poem "Relays" included in the packet I've handed out (*"Language" Poetries* p. 138). Thanks to the way the poem is printed on the

page, you immediately get the sense of the sentences as independent structural elements. This arrangement is quite common in Language poems. The title, “Relays” also indicates something of how the New Sentence functions in a poem. As in a relay race, there is a passing of the poem’s baton from one runner/sentence to the next. Each one is on its own while it is in possession of the baton and once it has passed it off to the next sentence it is out of the race, but its efforts still contribute to the overall result. As each runner/sentence, in turn, receives the baton, its job is not to hang around and converse with the others, but simply taking hold of the thing and *booking*. (I don’t know if you say that here, but where I grew up, *booking* meant *legging it*; running like hell.) The Language poets were aware that their poems required a new way of reading – creating this new way was, of course, part of their agenda. So, we often find clues within the poems themselves about how the New Sentence works. In “Relays,” for instance, we confront the twelfth segment: “The sentence-producing mechanism cannot be permitted to operate unchecked.” Watten is clarifying what we’re reading as we read it. This is not automatic writing. The machine is being monitored, But by whom? Writer? Reader? Both? Later the poem says, “This sentence is art and science. Not more than 10% conscious, the body itself has parts.” We could read art as literature and science as linguistics – two primary concerns of the language movement. The notion of a body which is only 10% conscious and comprised of parts certainly sounds like language: an initial premise for the writing and reading of a Language poem; importantly of *this* Language poem. A bit later still, Watten puts a sentence – well, a sentence fragment really – in quotes: “Gardens full of vicious hybrids and paradoxical grafts.” Is this a bit of self-commentary on Language methodology? Perhaps it’s been lifted from a review. But it’s hard to tell if it might have been meant as a compliment or a criticism. A lot of things are hard to tell.

Part Four: Some problems with the Language project

Perhaps, by now, you've already developed some of your own problems with the Language project. Suffice it to say you wouldn't be the first. The critics, ranging from New Criticism holdovers to confessional poetry stalwarts to Marxists who disagreed with their methods, the Language poets have taken it repeatedly on their collective chin. I'm not interested in just "piling on," as they say in American football. What I am interested in is the issues that get stirred up from the bottom of the pot whenever the Language poets are discussed.

One of the most common, not to mention derisive, critiques levied against the Language poets, was that their radical linguistic notions were, themselves, derivative emblems of the quick-cut, short-attention span, sound-byte, culture of the MTV-conditioned heights of late capitalism. Eliot Weinberger, attacked the techniques of parataxis and the New Sentence for being products of "a generation raised in front of a television: an endless succession of depthless images and empty sounds, each canceling the previous one. A non-sequitur implies a loss of memory, an erasing of history. 'Language' poetry as it is practiced by its strictest followers is identical to the speech of television's masterpiece, Ronald Reagan." Another vocal critic, *Poetry Flash* contributing editor Alan Soldofsky, compared Language poetry to "the language used by spokespersons from the Nixon Administration during the Vietnam War and the Watergate Investigation, when they lapsed into evasive, de-personalized jargon, found new meanings for old words."

In 1996, the Language poet, Bob Perelman, wrote the following about what's happened to the legacy of the Language movement's since their dissolution in the late 80s: "It is one of literary history's ironies that language writing, a movement challenging the social and rhetorical prerogatives of capital, has

become a semiproper name that itself bestows a certain amount of cultural capital upon those it covers.”

Regarding this “semiproper” naming, as Perelman puts it: those troubled by and/or opposed to capitalism’s reifying power run into very intractable problems if they concede such authority on the simple basis of a name becoming “semiproper”. The human projects of analysis, experience and understanding all rely, to some extent, on attaching these “semiproper” names to things. If such a practice automatically confers a surrender of authority to capitalism, that any “resistance” is thwarted in its conception as “resistance”.

