READING MACHINES

AMBIENT WRITING AND THE POETICS OF ATMOSPHERIC MEDIA

ALEC MAPES-FRANCES
HONORS THESIS IN MODERN CULTURE AND MEDIA (A.B., TRACK II)
BROWN UNIVERSITY 2017

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INTRODUCTION

> We are always living in a paradoxical situation. The mutations of subjectivity are sudden, occurring at 'infinite speeds.'…one says to oneself: Isn't it boring here? Isn't it nerve-racking? Isn't the ambiance great?
>
> —Félix Guattari[1]

Since Brian Eno pioneered the concept of ambient music in the 1970s, "ambient" has seen increasing circulation and proliferation in discourses on the arts and media as a catchword for work that surrounds, backgrounds, withdraws. Customarily, the genealogy of the term is audiocentric—Eno, the Muzak corporation's "audio architecture," Erik Satie's "musique d'ameublement," and even early modern "Tafelmusik"—leading music critics such as Mark Prendergast to name the 20th century the "ambient century."[2] But in contemporary usage, ambience and the ambient are frequently expanded well beyond music, sonic art, and sound studies, and into interior decoration, meteorology, computing, electronics, urbanism, corporate and

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[1] Félix Guattari, quoted in Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2014), 218.

[2] See Mark Prendergast, *The Ambient Century: From Mahler to Trance—The Evolution of Sound in the Electronic Age* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2001).

retail design, marketing, perfumery, literature, and visual art. In literary studies and ecocriticism, Timothy Morton has written of "ambient poetics," and Thomas Rickert has followed Morton with his concept of "ambient rhetoric": both of these accounts narrate the technical and environmental dissolution of Western theory's traditional subject-object dichotomy.[3] In technology, terms such as "ambient intelligence" (Brian Epstein and Philips Research) and "ambient informatics" (Adam Greenfield) encounter urbanism, architecture, and environmental studies, wherein authors like Malcolm McCullough have discussed the "ambient commons," and whole journals and research units have emerged around issues of ambience and sensory environments (e.g. *Ambiances*, published by Ambiances Architectures Urbanités (AAU), a unit of the Centre national de la recherche scientifique (CNRS) in France).[4] In poetry, Tan Lin has developed a practice of "ambient stylistics," "ambient reading," and "ambient writing," a practice which, I would suggest, poets like Lisa Robertson, Kenneth Goldsmith, and Pamela Lu have realized in different ways.

The term has, it must be noted, a much longer history, one delineated in a magisterial 1942 essay by Leo Spitzer. In "*Milieu* and *Ambiance*: An Essay in Historical Semantics," Spitzer traces the history of the terms *milieu*, *ambiance*, and their cross-linguistic compounds and variants, such as "*milieu ambiant*," "ambient medium," "*l'ambiance des milieux*," "*l'air ambiant*." Originally appearing in the Newtonian, early

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[3] See Timothy Morton, "Why Ambient Poetics? Outline For a Depthless Ecology," *The Wordsworth Circle* 33.1 (2002) and Thomas Rickert, *Ambient Rhetoric: The Attunements of Rhetorical Being* (Pittsburgh, PA: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2013).

[4] See Adam Greenfield in conversation with Mark Shepard, *Architecture and Situated Technologies Pamphlet 1: Urban Computing and its Discontents* (New York: The Architectural League of New York, 2007); Malcolm McCullough, *Ambient Commons: Attention in the Age of Embodied Information* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2013); and *Ambiances: International Journal of Sensory Environment, Architecture and Urban Space* (http://www.ambiances.net/international-ambiances-journal.html). For information on Brian Epstein and Philips Research, see Chapter 1 below.

modern-scientific context of a medium, *milieu* and *ambiance* move away from the sense of a determining environment or surroundings to a more open (and less deterministic) idea of ambience. I will not address this history in depth, but in any case it is worth acknowledging that some of the concepts under consideration may have been formulated in the natural and social sciences long before being put to use in design and in the arts.

The widespread presence of the "ambient" in contemporary art and technology has not, of course, been without its skeptics. The art historian Seth Kim-Cohen has written a book called *Against Ambience*, a polemic aimed at the art world's fascination with ambient aesthetics, which Kim-Cohen sees expressed in recent large-scale exhibitions of Minimal and post-Minimal Light and Space work (Robert Irwin, James Turrell, Olafur Eliasson, et al.). Kim-Cohen's primary contention is that such atmospheric works are too purely perceptual, that their "warm glows" and "soothing washes" are not "self-aware" or "conceptually concerned" enough to address the crises of the information age. "The ambient, in both its sonic and visual incarnations, describes a closed system," he writes. "The sites of transmission and reception are identical. Nothing changes, nothing moves. It is ascetic and abstinent. Its apparent (desired) purity is but an abnegation of participation in the social, communicative, and critical realms."[5] This impoverished account of ambient aesthetics basically excludes criticality as such from the category of ambient art, ambient music, or ambient poetry. It is a familiar account, one that sees the soft, the diffuse, and the therapeutic as incompatible with the traditionally hard edges of avant-gardist demystification.

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[5] Seth Kim-Cohen, *Against Ambience* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2013), 59.

Kim-Cohen opposes ambience to the realities of information capitalism, rather than entertaining the notion that certain instantiations of ambient aesthetics might productively mime and map the ambience *of* information capitalism (as I will ultimately argue). This opposition in turn leads to a repudiation of ambience in favor of "linguistic conceptualism," and from a certain perspective amounts to a vulgar form of ideology critique that cannot see ambience as anything other than an anodyne cloud that claims the status of revelation, somehow obscuring both the concrete conditions of the present and the impossibility of presence. (By way of illustration, Kim-Cohen disapprovingly quotes Turell: "My art deals with light itself. It's not the bearer of the revelation—it is the revelation."[6]) The book's argument thus hinges mostly on a watered-down Derridean anti-realism, which, while effective for refuting the overblown claims of someone like Turrell, only goes so far. "In a worldview such as mine," Kim-Cohen writes, "convinced of *mitsein*, there is no point in making ambient works of perceptual experience, as if that light, that sound, were a being, complete in itself, and that we, in a rare moment of access, are gazing into the very materiality of presence."[7] In what follows, my aim will be in part to show that a critical interest in the ambient and atmospheric has little, if anything, to do with the naïve realism of Kim-Cohen's strawmen.

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[6] Ibid., 41.

[7] Ibid., 120.

In 1973, marketing researcher Philip T. Kotler theorized atmospherics as a "silent language," a "new decorative aesthetic, that of *total design*."[8] In an article titled "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool," Kotler describes, in language aimed at marketing professionals, the englobing of the commodity in its environment, its "nesting in a space characterized by certain sensory qualities."[9] "Atmosphere planning" is here positioned as a newly formalized development, practiced throughout history, of course, but never before at the level of control and consistency that was becoming possible in late twentieth-century multinational capitalism, with its heavily mediated retail architectures and distribution systems. Kotler's model theorizes the mediation of the commodity through immersion in atmospheres, which, he argues, are at once at once "attention-creating media," "message-creating media," and "affect-creating media." Atmospheres link the commodity to the "lifestyle," another incipient branding concept, dissolving both subject (consumer) and object (commodity) into somewhat amorphous "lifestyle zones," where what is sold is not a thing but a whole set of practices and attitudes. Purchase and consumption audiences are targeted through the production of atmospheres appropriate to the lifestyle category proper to such audiences; what is targeted, then, is not so much an individual as what Gilles Deleuze called the "dividual," an aggregate composed from consumer research and data collection.

The theoretical humanities have, in their own way, taken a similar atmospheric turn. A substantial body of atmosphere theory exists, particularly in German

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[8] Philip T. Kotler, "Atmospherics as a Marketing Tool," *Journal of Retailing* Vol. 49, No. 4 (1973-74), 50.

[9] Ibid., 53.

philosophy and media theory, that follows twentieth-century precursors in aesthetics, phenomenology, and post-phenomenology such as Hermann Schmitz, Walter Benjamin and Martin Heidegger. Hans Gumbrecht has formulated the atmospheric mode in literature using Heidegger's non-psychological, non-individual notion of *Stimmung* (mood or attunement), while Peter Sloterdijk's ambitious *Spheres* trilogy, a "study of the air," reinterprets the history of philosophy as socio-spatial and atmospheric-spherological.[10] Gernot Böhme is perhaps the most pivotal thinker of atmospherics in aesthetic theory; in an article published in 1993, following his earlier studies on the topic in *Für eine ökologische Naturästhetik* [*For an Ecological Natural Aesthetics*] (1989), he calls for a realignment of aesthetics toward the articulation of atmospheres, elements which have historically been treated as hazy, unclear, and even "embarassing." "One has the impression that 'atmosphere' is meant to indicate something indeterminate, difficult to express, even if it is only in order to hide the speaker's own speechlessness," Böhme writes.[11] Drawing on Hermann Schmitz's "new phenomenology" of the body (*System der Philosophie. Bd. III.1 Die Wahrnehmung*, 1964), Böhme hopes to introduce a better concept for these strange, borderless, unlocalizable "auras" or "ambiences," "affective powers of feeling" and "spatial bearers of moods." Following Walter Benjamin's "Art In the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," Böhme claims that

> the primary task of aesthetics is no longer to determine what art is and to provide means for art criticism. Rather, the theme of aesthetics is now the full range of aesthetic work, which is defined generally as the production of

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[10] See Hans Gumbrecht, *Atmosphere, Mood, Stimmung: On a Hidden Potential of Literature* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012).

[11] Gernot Böhme, "Atmosphere as the Fundamental Concept of a New Aesthetics," *Thesis Eleven* 46 (1993), 113.

atmospheres and thus extends from cosmetics, advertising, interior decoration, stage sets to art in the narrower sense. Autonomous art is understood in this context as only a special form of aesthetic work, which also has its social function, namely the mediation of the encounter and response to atmospheres in situations (museums, exhibitions) set apart from action contexts.[12]

Thus, the new aesthetics would be "a general theory of aesthetic work, understood as the production of atmospheres…a theory of perception in the full sense of the term, in which perception is understood as the experience of the presence of persons, objects and environments."[13] It would immanently engage the ubiquitous and atmospheric "staging" of aesthetic situations, whether of politics, sports, cities, commodities, personalities, and would therefore perform exactly what is foreclosed in Kim-Cohen's account.

AFFECT

The will to confront and even describe the shapeless, indiscrete, and apparently non-signifying, expressed by Böhme's atmospherics, is shared by affect theory, with which the thought of ambience is closely linked. Simplifying grossly, affect theory has two major strands: one derived from Deleuze's work on Spinoza and his collaborations with Félix Guattari, elaborated by Brian Massumi, and one associated more closely with psychology, psychoanalysis, queer theory, and the studies of Silvan Tomkins. There are important differences between these two strands, but my thinking of the ambient will draw on aspects of both: namely, the "autonomy" (Massumi) of affect from what Tomkins calls the "central assemblies" of the drives and of consciousness,

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[12] Ibid., 116.

[13] Ibid.

and affect's nonconscious, non-emotional, and even non-human character. This is because ambient practices, especially in the arts, tend to attune themselves to peripheral or background processes, to the bed of noise in every channel, to the impersonal, generic, ubiquitous, and often barely perceptible flows that course automatically around, below, and through "subjects" and "objects" (*ambi* (αμφι), 'around,' + *ire,* 'to go'). These are deconcentrated and peripheral processes that do not use up large portions of the resources of attention. Affect theory is useful for understanding how such processual ambiences (or, in Böhme's terms, atmospheres) modulate and even inform bodies without directing them at a conscious level or demanding too much in terms of interpretation, contemplation, or depth.

Ambience, like affect, is always ambivalent virtuality, of a pre-individual "smooth space" (Deleuze and Guattari) and has little to do with the more determinate space of reified emotionality. The Deleuzean-Spinozan-Massumian axis of affect theory in particular helps articulate ambience's intimate relationship to consumer culture and to what Deleuze famously called the "control society," while the Tomkinsian axis highlights affect's object-independence, as well as its status as a non-linguistic and non-discrete (analog) inflection of communication.[14] And affect's spatialization, as Nigel Thrift has outlined, is fundamental for understanding how ambient practices diagram the built world and the landscape.

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[14] For Tomkins, affect is essentially a feedback-based inflection of communication, and thus modifies the sender-receiver binarisms of traditional information theory. "A living system such as a human being is a feedback system rather than a communication system, and therefore the freedom of such a feedback system must be distinguished from the formal theory of the information (i.e., complexity, degrees of freedom) of a communication system…The freedom of any feedback system is, consequently, a conjoint function of its complexity and the complexity of its surround." Silvan Tomkins, "What Are Affects?," *Shame and Its Sisters: A Silvan Tompkins Reader*, Sedgewick, Eve and Adam Frank, eds. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1995), 36.

"We do not yet have a critical or poetic language in which to represent the control

society" writes Alex Galloway in his 2012 book *The Interface Effect*. It is an offhand

remark, but an interesting one, and in what follows I want to problematize Galloway's

assertion.[15] On the one hand, I argue that new experimental and conceptual writing

that takes up the logic of ambience, best exemplified by the poet Tan Lin, is precisely a

poetics, or a poetic language, suited to the control society. On the other hand, with

Fredric Jameson, and perhaps even with Galloway, I want to insist that what is at stake

in poetics is not "representation" at all, but rather what Jonathan Flatley and Steven

Shaviro have independently termed "affective mapping," a *non*-cognitive mapping

(Jameson) that attempts to register the pre-emotional and pre-conscious *feelings*

synthesized and modulated by the control society, and more precisely by its

atmospherics and ambiences.[16] This would be distinct from the deficient forms of data

visualization and network mapping that Galloway correctly denounces, which are

usually not much more than an aesthetics of the (digital) sublime, images of

unrepresentability and not much more. Ambient poetics is closer to an aesthetics of

the beautiful, drawing its concepts from low-grade, impersonal, and surface-based

sensations like Kant's decorative floral frames or blank, non-structural pillars

(*parerga*).[17] Writing such ambiences, or writing ambiently, necessarily involves a

reworking of subjectivity that is not quite that of the sublime, which in its usual

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[15] Alexander R. Galloway, *The Interface Effect* (Malden, MA: Polity Press, 2012), 98.

[16] See Jonathan Flatley, *Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008) and Steven Shaviro, *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Winchester, UK: Zero Books, 2010).
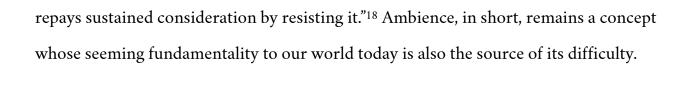
[17] Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Judgment* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 1987), 49.

formulation consolidates and empowers the subject as it is faced with the terrifying or overwhelming possibility of its defiguration into the smooth space of the environment. Instead, ambient poetics willingly vaporizes or atmospherizes the subject in a certain way, understanding subjectivity as configured by inattention, by the feelings of a room, by the microclimates of a city, and by metadata schemes and algorithms continuously operating below the perceptual and cognitive thresholds of central assemblies (consciousness). As we will see, ambient design, as in ubiquitous computing, ambient intelligence and Muzak—claim to liberate the subject and divest its attention from high-load processes, providing transitional, intervallic, and background accompaniment. Ambient poetics (and ambient aesthetics writ large) critically appropriates such techniques—widespread in contemporary culture—for the purposes of affective mapping and re-mapping. It provocatively poeticizes the consumer atmospherics and ambient technologies of control, confronting us with the spaces and durations of the present, and allowing us to imagine what spaces and durations "we might not have inhabited," to quote Lin. Or might inhabit otherwise.

Stimulated by the singular approach of Lin, I will trace the ambient through various transdisciplinary iterations. In Chapter 1, "Disappearances," I situate Lin's work next to 1990s innovations in technology and computing: the thinking of "ubiquitous computing," "ambient intelligence," and the fantasy of the "ambient (living) room," in which the world of labor is made over as a space of comfort and calm. Lin's call for the disappearance of poetry mimics the technologists' call for the disappearance of the computer. In Chapter 2, "Smooth Operations," I trace the more familiar (at least in the arts) line that runs from early avant-garde composer Erik Satie through the environmental engineering of the Muzak corporation and the semi-

critical practice of Eno. This line draws together the ambient and notions of the intervallic, transitional, and decorative, as in the airport compositions of Eno or in the furniture music of Satie. Deleuze and Guattari's typology of the smooth and the striated works to further elucidate how ambience works in concert with—rather than strictly against—strategies of control and management. Chapter 3, "Ambient Selves," returns to contemporary poetry and maps the relations between ambient techniques (Lin's non-reading and Satie's non-listening) and the properly poetic practices of Language writing, lyric, and conceptual writing. I submit the writing of Canadian poet Lisa Robertson (as the Office for Soft Architecture) as a kind of ambient poetics that, like Lin's, should be distinguished from the conceptual writing of Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin (et al.) by way of its reintroduction and vaporization of the lyric subject or self. Robertson's work deals with architecture and the city, and interfaces with the Situationist understanding of ambience. Finally, in Chapter 4, "Spaces We Might Not Have Inhabited," I return to Lin's *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, a book which presents the most complete formulation to date of ambient poetic practice, and I address its resonances with the speculations of Rem Koolhaas. Lin poeticizes (meta)data, machinic reading, logos, and the consumer atmospherics that characterize contemporary ambiences, confronting us with speculations on what reading and writing should look like after the end of sustained, concentrated, and human-centric textual reception.

Throughout this discussion, ambience will always retain a sense of elusiveness and double-sidedness, seeming to be alternately complicit and resistive in the political sense. Ambience is Janus-faced, as Timothy Morton asserts. And ambience, as Stephen Squibb rightly puts it, must be considered as "a haunting strategy of ambivalence that

repays sustained consideration by resisting it."[18] Ambience, in short, remains a concept

whose seeming fundamentality to our world today is also the source of its difficulty.

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[18] Stephen Squibb, "'ambient': Tanya Bonakdar Gallery, New York (review)," *Art-Agenda* (2013). http://www.art-agenda.com/reviews/ambient/. Accessed 12 Apr. 2017.

1 DISAPPEARANCES

Duration (11:03)

The poems [of our era] [are designed to disappear. [and disappear] continually into the stylistic devices that have been sampled and diluted from the merely temporal language [i.e. duration, historical or otherwise] of the day. As such they might resemble a pattern uninteresting and enervating in its depths but relaxing on its surface.[19]

Tan Lin's *BlipSoak01*, written in 1997 and published in 2003, is an "extended-play (EP) poem," a long, mostly sampled book that mimes the generic, processual features of a disco record or an ambient soundtrack. Its preface, which is written in short sections of prose and lasts eight pages or "11 minutes and 3 seconds," discourses impersonally on the disappearance of poetry, the beauty of surfaces, décor, falsification, and forgetting, the under-appreciated desire for boredom, and the pleasures of distracted and inattentive (non-)reading. It reads like a statement of self-assured avant-garde purposiveness, but one enunciated by a voice that is at once, somehow, both emollient and unsettled. "The poem that occurs today should occur against history," Lin writes.

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[19] Tan Lin, *BlipSoak01* (Berkeley, CA: Atelos Press, 2003), 11.

"Of course, it goes without saying that poetry should not be difficult it should be very very easy and deeply relaxing at the synaptic level, which is the level of looking."[20]

The preface to *BlipSoak01* additionally introduces a reading flow that continues throughout the book. Its sequencing reconfigures the traditional architecture of the page; rather than moving from left to right, top to bottom on each page, the textual order goes from left to right, top to bottom across each spread, inducing the eyes to scan back and forth across the center fold. In the preface, most of the lines have been placed on the rectos while the versos are nearly blank, save a few detached phrases.

VERSO	RECTO
	Beauty is over-appreciated; boredom is not. Like things that are blind, anyone who has ever looked at a book [as opposed to read it] knows a page is just a literal repetition of what came before i.e. of the things that we thought we were seeing and waiting for to appear next. The beautiful book should not be read but merely be looked at. The boring page makes us wait a very long time.
Everyone likes to	wait, though not in any particular order, for a mistake or an accident. [That is why] the left hand side of the page remains temporally uninteresting, and why the surface of the ambient poem you are gazing towards is highly distracting, filled with imprecisions, typos and forms of the hypnotic, which function backwards, just as boredom itself does.[3]

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[20] Ibid., 17.

Here, reading is made to take the form of an optical *dérive* or distracted visual[21] wandering facilitated by a boring codexical field. Instead of the forward momentum of linear processing, the topology of *BlipSoak01* aims to create reversals and microloops: a more nonlinear and non-pressured modality. (The exploration of forms of reading is a constant throughout Lin's work, and more recent projects like *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, which I will address in a later chapter, historicize such forms to a greater degree than *BlipSoak01*.)

The remainder of *BlipSoak01* following the preface—some 300 pages—consists of more minimal, dispersed couplets loosely structured by a seemingly random "numerical tracking system," whose tags ("01," "02," "03," etc.) intermittently pepper the space like "blips." In a reversal of the pattern in the preface—serial groups of text on the recto and detached bits on the verso—the bulk of the poem is arranged so that the couplets line the verso, while little truncated fragments and stray marks are scattered irregularly across the recto. The drifting, zig-zagging or looping reading dynamic is effectively the same, only mirrored. There are occasional changes and compressions; the text at one point divides itself into four columns, and at another point becomes degraded so that only single letters, numbers and pieces of words or code appear. But for the most part, the poem remains consistent and controlled throughout.

this is another logo 04
of boredom and the multi-national

sea, air-conditioned
like Antarctica

sometimes
Dior

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21 Ibid., 11.

Sometimes
Bebe or Miss Sixty 05[22]

Rather than utilizing the discontinuity of cut-up or montage, this poetry functions via continuity and smoothness. It is, as Brian Kim Stefans writes, "not collage, in which the bleeding edges of the assembled fragments scream out as loudly as the content, but a sort of all-over mixture of numberless untraceable sources."[23]

Perhaps *BlipSoak01* is poetry for a moment in which the shock effect of the collision or the discontinuity no longer has any critical currency: an age of integrated, ubiquitous technical media, a "space of flows" (to use a term of Manuel Castells) in which specificities and singularities have been smoothed out by air conditioning and online shopping. Junkspace: Antarctica, Dior, Bebe, Miss Sixty. Fredric Jameson would identify this "de-differentiating" state of affairs as an effect of the "new life of postmodern sensation," that "perceptual system of late capitalism" in which any radical artistic critique is neutralized by the simple fact of the aestheticization or culturalization of everything; "everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented."[24]

From a more technical and art-historical standpoint, media theorist Lev Manovich has designated this moment as one in which the visions of the early 20th century European avant-gardes are banalized specifically through their

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[22] Ibid., 70.

[23] Brian Kim Stefans, "Streaming Poetry," *Boston Review* Vol. 29, No. 5 (2004). http://bostonreview.net/archives/BR29.5/stefans.php. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

[24] Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Post-Modern, 1983–1998* (London: Verso, 1998), 73.

materialization as software; the aesthetic strategies developed to "awaken audiences from the dream-existence of bourgeois society"—montage, defamiliarization/ *ostranenie*/*Verfremdung,* surprise and *trouvaille*—have become embedded in the everyday routines of human-computer interaction (HCI): cut and paste, dynamic and moveable windows, multimedia platforms, hyperlinks, and so forth.[25] The understanding of HCI here is in a sense bounded by the edges of the screen and the experiences of individual personal computing—both of which Manovich derives from the cinema in his book *The Language of New Media*—and as many have suggested, this attachment to the rectilinear "window" and the immobile spectator brings with it certain limitations.[26] In order to really appreciate how fully the aesthetics of discontinuity have been recuperated and neutralized, perhaps a more environmental, atmospheric, and seamless approach is needed—this would be Lin's contention.