Refusing to surrender this authority is crucial, since the reification Perelman refers to is absolutely *not* ironic. It is wholly predictable, absolutely inevitable. What *is* ironic is Perelman’s inability to predict it and his inability in 1996 to have seen it as inevitable. For me this is indicative of one of the core problems of the Language movement. That is, their insular inability to contextualize their work in the broader world in which they operated. They naively seemed to believe that they really could avoid commodification and, in so doing, show their readers the way out of the recursive loop of earning and spending and earning.

One could attribute the Language poets’ naivete to a common trait of the avant garde, that is the tendency to look past the world as presently-constituted, the world in which the works will live and operate and to project into a future in which the works are understood and accepted without confusion or resistance. This, of course, smacks of a desire (repressed perhaps) to overturn the created here and now of the dominant culture and to replace with a there and later in which the avant garde has become dominant. To engage the present, is unglamorous work. And the Language

poets made little effort to reject a certain image of intellectual elan. Other poets, engaging more dire political exigencies, have adopted more quotidian practices and goals. In his little book on revolutionary poetics, Rogue Dalton, El Salvadoran poet put it this way: “I prefer to pinpoint the poet more as a scrutinizer of his own time than of the future, because, like it or not, insisting too much on what will come we lose at some level our immediate perspective, and we run the risk of not being understood by all the people who find themselves immersed in everyday life.”

There is a fine line, often crossed and rarely honored between the avant garde, on one side, and the Utopian and the messianic, on the other. In their haste to write themselves into the future, the Language poets, at their worst, became pedantic and patronizing. One particularly offensive example of this tendency is the essay “The Death of the Subject,” by Steve McCaffrey, a vocal proponent of all things Language. In this essay, McCaffrey promotes a writing which rejects a capitalist aesthetics and subsequently produces “writerly” texts. In Eleana Kim’s account of McCaffrey’s argument, these texts “blatantly subvert the conventional modes of reading as consumption and de-hierarchize the relationship between reader and writer. The communicative aspects of language can thus enter into a synchronic play in which authorial control is ceded to the reader, whose position shifts from consumer to producer.” This view overlooks the fact that the reader has always had the power of producer. McCaffrey seems intent on issuing authorial permissions (or commands) to subservient readers, allowing (or demanding) that they act more like writers. Seismic shifts in the mode and means of authorial production is not the way to facilitate more authorial reading.

In their efforts to alter and outgrow the straightjacket of the prevailing ideology, the Language poets felt compelled to tear at the very fabric of that

ideology: the language of the American 80s. They worked desperately to loosen its seams, to expose the fleshy paunch of avarice camouflaged within its slimming design and seasonally-updated colors. They saw the practices of previous generations of American poets as living a bit too comfortably within the confines of the cultural garb. In his "Reflections in Conclusion," the afterword to a collection of texts by Adorno, Benjamin, Bloch, Brecht and Lukacs on aesthetics and politics, Frederic Jameson writes, in agreement with Adorno, that "in the culture realm, the all-pervasiveness of the system, with its 'culture-' or (Enzensberger's variant) its 'consciousness-industry', makes for an unpropitious climate for any of the older, simpler forms of oppositional art." Jameson suggests that "When modernism and its accompanying techniques of 'estrangement' have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be 'estranged' and corrected by a more totalizing way of viewing phenomena."

As an aside I want to mention an article in last Sunday's New York Times Magazine (7 - December). The article was called "When Political Art Mattered, and" Jesse Green argued that visual art, in the America of the 1980s, affected actual change in public perception and, subsequently on public policy. The art in question in Green's article focused on a single, frameable issue: AIDS. As a strategic necessity, the art associated with AIDS activism in the 80s bracketed out larger issues of gay rights, socioeconomic status, public health policy, Ronald Reagan's so-called "trickle down" economics, etc., etc. The rationale was that AIDS was a crisis, a matter of life and death and, in order to slow the accelerating progress of the plague, certain concessions would have to be made. Green accepts these exigencies and even appears to condone the concessions. However, he also recognizes that in its efficacy, the art of AIDS activism, codified, quantified and categorized a means of attracting attention, a method of focusing debate, a

framework for the making of politically-motivated aesthetic choices, and, most worryingly, as a product of this means, method and framework, something which might be called, but would at least be recognized as, an “aesthetic” of action. The worrying thing is that this aesthetic, like any product, has been absorbed – reified – into the commoditized membrane of the capitalist body. This absorption transforms it; detournes it (in a perverse re-appropriation of the Situationist technique of re-appropriation), into an exchangeable idea, a style for sale. Tragically, Green concludes, “What’s most chilling about the AIDS works -- high, low, agitprop and all -- is that *if* they represent the most successful politicized arts movement in the history of America, it may also be the last.”