To step back for a moment: there are multiple disappearances in process here, including the disappearance of poetry, and the disappearance of the avant-garde, the position of the 'outside.' To this we might add another disappearance: the disappearance of the medium, as narrated most prominently in art theory by Rosalind Krauss.[27] It is Krauss whom Lin cites first in his article "Disco as Operating System, Part One," published in 2008. "Disco…" argues that the disco music emerging in the 1970s could be read as the "sound" of the dissolution of discontinuous media or of the plurality of the "Muses" theorized by Krauss, a dissolution into the monism of

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[25] Lev Manovich, "Avant-Garde as Software" (1999), 5. http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/avant-garde-as-software. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

[26] See, for instance, Mark B. N. Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004) and Galloway, *The Interface Effect*.

[27] See Rosalind Krauss, *"A Voyage on the North Sea": Art in the Age of the Post-Medium Condition* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1999).

information, from which any medium could be expressed in a computational system or multimedia machine. The formal exposure and innovation of media "supports" typical of Modernism would, in this view, have given way to a "post-medium" (Krauss) or "meta-medium" (Manovich) condition, enabled by the reading and writing processes typical of software. "As an ambient environment or operating system in which varied practices transpire, disco is the (sound of) data entering (input) and leaving (output) a system, where multiple sources are accessed in a time that is simulated to feel like a real-time operation," Lin writes.[28] And, later: "disco is an operating system that sits on top of a database (previously recorded musics), which is in turn accessed by a DJ, who serves as a GUI for those on the floor."[29]

What would happen if one were to choose to (1) recognize the contemporary moment as one in which discontinuity, specificity, and singularity—whether of media, of political organization, of economies, of historical or cultural or racialized objects,—are increasingly being dissolved into a seamless, global, ambient "mix," and (2) reproduce, problematize, and reinvent the textures and patterns of such a mix as a form of cultural practice, without becoming reduced to an asocial and impotent or even kitschy quietism? This is the question raised by Tan Lin's work (and, I would argue, by ambient practices more generally). Lin is interested in experimenting with the hypothesis that

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[28] Tan Lin, "Disco as Operating System, Part One," *Criticism* Vol. 50, No. 1 (2008), 84.

[29] Ibid., 95. See also Kodwo Eshun, "Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality," *More Brilliant Than the Sun: Adventures in Sonic Fiction* (London: Quartet, 1998). Eshun makes a comparable (and much earlier) case for music—especially music like disco, techno, etc., made by Black artists and conditioned by the Afrodiaspora—as operating system. This becoming-OS is also, critically, a process of deracialization that must be negotiated and redirected (for thinkers like Eshun, via Afrofuturism).

lyricism, subjectivity, and personal expressiveness might be reduced to blips in an ambient sound track, where historical markers (of cultural products) could be erased, and where nonreading, relaxation, and boredom could be the essential components of a text. Poetry—and here one means all forms of cultural production—should aspire not to the condition of the book but to the condition of variable moods, like relaxation and yoga and disco.[30]

In order to continue to unfold the practice of ambience, I want to turn to a discourse that is not primarily or even evidently poetic, art-historical, or art-theoretical: namely, that of ubiquitous computing and the Silicon Valley technologists of the late 1990s, a period roughly contemporaneous with much of what I have been discussing (Lin, Jameson, Manovich, Krauss). To the disappearance of the poem, the disappearance of the avant-garde, and the disappearance of the medium, we might also add the disappearance of the computer.

CALM TECHNOLOGY

In 1991, Mark Weiser, head of the computer science lab at Xerox's Palo Alto Research Center (PARC), published a paper in *Scientific American* called "The Computer for the 21st Century." "The most profound technologies are those that disappear," it begins. "They weave themselves into the fabric of everyday life until they are indistinguishable from it."[31] For Weiser and the researchers at PARC, the future of computing was imperceptibility, the integration of computers into environments such that they would become indistinguishable from a wall, a window, a doorway, a carpet, or a candy wrapper. The name of this future was ubiquitous computing or "ubicomp," posited as

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30 Ibid., 96-97.

31 Mark Weiser, "The Computer for the 21st Century," *Scientific American* (1991), 1. http://www.ubiq.com/hypertext/weiser/SciAmDraft3.html. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

the inevitable aftereffect of the Internet and its distributed networks. "We are trying to conceive a new way of thinking about computers in the world," writes Weiser, "one that takes into account the natural human environment and allows the computers themselves to vanish into the background."[32]

Instead of a bounded unitary mechanism or even a networked node—as in the classical PC, mobile device, or screen-based user interface (UI)—Weiser and his colleagues fantasized a kind of machinic, ambient computing that would be more like writing. Not the writing of book-bound literature or even periodicals, but the kind of writing found on street signs, billboards, barcodes, and product packaging. Indeed, analogies to writing technologies and post-print publishing run throughout this 1991 text. The technology of the laptop is for Weiser not much more than a (McLuhanian) remediation of the book. Owning a laptop, even a networked laptop, is like owning a "very important book," and a book—even a very important one—does not begin to express the full potential of writing and literacy, just as, for Weiser, a laptop does not come close to realizing the most exciting possibilities of computation.[33] The multimedia machine that is the PC remains a demanding and limiting focal center for attention. Failing to fade into the background, it thus institutes what Weiser describes as an asocial atomism: people tied to their individual screens.

Dismissive of cyberpunk VR fantasies, in which a user would be able to escape fully into the virtual reality of the computer, PARC imagined an inverse movement. Computers would flee their boxes and enclosures and escape into the world of the

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[32] Ibid.

[33] Friedrich Kittler, Sara Ogger, Joanna Drucker, and many others have argued that this understanding of the book as a woefully limited and exclusively linear object—an understanding that is pervasive in technical design as well as in media theory—is flawed. I will return to this "perspective of the book"— and its reinvention by Lin—in Chapter 4.

organism. It would be a peaceful liberation and resettlement, with minimal stress on either side. "Machines that fit the human environment, instead of forcing humans to enter theirs, will make using a computer as refreshing as taking a walk in the woods," Weiser concludes.[34] Whereas VR, in its separate sphere, sought to simulate the world, ubicomp sought to invisibly enhance and organize it, becoming immanent to it. For ubicomp, VR might have uses in entertainment, but beyond that, it presented no solutions to the functional problems that ubicomp technologists and designers wanted to solve. These were problems bound up in ergonomics, logistics, and comfort—banal problems of living and not of spectacular excitation.

The affective character of the ubicomp imaginary and its "embodied virtuality" is immediately striking in these early texts. The future of computation is qualified not with the older military-technical rhetoric of speed, efficiency, power, and energy, but with adjectives like "refreshing," "pleasant," "calm," "relaxing," and "cozy." Computers, a source of frustration, anxiety, and information overload, ubicomp suggests, could someday behave less like machines and more like incense, benzodiazepines, or lounge chairs. The new HCI under ubicomp would be make all space feel safe, familiar, "like home," mitigating most of the stresses and uncertainties of domestic and non-domestic labor, while also increasing the productivity of such labor.

"The Coming Age of Calm Technology," published by Weiser and PARC director John Seely Brown in 1996, focuses specifically on this affective approach to ubiquitous computing, introducing calmness as the most fundamentally interesting and challenging aspect of future HCI design. "If computers are everywhere," write Weiser and Brown, "they better stay out of the way, and that means designing them so that the

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[34] Ibid, 8.

people being shared by the computers remain serene and in control."[35] The authors

propose a conceptual and dialectical framework of attentive "centers" and

"peripheries" with which to move forward. Periphery names attunement without

explicit attention, a sort of cloudy Heideggerean *Stimmung* that exists independently of

an individual subjective consciousness. The center, naturally, is on the other hand the

center of attention, the domain of what is consciously attended to. "A calm technology

will move easily from the periphery of our attention, to the center, and back," Weiser

and Brown write.[36] This oscillatory movement is "encalming," they claim, for two

reasons: first, because a well-functioning periphery avoids overburdening or

exhausting the relatively limited processing power of human attention, and second,

because the unimpeded ability to select and recenter objects formerly in the periphery

is the essence of "control" and implies an increased power of acting. "Technologies

encalm as they empower our periphery…When our periphery is functioning well we

are tuned into what is happening around us, and so also to what is going to happen,

and what has just happened."[37]

FEELING INVOLVED

"The Computer for the 21st Century" includes a remarkable speculative portrait of life

after ubiquitous computing. Reminiscent of '60s advertising copy, Weiser's 'short

story' reimagines living and working conditions, inducing a sense of ease and

convenience, and tracing a continuous flow uninterrupted by transitions from home

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[35] Mark Weiser and John Seely Brown, "The Coming Age of Calm Technology" (1996), 3. http://www.ubiq.com/hypertext/weiser/acmfuture2endnote.htm. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

[36] Ibid., 4.

[37] Ibid.

to car to office (and back again). The protagonist is a woman named Sal, who, like Weiser, apparently works on ubiquitous computing in Silicon Valley.

> Sal looks out her windows at her neighborhood. Sunlight and a fence are visible through one, but through others she sees electronic trails that have been kept for her of neighbors coming and going during the early morning. Privacy conventions and practical data rates prevent displaying video footage, but time markers and electronic tracks on the neighborhood map let Sal feel cozy in her street.
> Glancing at the windows to her kids' rooms she can see that they got up 15 and 20 minutes ago and are already in the kitchen. Noticing that she is up, they start making more noise.
> At breakfast Sal reads the news. She still prefers the paper form, as do most people. She spots an interesting quote from a columnist in the business section. She wipes her pen over the newspaper's name, date, section, and page number and then circles the quote. The pen sends a message to the paper, which transmits the quote to her office. […]
> On the way to work Sal glances in the foreview mirror to check the traffic. She spots a slowdown ahead, and also notices on a side street the telltale green in the foreview of a food shop, and a new one at that. She decides to take the next exit and get a cup of coffee while avoiding the jam.
> Once Sal arrives at work, the foreview helps her to quickly find a parking spot. As she walks into the building the machines in her office prepare to log her in, but don't complete the sequence until she actually enters her office. On her way, she stops by the offices of four or five colleagues to exchange greetings and news.
> Sal glances out her windows: a grey day in Silicon Valley, 75 percent humidity and 40 percent chance of afternoon showers; meanwhile, it has been a quiet morning at the East Coast office. Usually the activity indicator shows at least one spontaneous urgent meeting by now. She chooses not to shift the window on the home office back three hours—too much chance of being caught by surprise. But she knows others who do, usually people who never get a call from the East but just want to feel involved.[38]

However contrived and quaint, the passage has a beautifully ambient tone. Every encounter is pleasant and relaxed, guided by subtle optical markers and indexes that facilitate the "calming" center-periphery oscillation. As envisioned, all interfaces are

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[38] Weiser, 6-7.

located on existing architectural surfaces, without needing their own separate screens (windows, "foreview mirrors," etc.). It should be clear, too, that certain elements in Weiser's diegesis are included in order to (minimally) assuage ethical doubts. For instance, at each point of interface in the narrative, Weiser is careful to emphasize certain choices or selections that the media make available. Even privacy concerns are accounted for (though apparently privacy is not enough of a concern to preclude the electronic tracking of neighbors).

Most palpable here, however, is the smoothness of the space described by Sal's trajectory. All space is conceived of as informatic, and the narration of the space unfolds in an anticipatory tense—information is processed ahead of time such that no encounter will be discontinuous or unexpected, "catching Sal by surprise." There is continuity even with the faraway East Coast office, the activity of which colors the information space of the West Coast office, creating a low-level, asubjective "feeling of involvement" without disrupting the local workflow. Such affective or atmospheric attunement has the status of weather, which Weiser poetically layers onto the monitoring of levels of work.

As Mark Hansen has suggested, the key insight of Weiser, Brown, and PARC was precisely to uncover this atmospheric mode, a mode which Hansen suggests has increasingly become generalizable to media as such. For Hansen, what is important is the microtemporal, pre-perceptual solicitation thematized in ubicomp's fantasies. This kind of solicitation marks a "qualitative shift in the economy of sensation," enabling the seamless integration of neural and technical logics.[39] Hansen argues that the

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[39] Mark B. N. Hansen, "Ubiquitous Sensation or the Autonomy of the Peripheral: Towards an Atmospheric, Impersonal and Microtemporal Media," in *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging With Ubiquitous Computing*, Ulrik Ekman, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012), 72.

ubicomp dialectic of center and periphery does not go far enough in the direction of the peripheral. Positing the "autonomy of the periphery," he claims that the "microtemporal and imperceptible dimension of ubiquitous computational environments *can never be brought into the sphere of direct, conscious attention and awareness*; rather, it impacts sensory experience *unconsciously, imperceptibly—in short, at a level beneath the threshold of attention and awareness.* It impacts sensory experience, that is, by impacting the sensing brain microtemporally, at the level of the autonomous subprocesses or microconsciousnesses that […] compose the infrastructure of seamless and integrated macroconscious experience."[40]

Hansen's contention here is perhaps overstated; his argument, which draws on contemporary neuroscience, phenomenology, and ergonomics, does the easy work of undermining ubicomp's hastily conceived dynamic of easy "recentering," yet leaves untouched the more sociopolitical questions involved in the discourse of ubicomp: particularly, questions of labor and control. I will return to these questions in more depth later. In any case, I would strongly agree with Hansen's identification of ubicomp, emerging as it does at the twilight of the 20th century, as a crystallizing moment not only in the "dialectic of technics and sensation," but in the history of information, governmentality, and media, as well as that of media poetics and (an)aesthetics. The discourse of ubicomp undoubtedly reveals something fundamental about media *or their disappearance,* and its insights are not limited to the domain of computing.

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[40] Ibid., 70.

Contemporary and roughly analogous to the PARC group's concept of calm

technology is a concept termed "ambient intelligence," introduced at a 1998

conference at Philips Research. In a presentation on the "digital living room," Brian

Epstein of Palo Alto Ventures put forth a vision that followed from Weiser and Seely's:

"one in which technology anticipates our needs, in which the intelligence is ambient—

much like [how] the light in this room, satisfying our need to see without our even

being conscious of it, pervades the entire room. And as long as our needs don't change,

the ambient light continues to unmediatedly satisfy the need."[41] Specifically, it is the

topos of the living room around which Epstein constructs ambient intelligence. In an

opening section entitled "What is a Living Room?" Epstein writes:

> In the office, the value of a technology to us is the functionality provided,
> period. But in the living room, the attention required by a technology, the
> degree it makes demands of us, diminishes its value to us. The functionality of a
> technology is important in the living room, as in the office, but it becomes less
> and less appealing, the more it forces us into "lean-forward mode" and
> interrupts our life.[42]

Here, once again, is a border between domestic and work environments, a border that

is drawn only to be effaced. One of the implications of ubicomp, as we have seen, is

that the technology design of the work environment should become more appealing

and more like that of the living room; while Epstein does not follow this line of

thinking explicitly, it is no accident that his discussion of the living room begins from

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[41] Brian Epstein, "Script for Digital Living Room Conference Keynote" (1998), 6. http://epstein.org/wp-content/uploads/DLR-Script-Internal.doc. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

[42] Ibid., 1.

the office, its dialectical antithesis. Computation could overcome the separation of living (life) and functional innovation (work). "In the digital living room in the future," Epstein writes, "innovation is truly integrated with life, in which our environments become wiser, more comfortable, and more compelling."[43]

One year earlier, in 1997, the Tangible Media Group at the MIT Media Lab completed a project they called "ambientROOM." The group, directed by Hiroshi Ishii, produced a space augmented by what they called "ambient media," media which included sound, light, shadow, airflow, and wall projections. These non-intrusive media were designed to signal, as "background channels," changing information that users would want to monitor continuously, such as the weather, network traffic, stock prices, or even "the activity of a child or loved one." A reflection of water ripples on the ceiling, for instance, indicated the movement of a hamster on a hamster wheel, while audio recordings of rain were made to modulate in correspondence with levels of email activity. "Light rain may mean you have a few unread messages. Thunder could mean that your mailbox is extremely full."[44]

Common to ambient intelligence, ambientROOM, and the theorization of calm technology and ubicomp is a desire to make the world over as a living room, to adjust the economies of attention so that no task—whether leisure or labor—is overly taxing on the human sensory-motor apparatus. It is a way of making room, and time, for living. By analogy to the emergence of softer, ambient practices within or against the more opaque artistic avant-gardes, ubicomp and ambient intelligence almost seem to

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[43] Ibid., 6.

[44] Hiroshi Ishii, et al. Video produced in conjunction with "ambientROOM: Integrating Ambient Media with Architectural Space," *CHI '98: ACM Conference on Human Factors and Computing Systems* (1998). http://tangible.media.mit.edu/project/ambientroom/. Accessed 29 Nov. 2016.

appear as revolutions within or against the "computer revolution," which, since its initial configurations, had thematized speed and processing power in a more overtly spectacular manner, and in a way that privileged the individual optical device—the screen—at the expense of other multi-modal or even amodal kinds of communicative sensation.

Ubicomp and its offshoots are useful here not only because they propose a disappearing act quite similar to that of Tan Lin's poetry (or Brian Eno's ambient music, for that matter), but also because their technical, non-critical and quasi-utopian approach more generally complement activities in the fields of contemporary critical theory and intermedia practice. Ubiquitous computing is, in many ways, the very image of what Gilles Deleuze, writing in 1992, called the "control societies," or of what some of the Italian Autonomists, writing in the 70s and 80s, called the "diffuse" or "social factory," the image of a kind of design thinking that has attempted to technologically solve the crises of capitalism by eradicating the enclosures (*enferments*) and molds of peak Fordism and replace them with softer, free-floating, flexible or ambient systems.[45] The implementation of many of ubicomp technologies in recent years, including but not limited to social media, GPS mapping services, Radio Frequency Identification (RFID), Quick Response (QR) codes, "the Internet of things," smart cities, just-in-time or on-demand production, and so-called "sharing economy" platforms, has only demonstrated the increasing relevance of this thinking. In order to connect such thinking to critical theory, art, and literary practices, however, and in order to appreciate the appropriation of this thinking within such practices, what is needed is a continuation of this detour not through the strictly digital but through the

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[45] See Gilles Deleuze, "Postscript on the Societies of Control," *October* 59 (1992), 3-7 and Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion: A Manifesto for the Twenty-First Century* (Malden, MA: Polity, 1989).

history of music, sound, and listening which profoundly informs ubicomp, ambient poetics, and ambient aesthetics alike, preceding the age of ubiquitous computing altogether.

2 SMOOTH OPERATIONS

> With this album you can actually experience the concept of stimulus progression. We have programmed six selections on each side for purposes of demonstration. Move the needle of your record player from one selection to the other. Listen a few seconds to each. Feel the change in mood as the stimulation increases from the first selection to the last. The effect is both psychological and physiological: proof that MUZAK is more than music.
>
> —Muzak, Inc.[46]

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Muzak, Inc. introduced a product it called "stimulus progression." The stimulus progression, a program of proprietary music and periodic silence, was based on studies conducted throughout the 1940s and 50s on the relationship between auditory stimulation and worker productivity. Using data collected by independent scientists Dr. Harold Burris-Meyer and Richard L. Cardinell, as well as research from Lever Brothers, Fairfield University's language laboratory, and the U.S. Army Engineering Labs, Muzak aimed to create a musical program of modulating intensities that would energize workers at strategic points in the cycle of the day. Led by Dan O'Neill, Muzak's "Director of Human Engineering," the stimulus

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[46] Liner notes to *Stimulus Progression Number One* (MUZAK, 1970).

progression had almost comically villainous aspirations toward affective command and control. "Muzak is getting closer to transforming this elementary tinkering into an exact science…the Total Program…which will (I wonder) be able to pep people up or quiet them down…We are not so much interested in what music we use, it is with the sequence that you achieve results."[47]

From these Taylorist and military origins, Muzak would eventually develop into a genericized brand synonymous with environmental music played in malls, stores, hotels, restaurants, and so on. It was, as the company put it, "audio architecture" apprehended distractedly, a music "to be heard, but not listened to," fulfilling Walter Benjamin's definition of architecture as an art whose reception occurs "in a state of distraction [*Zerstreuung*] and through the collective."[48] Although the demand for Muzak would wane toward the beginning of the 1980s, replaced with more customizable, diverse, and cross-branded approaches to commercial sound programming, the product remains paradigmatic of a certain generic, impersonal style in overdeveloped societies: a light, chintzy, softly familiar music, a diffuse music that can't be placed, a peripheral music that floats just below the threshold of conscious attention. Like a kind of voiceless disco, Muzak anonymized the melodies and production techniques of contemporary pop music, removing markers of authorial specificity to become an "any-music-whatever," yet accentuating its capacities for social control.

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[47] Dan O'Neill, quoted in *The Cincinnati Inquirer Magazine*, January 28, 1973, and in Genesis Breyer P-Orridge, "Muzak: A Concept in Human Engineering," *Exit* 2 (1985), 11.

[48] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version," *Selected Writings: Volume 3 (1935–1938)* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002), 119-120. The word *Zerstreuung*, translated as "distraction," also connotes dispersion, deconcentration, and dissemination.

Brian Eno credits Muzak with the invention of "music designed specifically as a background feature in the environment."[49] This is not strictly accurate; background or environmental music certainly predates Muzak and is quite possibly even more common, as Jacques Attali has suggested, than music made to be listened to as an autonomous and 'foreground' work of art in the modern sense. What was really innovative and remarkable about Muzak was its deployment of music in a managerial mode: its explicit ergonomic and disciplinary rhetoric, its marketing as a productivity tool backed up with supposedly cutting-edge scientific research. Muzak was, as Attali characterizes it, a "security system," one of the first systems to permit the "use of musical distribution channels for the circulation of orders."[50]

UBIQUITOUS AUDIO: ENO'S TINTS

No discussion of ambient aesthetics is possible without a consideration of "ambient music," a term coined by Brian Eno in 1978. Eno's ambient practices, which include work in the mediums of music as well as sound design and video installation, have undoubtedly helped to inaugurate a whole musical genre that goes by the name "ambient," a genre whose practitioners frequently invoke Eno's name and concepts. Somewhere between Western formal composition (especially as pioneered by Erik Satie, Edgard Varèse, John Cage, La Monte Young, Pauline Oliveros, and various other figures of the Minimalist and electroacoustic avant-gardes) and commercial pop practices (particularly progressive rock, New Age recordings, and downtempo/chillout

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[49] Brian Eno, "Ambient Music," in *Audio Culture: Readings in Modern Music*, Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, eds. (New York: Continuum, 2004), 96.

[50] Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 8.

electronic dance music), the ambient genre knowingly positions itself alongside kitsch and "nonmusical" references: Muzak, but also interfacial and intervallic sound elements like "music on hold" (MOH, music played on customer service telephone lines) and software system sounds, as well as meditation or healing music—secular and religious—and the "white noise" of sleep aids or so-called "sound conditioners." In what follows, however, my priority is neither to produce a coherent history of a genre nor a critical or musicological-analytic reading of Eno's work, but rather to use Eno as something of a theoretician of ambient practices, and to examine the ways in which his concept of the tint is productive in analyzing ambient media, artworks, and texts beyond the limits of the musical genre that bears his mark.