I understand the socio-historic contingency of any use of language or system of signs, and, therefore, the need to question those uses and the socio-historic assumptions on which their use is based. In the singular context of such an understanding, the estrangement proposed by Victor Shklovsky, pursued by the avant gardes of the 20th century and then re-estranged by the Language poets would appear to be a perfectly reasonable strategy of resistance. But I also recognize what might be called, for lack of a better term, some more universally ‘human’ impulses and capacities which art seems uniquely equipped to convey. These impulses and capacities may, in fact, reside at the level of an effort to transcend their socio-historic restraints. I’d like to suggest that, in the inevitable failure to achieve this transcendence, certain artworks succeed. The ability to carry the acknowledgement of this inherent futility in the earnest arc traced through the night sky of the receptive, analytic imagination, is the super-formal, super-contentual form and content of transcendent and effectively resistant art, music and literature.

I’m not really sure yet, but this super-formal, super-contentual register may be what, in my research I have had recourse to call “the über-level of

cognition.” That is, a register which behaves as or resides in a super-category, above or apart from form and content, the syntagmatic and the paradigmatic, *langue* and *parole*. I realize this is a cheat (or, more benevolently, a placeholder). My intention is not to obfuscate or to confuse a categories which have generally accepted names and properties. Just as form can be analyzed and made material, so too can content. When I say content, I don’t mean representation or represented material, but content as a material in and of itself; a material just as able, just as entitled to interact with the objects of the world as any other material. The über-level of cognition is where we might admit that the tools of reason are ill-adapted to analyze material phenomena which do not derive from or dwell in reason. Here, we can acknowledge the possibility of countless reasonable theses, but must, finally, realize that none of them are true exclusively, because none of them partakes of the same plane of experience as the effects it purports to explain. Any analog is pure analogy and ultimately built of equal amounts of coherence and non-coherence. Any analysis is of a different order, a separate language. The poem or the song and its effects are impregnable from without. From within their effects; effected *by* them, they are, of course, eminently pregnable. Indeed they are fertile, virtually exploding with apparent offspring.

Part Five: Language Poetry as a minority/resistant voice

Language poetry’s resistance to the prevailing ideology of late capitalism – through the foregrounding of linguistic materiality, the use of parataxis and the New Sentence – serves to portray Language poetry and its ideologies as a minority. For me, this raises the question of whether their output can be thought of as a minor literature in the sense proposed in Deleuze and Guattari. Here’s a capsule definition of minor literature from Deleuze and Guattari’s *Kafka: Toward A Minor Literature*, “The three characteristics of minor literature are the deterritorialization of language, the connection of the

individual to a political immediacy, and the collective assemblage of enunciation.” By this definition, Language poetry would indeed appear to fit the bill. The New Sentence, often re-appropriating modes of discourse or actual chunks of discourse from the majority language, accomplishes, if nothing else, a significant deterritorialization of language. According to their dicta, their quasi-manifestoes, their statements and their critical works, the language poets made every effort to connect themselves and their readers as individuals to a political immediacy. Language work is all about the skeptical disentangling of discourse from its obviously, yet surreptitiously-instantiated ideology. And lastly, as the longest-lasting, best organized, most prolific movement in the history of American letters, Language poetry could certainly be thought of as a “collective assemblage of enunciation” almost regardless of the consistency of their collective enunciation. More important, though, is the fact that, to a very great extent, those who maintained a lasting relationship with the journals and figures around which the movement revolved, displayed a great and consistent understanding of and sympathy for the main theoretical tenets of the project.