Just as ambient intelligence emerged from a moment in the 1990s in which digital media were becoming ubiquitous, ambient music appeared at a comparable moment in the 1970s in which audio media—radio, recording, records, cassettes—had begun to operate continuously and in all kinds of spaces theretofore untouched by music and sonic communication. Muzak's promotional literature states as much: "Today's Baby Boom generation," they write, "grew up with music as an integral part of their lives. From the clock radio to the Hi-Fi to the stereo to the CD player, music has always been present. They expect it everywhere they go. In fact, respondents of all ages in survey after survey unanimously agree they prefer to shop, dine, and work where music is present."[51]

In theory and media studies, this condition of "ubiquitous listening," as Anahid Kassabian has named it, results in a number of new concerns about sonic environments and the status of auditory thought. Around 1975, Marshall McLuhan

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[51] *MUZAK* Limited Partnership, quoted in Jonathan Sterne, "Sounds Like the Mall of America," *Ethnomusicology* Vol. 41, No. 1 (1997), 24.

highlights the space of ubiquitous audio; the whole twentieth century, he argues, was characterized by the gradual emergence of "acoustic space" enabled by technical media, a space which, in contrast to classical visual space (linear, perspectival) was now "dynamic, always in flux, creating its own dimensions moment by moment."[52] Attali, writing in 1977, likewise notes the historically unprecedented ubiquity of "organized noise." "Music…has invaded our world and daily life," he writes. "Today, it is unavoidable, as if, in a world now devoid of meaning, a background noise were increasingly necessary to give people a sense of security."[53] Arguing that the social organization of noise in space is inextricable from economic flows, Attali's work demonstrates how music "reflects the manufacture of society," "constitutes the audible waveband of the vibrations and signs that make up society," and *prompts us to decipher a sound form of knowledge*" over and against Western knowledge's all-too-ocularcentric focalization.[54]

The development of ubiquitous listening in the twentieth century was also accompanied by the thought of the "soundscape," most prominently developed in the "acoustic ecology" or "ecoacoustics" of the 1960s and early 1970s, and later within the field of "sound studies." Developed by R. Murray Schafer, Barry Truax, Hildegard Westerkamp, and colleagues at Simon Fraser University in Vancouver, acoustic ecology is arguably part of the lineage of Canadian media theory and media ecology that includes McLuhan and Harold A. Innis (of whom Eno and Cage alike were followers). Acoustic ecology, often extremely limited by its own moralizing tendencies,

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[52] Marshall McLuhan, *Media Research: Technology, Art, Communication*, Michael A. Moos, ed. (Amsterdam: G+B Arts International, 1997), 41.

[53] Attali, 3.

[54] Ibid., 4.

nevertheless pushed the theory and practice of sound beyond musical studies, into a properly audiocentric space informed by sociology, anthropology, environmental studies, media studies, and literary studies. Eno's work is quite clearly preceded and subtended by such (multi)disciplinary developments, and frequently shares with acoustic ecology and Muzak alike a humanistic-anaesthetic predisposition, one that tends to seek the reduction of noise and sonic clutter through peaceful (non-)interventions.

Eno's ambient practice explicitly derives from his interest in sound design, a field which seems ultimately non-musical and even non-artistic. The first project in his series of *Ambient* recordings, *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), was ostensibly conceived in Cologne Bonn Airport as a replacement for the airport's ill-conceived and probably non-designed sonic atmosphere, a new soundtrack that would anaesthetically assuage the anxiety and sensory overstimulation that characterized the experience of the space.
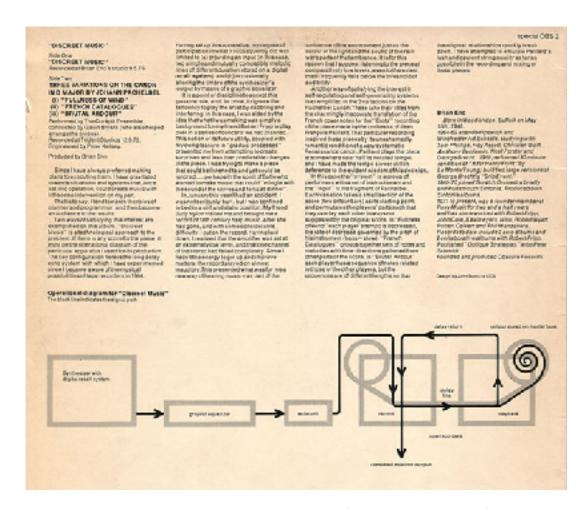
> In late 1977 I was waiting for a plane in Cologne airport. It was early on a sunny, clear morning, the place was nearly empty, and the space of the building (designed, I believe, by the father of one of the founders of Kraftwerk) was very attractive. I started to wonder what kind of music would sound good in a building like that. I thought, "It has to be interruptible (because there'll be announcements), it has to work outside the frequencies at which people speak, and at different speeds from speech patterns (so as not to confuse communication), and it has to be able to accommodate all the noises that airports produce. And, most importantly for me, it has to have something to do with where you are and what you're there for—flying, floating and, secretly, flirting with death." I thought, "I want to make a kind of music that prepares you for dying—that doesn't get all bright and cheerful and pretend you're not a little

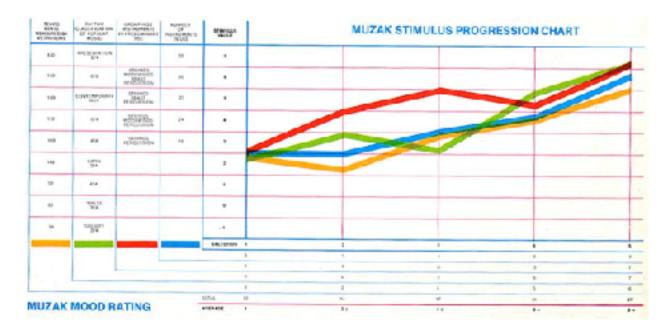apprehensive, but which makes you say to yourself, 'Actually, it's not that big a deal if I die.'"[55]

Eno's "program" here—both communicational, affective, and existential—guides a production process that resembles interface design far more than it resembles traditional or twentieth century avant-garde composition processes. The design program and its major affordances are typical of ambient sensibilities: interruptability, subtlety or withdrawability, amenability (to movement or communication), and affectively 'encalming' capabilities. The airport is essentially, or first and foremost, a space of communicational flows and informatic circulation, which are to be enhanced and optimized by these affordances. And as with ubiquitous computing, the goal here is simply to achieve an ease of movement across already existing systems and their thresholds—through workflows, channels, or even, as Eno suggests, a life—for which the ambient intervention is a lubricant, as it were.

Eno expands the program for ambience in the "manifesto" first published in the liner notes of *Ambient 1: Music for Airports*'s original Polydor Records release. In this short text, Eno argues that the work of "Ambient Music" is in part to improve on the uninspired content of Muzak recordings. Never far from the language of cybernetics, Eno correctly describes Muzak as proceeding "from the basis of regularizing environments" and "blanketing their acoustic and atmospheric idiosyncrasies"; he refers to Muzak's claim to "brighten" spaces, "supposedly alleviating the tedium of routine tasks and leveling out the natural ups and downs of the body rhythms."

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55 Eno, 96. The recordings were never used in Cologne Bonn, but they have occasionally been played in airports and transportation hubs, as part of Eno's early audiovisual installations. *2 Fifth Avenue* (1979) and *White Fences* (1979), for instance, slow-paced videos of urban landscape features soundtracked by *Music for Airports*, were shown on televisions at La Guardia airport and Grand Central Station in the early 1980s.

Liner notes to Brian Eno, *Discreet Music* (Obscure Records, 1975).

Muzak Stimulus Progression chart, from Muzak promotional literature, n.d.

Ambient music, according to Eno, is a strange (anti-)Muzak. It shares Muzak's enveloping character, but where Muzak is designed to increase productivity via a kind of hyperactive and energizing stimulation, ambient music is simply "intended to induce calm and a space to think." And instead of simply erasing the particularities of a space and replacing them with "brightness," a sort of all-over, non-conscious excitation, ambient music allows those particularities to remain, even accentuating them. "Ambient music," Eno writes, "must be able to accommodate many levels of listening attention without enforcing one in particular; it must be as ignorable as it is interesting."[56]

Eno defines an ambience simply as "an atmosphere, or a surrounding influence: a tint." Ambient music involves a recoloring or tinting of a place. It functions like a semi-transparent envelope, enabling a plurality of sonic layers to come forth. In color theory, and more precisely in painting or other modes of subtractive color mixing, a tint is defined as the product of a lightening, a lightening that takes place without a shift in hue. In more colloquial usage, tint refers to any modification of coloration in either direction (saturation or desaturation), and usually connotes a very slight or barely perceptible modification. Tint often appears as a descriptor of otherwise transparent materials made translucent; think of tinted windows, tinted glasses, tinted film, or tinted moisturizer. In this sense, to use a synesthetic analogy, ambient music might almost be what semi-transparency is for vision; transparency, that is, as defined by Gyorgy Kepes as an interpenetration of individual elements without destruction,

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56 Eno, 97.

resulting in a space that "not only recedes but fluctuates in a continuous activity," a supposedly non-hierarchical space of continuous variation.[57]

SMOOTH OPERATIONS

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari associate such "continuous variation" with what they call "smooth space." For Deleuze and Guattari, continuous variation is basically a process of soft-edged defiguration, "a transformation of substances and a dissolution of forms, a passage to the limit or flight from contours in favor of fluid forces, flows, air, light, and matter, such that a body or a word does not end at a precise point…A matter more immediate, more fluid, and more ardent than bodies or words."[58] The concept is introduced first in relation to Hjelmslev's semiotics and the theory of minor literature—continuous variation as an excessive amplitude that puts pressure on the "representative threshold of the majoritarian standard." Here, the placing of variable elements in continuous variation is quite explicitly described in the terms of a synthetic ambient mix, or, "opera": "Gestures and things, voices and sounds, are caught up in the same 'opera,' swept away by the same shifting effects of stammering, vibrato, tremolo, and overspilling. A synthesizer places all of the parameters in continuous variation, gradually making 'fundamentally heterogeneous elements end up turning into each other in some way.'"[59]

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[57] Gyorgy Kepes, *Language of Vision* (Chicago: Paul Theobald and Company, 1969), 77.

[58] Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 109.

[59] Ibid., 109.

Deleuze and Guattari theorize two kinds of space, the "striated" and the

"smooth," two terms they borrow from the composer Pierre Boulez. These kinds do

not exist in isolation, but are rather always mixtures, multiplicities, each

communicating with the other in different ways. In the musical schema, the striated

> is that which intertwines fixed and variable elements, produces an order and succession of distinct forms, and organizes horizontal melodic lines and vertical harmonic planes. The smooth is the continuous variation, continuous development of form; it is the fusion of harmony and melody in favor of the production of properly rhythmic values, the pure act of the drawing of a diagonal across the vertical and the horizontal.[60]

The space-time of continuous variation is smooth because it is not pulsed. Deleuze and

Guattari, paraphrasing Boulez, write that "in a smooth space-time one occupies

without counting, whereas in a striated space-time one counts in order to occupy."[61] In

smooth space-time, it is as if everything has become interval, intermezzo, medium—

between beats, between pulses, between lines of striation. But, again, the smooth is not

a space of homogeneity nor of sameness; it is a nonmetric space of continuous

variation, of unrepeatable singularities whose edges are soft and indeterminate.

> Smooth space is directional rather than dimensional or metric. Smooth space is filled by events or haecceities, far more than by formed and perceived things. It is a space of affects, more than one of properties. It is *haptic* rather than optical perception. Whereas in the striated, forms organize a matter, in the smooth materials signal forces and serve as symptoms for them. It is an intensive rather than extensive space, one of distances, not of measures and properties. Intense *spatium* instead of *extensio.* A Body without Organs instead of an organism and organization. Perception in it is based on symptoms and evaluations rather than

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[60] Ibid., 478.

[61] Ibid., 477.

measures and properties. That is why smooth space is occupied by intensities, wind and noise, forces, and sonorous and tactile qualities.[62]

Deleuze and Guattari will continue to make models of the smooth and the striated: the smooth is nomad space and the striated is sedentary space; the smooth is the space of multinational capital and the striated is the space of the nation-State; the smooth is the sea and the striated is the city. Smooth space subordinates endpoints and starting points to the lines of becoming that pass between them; striated space emphasizes the supremacy of the points and minimizes the passages. And throughout, Deleuze and Guattari are careful to show how the binaries do not quite hold and how each of the two kinds ends up continually modifying the other, albeit using various methods.

The smooth seems easily identifiable with the atmospheric, quasi-liberatory space-time of ambient music, as commentators such as Paul Roquet and Ulrik Schmidt have suggested.[63] This is certainly true within ambient musical compositions themselves, whose forms often have a cloudy, soft-edged, non-pulsed character. But the situation seems more complicated than this. In keeping with their emphasis on the asymmetrical co-modulation of the two kinds (smooth and striated), Deleuze and Guattari in fact give the ambient a much more ambivalent position, suggesting that it serves to generate striae, and is more precisely an "encompassing element" of the striated which the latter instrumentalizes in order to stabilize itself. In a section on visual art and painting, they claim that "striated space is defined by the requirements of long-distance vision: constancy of orientation, invariance of distance through an interchange of inertial points of reference, *interlinkage by immersion in an ambient*

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[62] Ibid., 479.

[63] See Paul Roquet, *Ambient Media: Japanese Atmospheres of Self* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016) and Ulrik Schmidt, "Ambience and Ubiquity," in *Throughout: Art and Culture Emerging with Ubiquitous Computing*, Ulrik Ekman, ed. (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2012).

milieu."[64] The ambient milieu is said to optimize the "interlinkage" of monadic points—or, more precisely, nomadic points—such that there is a net reduction of noise in the system, an overall homogenization, and a reemphasis of the superiority of the points on either side of the lines of communication. (This rhymes quite strikingly with the aims of ambient intelligence, previously discussed, and the program of Eno's airport music.) In a word, ambient music works to smooth out a striated space—the space of the mall and its partitions, the space of the commute and the city, the space of the office and its cubicles, the space of the airport and its gates and security checkpoints—only to grant individual bodies and subjects a kind of sovereignty and thus to functionally recapitulate the striae without eliminating them.

The ambient is then "the Encompassing Element without which nothing would be global or englobed," say Deleuze and Guattari. "The desert, sky, or sea, the Ocean, the Unlimited, first plays the role of an encompassing element, and tends to become a horizon: the earth is thus surrounded, globalized, "grounded" by this element, which holds it in immobile equilibrium and makes Form possible."[65] The Encompassing Element, a term supposedly borrowed from Jean-Pierre Vernant's analysis of Anaximanderean space, has a globalizing valence, and Deleuze and Guattari link this particular mode of the smooth to the world-space of capital, or to what they—and especially Guattari in his later work—will call "integrating (or integrated) world capitalism."

"Never believe that a smooth space will suffice to save us," Deleuze and Guattari intone. This much is obvious. But the question remains as to what degree the

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[64] Deleuze and Guattari, 493.

[65] Ibid., 495.

smoothing capacities of ambient media can be experimented with, used critically and inventively, used to contest and reimagine spaces and practices of space as they exist under integrated world capitalism. Eno does not convincingly address this question; despite his professed distaste for Muzak, he leaves its principles intact without really repurposing them, and he leaves its mode of smooth operation more or less unmodified. His thinking nevertheless keys us into what these ambient principles are in the first place, and his practical shortcomings have invited improvement.

FURNITURE MUSIC: (NON-)LISTENING TO SATIE

Much has been made of Eno's indebtedness to a whole host of composers who were producing "ambient music" *avant la lettre*, mostly in the context of Western art music. This debt is not made explicit in the *Ambient 1* "manifesto," though it is referenced in the notes for the 1975 ambient record *Discreet Music*. It is not worth belaboring this point, and suffices to say that earlier uses of ambient, environmental, or "background feature" musics display similar stylistic and formal concerns to the idiom spearheaded by Eno. The narration of this history usually starts from the critical work of the early twentieth-century composer Erik Satie and his *musique d'ameublement* ("furniture music"), which he described as music to fulfill the same atmospheric roles of "light, heat and all the forms of comfort."[66] "We must bring about," he wrote,

> a music which is like furniture—a music, that is, which will be part of the noises of the environment, will take them into consideration. I think of it as melodious, softening the noises of the knives and forks, not dominating them, not imposing itself. It would fill up those heavy silences that sometimes fall

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[66] Erik Satie, quoted in liner notes to *Noriko Ogawa plays Erik Satie — Piano Music, Vol. 1* (BIS Records, 2016).

between friends dining together. It would spare them the trouble of paying attention to their own banal remarks. And at the same time it would neutralize the street noises which so indiscreetly enter into the ploy of conversation.[67]

Satie's project was more or less to radicalize the generic characteristics of 16th, 17th, and 18th-century *Tafelmusik* ("table-music") and *Verwandlungsmusik* ("changing music") and 19th century *divertimentos* and *divertissements* ("amusements")—all light, leisurely, unobtrusive genres designed to optimize dinner conversation in private settings, or to serve as incidental or background music during an intermission or change of acts in a ballet, opera, or dramatic production. This music is all interval (much like Deleuze and Guattari's smooth space). The resulting works of Satie, often pastiches, were extremely minimal and repetitive, rarely performed in the composer's lifetime and treated by most contemporary commentators as proto-Conceptual jokes.

Satie first applied the term to a set of four very short pieces. The notes for a collaborative concert with Darius Milhaud in 1917 implore listeners to ignore the music, to hear it without listening to it, or to hear it inattentively.

> We urge you to take no notice of it and to behave during the intervals as if it did not exist. This music…claims to make a contribution to life in the same way as a private conversation, a painting in a gallery, or the chair in which you may or may not be seated.[68]

Here, Satie is not only presenting an intervallic smoothness, but also arguably proposing a kind of "non-cochlear" music analogous to the "antiretinal" art introduced by Marcel Duchamp, whose *Fountain* dates to the very same year.[69] (I want to follow

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[67] Satie, quoted in John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1973), 76. This quotation is also referenced in Brian Eno's liner notes to *Discreet Music* (Obscure Records, 1975).

[68] Quoted in Pierre-Daniel Templier, *Erik Satie* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1969), 45.

[69] See Seth Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear: Towards a Non-Cochlear Sonic Art* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2009).

this possible contour, outlining Conceptualism and ambience, in the pages to come.) And with this virtually intermedia approach to non-listening, in which music becomes decorative art or interior design, Satie's set of pieces effectively functions, as Eno would later write of his own ambient music, as "a small but versatile catalogue" of music "suited to a wide variety of moods and atmospheres."[70] Satie's own "catalogue" was comprised of the following 1917 pieces, to which a fifth piece was added in 1923:

1. *Tapisserie en fer forgé* - pour l'arrivée des invités (grande réception) - À jouer dans un vestibule - Mouvement: Très riche
   (*Tapestry in forged iron* - for the arrival of the guests (grand reception) - to be played in a vestibule - Movement: Very rich)

2. *Carrelage phonique* - Peut se jouer à un lunch ou à un contrat de mariage - Mouvement: Ordinaries
   (*Phonic tiling* - Can be played during a lunch or civil marriage - Movement: Ordinary)

3. *Sons industriels* - Premier *Entr'acte*: *Chez un "Bistrot"*
   (*Industrial sounds* - First *Entr'acte*: *At a "Bistro"*)

4. *Sons industriels* - Second *Entr'acte*: *Un salon*
   (*Industrial sounds* - Second *Entr'acte*: *A drawing room*)

5. *Tenture de cabinet préfectoral*
   (Wall-lining in a chief officer's office)
   (commissioned 1923)

Like Eno, Satie was interested in miming the (glossy) catalogue rhetoric of optimization—in a letter to Jean Cocteau "advertising" his furniture music, Satie writes:

> Insist upon Furniture Music. Have no meetings, no get-togethers, no social affairs of any kind without Furniture Music … Don't get married without

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[70] Eno, 97.

Furniture Music. Stay out of houses that don't use Furniture Music. Anyone who hasn't heard Furniture Music has no idea what true happiness is.[71]

The adoption of a commercial voice here only further underscores the degree to which Satie's practice is an ambience of ambivalence, close to irony or pastiche. Satie is an easy icon for ambience, moreover, because he represents, in terms of milieu, a caustic avant-garde that is not acidic like Dada, but basic like soap—a soft, "pure," but nonetheless vexing and irritating affront to the bourgeoisie of the day.

However, in the course of his 20th century reception, Satie would become known for his earlier works, namely the *Gymnopédies* of 1888 and the *Gnossiennes* of 1893, far more than for his furniture music. In contradistinction to the latter, the early compositions are very conventional, simple melodies that easily soundtrack jewelry commercials and hotel lobbies. They are subdued and relaxing, minimal like the furniture pieces but without pastiche. Satie's midcentury recuperation, as it were, became a point of contention for many invested in the avant-garde—most prominently, for John Cage, who in his lectures during the 1940s and 50s adopted Satie as a kind of legendary figure of inspiration. The main example used by Cage and by those interested in reconstructing Satie's avant-garde status has been *Vexations* (1893-94), a work that was never published and likely never performed during Satie's lifetime. (It was not until Cage printed a facsimile of the composition in 1949 that its existence became widely acknowledged.)

Vexations is a short theme written in deliberately convoluted enharmonic notation, covering less than a full page, accompanied by the instruction: "*Pour se jouer 840 fois de suite ce motif, il sera bon de se préparer au préalable, et dans le plus grand silence,*

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[71] Satie, quoted in Cage, 76.

par des immobilités sérieuses" ("In order to play the theme 840 times in succession, it would be advisable to prepare oneself beforehand, and in the deepest silence, by serious immobilities"). Taken as a command to repeat the theme 840 times, *Vexations* epitomizes furniture music, and represents a very early case of Minimalist performance principles. Cage organized the first known performance of the piece in 1963 at the Pocket Theatre in Manhattan; the performance lasted over 18 hours and required a relay team of about 14 pianists, including Christian Wolff, John Cale, David Tudor, and Cage himself.

 Vexations, *Music for Airports*, and Muzak's *Stimulus Progression* are all meant to be listened to inattentively, or even not listened to at all. But I want to suggest that what Satie's piece introduces—and what *Music for Airports* and *Stimulus Progression* lack—is a real sense of ambivalence, of unsettled ambience. The distinction here is affective. Where *Stimulus Progression* merely mimics contemporary pop tonality, and where Eno abstracts it to a drifting, smooth movement mostly of fifths and tonics, Satie gives us an strange, nearly atonal loop that never lands on solid ground. *Vexations* would never be played in a mall. And yet it imitates, in almost all its other aspects, the strategies of ambient music and ambient media. It is unpulsed, nonmetric, ignorable, even eerily encalming, to a certain degree.

 At the same time, Satie's work points away from ambient, affective media like Muzak and toward a different aesthetic and art-historical trajectory: Conceptualism and the antiretinal, art made not to be perceived, the arts of non-listening, non-reading, non-looking, non-writing. By returning to Tan Lin and introducing Lisa Robertson, I want to look at these intersections and divergences in Conceptual and

ambient poetics: the relation between Conceptualism ("Against Expression") and

ambience's soft, affective studies.