The Language poets, themselves, seemed to argue for themselves as representatives of an ideological minority. Placing themselves in an American literary lineage, they portrayed themselves as carriers of a torch which was lit in the early stages of the formation of an American national cultural identity. Charles Bernstein: “...everywhere the local is under fire from the imposed standard of a transnational consumer culture and undermined by the imperative to extract it and export it.

In the United States we are particularly bedeviled by our own history of cultural resistance, often confusing the struggles for cultural legitimation of the last century with our own reversed roles in this one.”

Bernstein is referring, among other things, to the notion of creating a national literature, a distinctly American voice in the 19th century. (One thinks, illustratively, of Melville and Whitman.) But this endeavor was undertaken by members of the cultural minority of the day. That role, for American cultural producers has evaporated, replaced by the hegemonic, American, majority voice of the 20th century. Bernstein's vision of the Language project is to reclaim this minority position, representing a dissident perspective buried within the established organization of ideology.

Whether the Language poems, on their own, carry this message; achieve what I referred to earlier as a *skeptical disentanglement*, is another question. And whether the Language poems (any poems, for that matter) should – or even could – be asked to carry or achieve anything *on their own*, is yet *another* question.

But, still, there is no sense of a “swelling up from within” in Language poetry. The majority language isn't threatened because the Language poets don't invent or portray a minority language – a minority existence – through their work, from inside or underneath the major language which contains them. Instead they provide a detached commentary which, despite their claims, seems to come from outside or, at least, from off to the side; from a disembodied skepticism. With hip hop language we can feel this “swelling up from within.” The surface of the major language shows cracks and begins to collapse into the crevasses created by the internal corruption. But in the example of hip hop, you also begin to see the fault lines in Deleuze and Guattari's thinking: hip hop language has very successfully infiltrated the major language, one could even argue that it has undermined it. But it has not displaced the prevailing ideology. It hasn't even called it into question or critiqued it. It has, in fact, endorsed capitalism's animal instincts, returning the abstracted, institutionalized laws of socioeconomic Darwinism to the level

of the individual. If there is a readjustment of the mainstream ideology it is a resetting to the primary stages of its development. One could think of Jameson's stages of capitalism as reflecting subjective viewpoints of relations to the Other: from the subjective perspective of the reigning economic and ideological power, the first stage could be characterized as "me against the world." the second stage, as "us against the world"; and the third stage as "us with the world wanting to be like us." Economists unanimously view free international trade as a good thing for all. But as trade barriers between majority and minority fall, so too do the divisions between the major and minor languages and the major and minor ideologies. As fall the distinctions, so falls the potential for resistance.

It seems to me that Deleuze and Guattari's notion of the minor seems to be proposing a corruption of the major by minorities, aliens, non-natives, etc. as a material corruption. Deleuze and Guattari are still too entwined in both the idea of the genius artist and of the language-centricity of literature. They share this opinion with the Language poets and for this reason, Language poetry can comfortably be nest in their definition of a minor literature. I am inclined to believe that the ultimate test of a literature's status and efficacy as a effectively resistant minor literature happens in its reception and not in the intentions or rules applied during production. I would prefer to re-jig the definition of minor literature to include something about the friction between the moment and mode of the literature's enunciation and the character and conventions of the sensibilities and sensitivities of its reception.

This returns us to the little word "any" which I zeroed in on earlier. To refresh our memories I quoted Michael Davidson's description of the Language poets, in which he somewhat cavalierly wrote that "any deformation forces attention onto the material basis of meaning production within." And I said, in response, that, in many ways, the entire program of

the Language poets turns on one's acceptance or rejection of – the veracity of – this little word “any”. What I'm suggesting is that an attempt to create an effectively resistant minor literature must be strategically cognizant of the modes of its reception. It is not *any* deformation which forces attention onto the material basis of meaning production within language. But only carefully selected and tested deformations. Both Deleuze and Guattari's conception of minor literature and the Language poet's practices, fail to engage the very real frictions of the transfer from writing to reading.