3 AMBIENT SELVES

Tan Lin's "ambient stylistics" were already operational, as we saw, in 1997's *BlipSoak01*, but the term's first appearance in print was as the title of a piece published in a 2000 issue of the journal *Conjunctions*. A direct predecessor to Lin's 2011 book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking,* the poem "Ambient Stylistics" is a sort of non-committal or soft manifesto that mixes literary theory, cultural theory, autobiography, and a Steinian fondness for lists, arrays, and other short, quasi-automatic declarations. And like *BlipSoak01*, it gives us instructions for reading it. "This a poem about boredom and its relation to the things that we know are not repeated," Lin begins. "It should not describe but only skim (biographical) material we already knew. It should exist on the edge of something that is no longer funny. In this way, it should create the meaningless passing of time, like disco music."[72] "Ambient Stylistics" reiterates but also reformulates the poetics proposed in *BlipSoak01*: it references Muzak, New Age, mood music, and the disappearance or camouflaging of the poem into ambiences, "into the large shapes and the patterns of words that surround us," evoking "the most diffuse and unrecognizable moods that a culture

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[72] Lin, "Ambient Stylistics," *Conjunctions* 35 (2000), 127.

produces."[73] "Poetry ought to be as easy as painting by numbers," Lin insists. "It should turn us into those emotions and feelings we could not experience in our own body. All poetry goes out in drag."[74] Queer dance culture, T.S. Eliot, and Gertrude Stein are praised as the most important predecessors of ambient stylistics.[75] Ronald Reagan's failing memory is analyzed alongside Quaaludes, Warhol, and Donna Summer, while television, drugs, and ambient biometric intelligence provide the best poetic models. "The most refreshing language would be written by an exercise bike or a fancy treadmill filled with electronic devices that measure one's alpha waves, pulse, heartbeat, respiration rate, C02 output, etc."[76]

In this early formulation, Lin's interest in and performative complicity with what might be loosely described as the cultural and cognitive logics of late capitalism, (a poetry of "pleasure," "disposability, superficiality and ephemerality," "effortless non-understanding" and "redundancy," "overall sameness" and "standardization"), and especially his call for the replacement of "conscious experimentation and ego" with "unconscious repetition," resembles both the non-listening of Satie and the non-viewing of Duchamp. It is also closely related to the contemporary attempt in American poetry to describe and produce what has been called "conceptual writing." However, I want to argue that new modes of ambient poetics—especially as exemplified by Lin's later work and by much of Lisa Robertson's writing—present a

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[73] Ibid., 129.

[74] Ibid.

[75] "Gertrude Stein is the most important writer of the twentieth century who ought to remain completely unread. I have never read more than two sentences of *The Making of Americans* at a time (they put me to sleep or make me want to eat something like pizza or hot dogs), and in that way I have read the book many, many times. I have, in a sense, never been able to put the book down and I hope that in the future I will continue to never put it down until the day that I die or stop eating." (Lin, 132)

[76] Ibid., 140-141.

much more nuanced and remarkable style for the 21st century, one that carefully incorporates and modifies (auto)biography, affect, embodiment, lyric, and the psychogeographic. It may be antiretinal, but only in the sense that it attenuates subjective and perceptual fields to a low and relaxing level (rather than bracketing them altogether). It then expands into the affective, which is nonconscious and pre-emotional. I argue that, although sharing many of the concerns of conceptual writing (and, similarly, deeply indebted to Language writing), ambience as a particular poetic concept and approach mimes and documents, in a singular fashion, the diffusion of subjectivity into consumer atmospherics and ambient networks.

CONCEPTUAL AND AMBIENT POETICS

Conceptual writing, as formulated at the beginning of the 21st century by Craig Dworkin, Kenneth Goldsmith, and a number of other contemporary theorists and practitioners including Marjorie Perloff, Vanessa Place, and Robert Fitterman, positions itself largely at the intersection of two traditions. These are North American experimental poetics (such as Language writing and Objectivism) and Conceptual visual art (such as the language-oriented and materially textual work of Joseph Kosuth, Adrian Piper, Dan Graham, Andy Warhol, and various artists promoted by the curator and dealer Seth Siegelaub). Both of these traditions emerge in the wake of European and North American Modernist experiments which occurred earlier in the twentieth century, and in turn owe much to such figures as Marcel Duchamp, John Cage, Gertrude Stein, Erik Satie, Ezra Pound, and Stephane Mallarmé. Conceptual writing, or conceptual poetry (ConPo) as it's sometimes called, tends to involve process- and

machine-based forms of "uncreative writing," which include appropriation, Oulipan experiments, Fluxus-like scripts, allegorical collage, and an interest in digital media and digital textuality. ConPo's "canon" might include works such as Goldsmith's verbatim transcriptions of traffic reports, weather reports, sports commentary, and a September 1, 2000 edition of the *New York Times* (*Traffic,* 2006; *The Weather*, 2005; *Sports*, 2008; and *Day*, 2003, respectively) or translations of his own everyday speech and activities (*Soliloquy,* 1997 and *Fidget*, 2000), Caroline Bergvall's collation of 48 different translations of the open lines of Dante's *Inferno* (*Via*, 2005), Christian Bök's univocalics (*Eunoia*, 2001) or later experiments with bio-generated texts (*Xenotext*, 2015), and Dworkin's parsing of sentences in a grammar textbook, replacing each word with the name of its grammatical function (*Parse*, 2008).

In Dworkin and Goldsmith's influential volume *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011), the authors reevaluate—as we saw earlier in Manovich—the status of the aforementioned avant-gardes in the age of digital media, wherein software and the internet appear to have transposed into a more banal register the anti-hierarchical, avant-garde gestures of appropriation, copying, and cut-up. Even writing itself has been accelerated, automated, and banalized to a degree that it is beginning to disappear—as the media theorist Vilém Flusser proclaimed—from human culture altogether, becoming diffused into hidden and nonconscious, nonhuman processes. This is by no means an unanticipated occasion. Indeed, in its long development through discourse networks characterized by things like monumental inscription (tablets, palimpsests, tattoos) and documentary notation (notes, lists, sketches), from the ideogrammatic and pre-alphabetical to the age of moveable type, typography, and typographic standardization, writing frequently and increasingly

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becomes backgrounded, incidental. And reading moves with it. Digital culture has simply actualized, by new and different means, the potential for writing to become ambient in this way. In *Does Writing Have a Future?*, published in 1987, Flusser writes:

> Our literature is not monumental...it does not demand consideration and contemplation. It is documentary, it teaches and instructs. Our literature wants doctors rather than wise men. It is written quickly to be read quickly. And this speed explains the dynamics of the ever-increasing flow of literature in which we are swimming.[77]

One might also compare the statement of Friedrich Kittler—who, it should be noted, largely disagreed with Flusser on other grounds—that "we do not write any more." "Human-made writing," he explains, "passes through microscopically written inscriptions which, in contrast to all historical writing tools, are able to read and write by themselves."[78] In the mediatic transition that runs through typography to programming, actual writing is concealed in the digital "stack" that, at the level of the graphical software interface, manifests as line, as gesture, as image, and as indicator, rather than as a traditional text. It is not only a matter of text messages, internet comments, spell-check, corrective and predictive typing, algorithmically generated input suggestions, and so on, but a matter of (not) knowing, on the part of the user, how these writings operate in the first place at the level of the program. Flusser describes this condition as a "new illiteracy."

Although they may hold some amount of preliminary pessimism regarding the "death" of human notation, both Flusser and Kittler remain radically, if critically, open

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[77] Vilém Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 18.

[78] Friedrich Kittler, *Literature, Media, Information Systems* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 147.

to what may emerge in post-print digital culture. "It is beginning to become clear," writes Flusser, temporarily taking the utopian position, "that continuous notation" (and here one might substitute "ambient notation," the ambient notation of digital media) "continuous and accelerating progress, concerns apparatuses… Apparatuses have no existential brakes: they don't exist, and they don't need to come up for air. And so we can leave progress, historical thinking and action, to apparatuses. They do it better. And we can free ourselves from all history, become mere observers of it, and become open to something else—to a concrete experience of the present."[79] When Kittler intones that "we simply do not know what our writing does," we might read an implied Spinozism: we do not know what our writing *can do*.

It is in this media-historical context that Dworkin and Goldsmith propose conceptual writing as a cultural-practical response to this technical "revolution" that has already occurred, in Goldsmith's words, "in the operating system of how we write at the root level." Goldsmith speculates that poetry's response to this irreversible mutation in the "ethos and modes" of writing 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*."[80] Conceptual writing is in other words something like the literary echo of the antiretinal moment Marcel Duchamp described in art, in which works no longer need to be read (or viewed, in the case of art), but rather need to be conceived as processual and context-bound events within a relatively controlled institutional

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[79] Flusser, 21.

[80] Kenneth Goldsmith, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?," introduction to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, eds. Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011), xxi (italics added).

situation. "Everything was becoming conceptual," Duchamp says; "that is, it depended on things other than the retina."[81] The "things" upon which artworks began to self-reflexively depend were the individuals, networks, media, and *texts* responsible for the creation, presentation, and commoditization of the works: artists and their semiotic manipulations, curators and arts professionals, contracts, files, and documents, galleries and press releases, or, in short, *systems*. The critic Lucy Lippard called this a "dematerialization" of the work of art, but, as Dworkin points out, it also could be said to be a "rematerialization" of language-oriented media, the armature on which the economy of Conceptual art is built. At first, the omnipresence of language in Conceptual art practices appears as a movement towards the immaterial and informatic, but its proliferation inarguably involved a renewed attention to the (newly uncanny) hardware of text, paper, books, and textual displays. Conceptualism, as Robert Smithson put it so succinctly, called for "LANGUAGE to be LOOKED at and/or THINGS to be READ." The opacity of "printed matter," Dworkin concludes, "is a conclusion of conceptual art but already a premise for conceptual writing," in which works are said to depend on the material systems that situate them and participate in their becoming, composed of acts of editing, transcription, translation, and publishing, with an emphasis on semi-automated or machinic procedures of textual production and distribution.[82]

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[81] Pierre Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp* (New York: Da Capo, 1979), 39. Quoted in Craig Dworkin, "The Fate of Echo," introduction to *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, xxvii.

[82] Dworkin, xxxvi.

Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman make a further distinction within conceptual writing between what they call pure conceptualism and impure conceptualism. In their *Notes on Conceptualisms*, they explain:

> Pure conceptualism negates the need for reading in the traditional textual sense —one does not need to "read" the work as much as think about the idea of the work. In this sense, pure conceptualism's readymade properties capitulate to and mirror the easy consumption/generation of text and the devaluation of reading in the larger culture. Impure conceptualism, manifest in the extreme by the baroque, exaggerates reading in the traditional textual sense. In this sense, its excessive textual properties refuse, and are defeated by, the easy consumption/generation of text and the rejection of reading in the larger culture.[83]

This distinction makes clearer some of the priorities of conceptual writing—or at least of what Place and Fitterman consider conceptual writing. As in Lin, these two modes are connected to a conception of the contemporary in which reading in the usual, sustained, focused, human sense is no longer necessary, or even desirable. But there are limitations here. For one thing, in Place and Fitterman, non-reading is not ever understood at the level of embodiment (where sensation and affect might still exist), but rather is immediately reduced to the non-sensory realm of the "idea," which exists in thought. For another, the "need for reading" here seems to be either/or. That is, it either is absent, or is exaggerated to the point of ironic redundancy. The binary of pure and impure conceptualisms leaves no room for ambient reading, which would go on inattentively and distractedly, heavily mediated by what Lin calls absorptive "reading environments," or the spaces in which reading takes place, thus pointing out those

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[83] Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013), 25.

spaces and registering the changes within them.[84] What I am suggesting here is that, unlike Place and Fitterman's conceptualisms, ambient aesthetics must be understood as a materialism, an atmospherization of reading and not a simple substitution of reading with "the idea of a work."

Kenneth Goldsmith's reading of Tan Lin is also limited in its understanding of (non-)reading, albeit in a different way. It fixates on the effacement of the "I," focusing on its replacement by the inventory at the expense of a more developed notion of ambient subjectivity (and of Lin's work in general). In his quasi-manifesto, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Goldsmith articulates Lin's "ambient" along the lines and within the limits of his own uncreative writing. For Goldsmith, Lin's *Ambient Fiction Reading System 01: A List of Things I Read Didn't Read and Hardly Read for Exactly One Year* (2006-7), a blog of reading citations maintained by the author, is exemplary of conceptualist techniques of managing and reusing archival information collected online. The blog, also published in eBook form as *BIB* (2007), consists only of dates, times, approximate reading locations or environments, and article titles. Here is the entry from October 11, 2006:

> 12:17-19 HOME OFFICE WSJ Rethinking Recess
> 12:19 Engineering Food at Level of Molecules
> 12:20-2 Man is Forced onto Highway and Hit by a Car in Brooklyn
>
> 7:55-6 LIVING ROOM City Acts to Add Low Cost Homes
> 7:56-7 A Cross Cultural Saga Wins the Booker Prize
> 7:58-9 Iraqui Dead May total 600,000 Study Says
> 8:-03 In Minnesota, Voters Tune Out Scandals and Infighting to Focus on Issues
> 8:40 WSJ Louis Vuitton Tries Modern Methods On Factory Lines

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[84] Lin, interviewed by Chris Alexander, Kristen Gallagher, and Gordon Tapper in Lin, *HEATH Course Pak* (Denver, CO: Counterpath, 2012), n.p.

8:02-6 HOME OFFICE An Analyst Questions the Self-Perpetuating Side of Therapy
8:12-14 Friends for Life an Emerging Biology of Emotional Healing

8:19-23 Farmhouse Called Home is a Home to History Too[85]

Other than a brief mention of Eno and Satie, Goldsmith does not provide any analysis of what Lin means by "ambient"—despite including the term in the title of the chapter—nor a reading of any of Lin's other works. He is finally interested in how the accumulation of citations results in "a fairly accurate portrait of Tan Lin, a different type of autobiography, accurately describing himself and his circumstances, without once ever having used the pronoun *I*."[86] He is less interested in the specific affects and moods which circulate in Lin's work, and which are directly tied to elements of consumer culture as well as to (racialized, queered, gendered) embodiments.

AMBIENT LYRIC

As its critics are eager to point out, conceptual writing too often presents a strawman version of the lyric Subject, which it identifies as the deep, dramatic, expressive, and sovereign "I" that is to be rejected and effaced. Dworkin bemoans the traditional, writing-workshop lyric which he claims still holds sway today; he cites Charles Olson's desire to be "rid of lyrical interference of the individual as ego" as the desire proper to conceptualism. He continues:

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[85] Lin, http://ambientreading.blogspot.com/. Accessed 1 Apr. 2017.

[86] Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 199.

Our emphasis is on work that does not seek to express unique, coherent, or consistent individual psychologies and that, moreover, refuses familiar strategies of authorial control in favor of automatism, reticence, obliquity, and modes of noninterference. With minimal intervention, the writers here are more likely to determine preestablished rules and parameters—to set up a system and step back as it runs its course—than to heavily edit or masterfully polish…Frequently, we had to admit that works we admired were not quite right for this collection because they were simply too creative—they had too much authorial intervention, however masterful or stylish that intervention might be.[87]

Or, to put it more bluntly, as Place and Fitterman have it: "'I' do not exist…objectivity is old-fashioned, subjectivity idem."[88] There is reason to believe that this euphemism for lyrical subjectivity—"unique, coherent, or consistent"—is not much more than a hasty polemical simplification that is given far too much emphasis in conceptualism's histrionics. Jonathan Culler, Marjorie Levinson, Virginia Jackson, and others associated with New Lyric studies have convincingly shown, for instance, that the lyric is far more complex than its Conceptualist detractors seem to believe. In addition to being an ill-defined set of approaches with no clear historical coordinates, the lyric is said to have problematized the Subject just as much as it constructs it. Levinson writes brilliantly of the cloudification of the "I" in Wordsworth, the becoming-"mesh" of subjectivity, in which "the self dissipates into the atmosphere—it becomes climate—but climate becomes all in all. *Le vaporisation et centralisation du moi. Tout est la*' (Baudelaire)." In this Romantic verse, writes Levinson, "it is as if the film of cloud that is "I" dissolves into an atmospheric impulse that animates the textual field as the ionized air before a summer storm makes your skin tingle. A pattern flashes on the inward eye (we do not ask *where* that is any more than we ask *whose* heart gets filled)—

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[87] Dworkin, xliii-xliv.

[88] Ibid., 38.

that flash, awakening a visible scene on which the sun is shining, a scene brought forth by the living air into which the blur of self has melted."[89] Ambient subjectivity's unlocalizability, its cloudy, meshlike or networked form, may be already palpable in the lyric genre that ConPo (and LangPo with it) has tended to oppose.

Like Levinson's work on clouds, Timothy Morton's idea of "ambient poetics" is an intervention in the field of New Lyric and Romantic studies, but with a distinctly ecological valence. Morton sees ambient poetics as manifest in Romantic verse from Wordsworth and Coleridge to "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Ambience functions by pointing out the medium or environment in which communication and activity take place, elaborating on the hum of a room, the touch of a breeze, the glow of a street. (Again, recall Lin's "reading environments.") The ambient includes such "surrounding" objects as "the margins of a page, the silence before and after music, the frame and walls surrounding a picture, the decorative spaces of a building (*parergon*), including niches for sculpture."[90] It collapses the subject-object schema by disturbing the edges of the subject, defiguring it, and redefining it by its moods and its places of dwelling. With this potential for environmental indication and monitoring, ambient poetics addresses a fundamental crisis—namely, ecological crisis, the crisis of the so-called Anthropocene (or what Jason W. Moore has dubbed Capitalocene). Ambience, as Morton defines it, "is a poetic enactment of a state of nondual awareness that collapses the subject-object division, upon which depends the aggressive territorialization that precipitates ecological destruction."[91] According to Morton, it's by writing ambience

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[89] Marjorie Levinson, "Of Being Numerous," *Studies in Romanticism* Vol. 49, No. 4 (2010), 650.

[90] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 34.

[91] Morton, "Why Ambient Poetics? Outline For a Depthless Ecology," *The Wordsworth Circle* 33.1 (2002), 52.

and reading for ambience that we might move toward what he calls a "depthless ecology." Not a "deep ecology" invested in cultural guilt and natural purity, but a surface (or a bottomless) ecology that perhaps integrates, perhaps following theorists Felix Guattari and Gregory Bateson, the pre-individual ecologies of the psychical, the social, and the environmental.[92] This is to say that ambience, even for Morton, doesn't necessarily have anything to do with the "environment" in its traditional ecological sense, "the great outdoors," an outside or primordial Nature to be preserved from its opposite, Culture. Ambience is simply the ambience of the spaces we are already inhabiting—on the one hand, the intimate spaces of dwelling, and on the other, the most inhuman or alien of spaces, even those spaces that are intolerable. And this is ambience's politics, in the abstract: to imagine what spaces we might (not) inhabit, or might inhabit otherwise.

Morton's formulations unfortunately have little concrete to say about current poetic practice; his genealogy is one that ends with Eno and moves backwards from him, one in which Eno's ideas are retrospectively applied to 18th and 19th century texts. Still, much of what Morton says coheres nicely to the logic of ambience that we have followed from Satie through Eno through ubicomp to Lin, and its emphasis on ecology is instructive. Before finishing with Lin, however, it is worth asking how the remarkably ambient work of the Canadian poet Lisa Robertson—who does not use the term ambient herself—creates striking ecological and architectural connections that bridge the lyric, Language writing, conceptualism, and Lin's later work.

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[92] See Félix Guattari, *The Three Ecologies* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2008).

"We sew ourselves into air, we're speaking for the air in the shape-filled cities, the air of the black branches, the objects covered in string, the smudged paper against the metal fence, some spatial confusion which replaces love."[93] Through these and other techniques—gaseous grafting, spatial confusion, and the ventriloquizing of airs—Lisa Robertson's poetry thematizes the expression and embodiment of architectural space. It often enacts a kind of vaporization of the body, a defiguration of the body into the urban ambiances which are the built world's "expressions." Writing as the Office for Soft Architecture, a pseudo-corporate author-function, Robertson has "documented" this vaporous spatialization of subjectivity, which is also a "becoming multiple" and a "becoming money."[94] At first glance, such a writing might seem counter-intuitively like a spiritualization or dematerialization of the body. But it's more complex than this. There are stakes to these becomings, and they contribute to an understanding of affect and ambiance which enrich and complicate, rather than efface, the body (and, we might add, subjectivity itself). Far from merely undoing the body and abstracting it from its qualities, as conceptualism tends to do, Robertson's radical atmospherics—particularly in her *Seven Walks*—can be used to indicate the class- and gender-specificities with which it is necessary to think spatial experience. Her *détournement* of historical (masculinist) poetics of urban geography and urban architecture forces a remarkable encounter with these specificities, and also with the ambient (and guilt-ridden) happiness of comfort.

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[93] Lisa Robertson, *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (Toronto: Coach House Books, 2003), N.p.

[94] Ibid, 9.

Seven Walks, a series of seven prose poems published in *Occasional Work and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture*, makes a mixture of *reverie*, *flaneurie*, and *dérive*, coupling these with the postures and textures of the late lyric in its decadent exhaustion. The *Walks* are a "preposterous reverie," imbued with a "*fin-de-siècle* hopefulness, which [blooms] in tandem with its decay."[95] They are documents of the contemporary urban *topos* narrated by a collective subject (the Office, which is here articulated primarily as a lyric "I" and its companion, a "guide"). Composed of members of "the lyric class," a kind of undead bourgeoisie, the Office describes itself as "the outmoded remainders of a class that produced its own mirage so expertly that its temporal disappearance went unnoticed." "As the lyric class," they continue, "we pertained to all that was lapsed or enjambed."[96] The Office thus provocatively and indeed "shamefully" tends to find itself engaging in the "eroticization of a privileged passivity," a passivity of the spectacle whose architecture is a "spiritual diorama," a space of listless, "scripted consumption," paralytic and innocuous pleasures.[97]

The Office is defined largely by its banality, its superficiality, and its being little other than the ornaments and "fine clothes" in which it is cladded. In a sense it resembles the 19th-century aesthete with his—and it was always 'his'—"ferocious piety to artifice."[98] Perhaps unlike the aesthete, however, and certainly unlike the classical conception of the transcendent lyric "I," the members of the Office do not believe themselves to be 'free.' They are too self-conscious for that. Rather, they ask: are not appearances of autonomy something like very "fiction of the strangeness of the city?"

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[95] Ibid., 192.

[96] Ibid., 197.

[97] Ibid., 196.

[98] Ibid., 223.

"And if we spoke in the accent of the rhetorical past," they write, "in the myriad ligatures of cities, if desperation belonged to our texture, it is because, massively vulnerable, we were precisely unfree. We embodied the conflation of elegance and shame."[99]

On the one hand the rhetoric appears to narcissistically prioritize the unfreedom of the "privileged" aesthete over the unfreedom of the poor and subaltern (who are obviously quite absent from these texts). ("Perhaps it's the word 'justice,'" quips Robertson, "that has an expensive sheen."[100]) But the Office's work arguably extends beyond the simple shame and guilt of the privileged, and indeed beyond the entire contemporary liberal discourse of "privilege." Rather than the religiosity of the transcendence associated with logics of guilt and judgment (privilege as inherited sin), the Office strives for critical immanence in the city, following a quasi-Situationist approach that "insinuates itself deviously within the hairline cracks in capital," that registers capital's smooth spaces and the continuous variation that defines them.[101] Along these lines, the Office largely concerns itself with psychogeographic ambiances —or what Guy Debord might call "microclimates"—and not bounded structures; in other words, it tends to describe the soft-edged moods and atmospheres that pass through the body in urban space, rather than the borderlines the body traverses in a determinate movement from one side to the other, from origin to destination. A ride in a cab is not a line from one point to another point (striated movement), but a smudged and even comfortable point between lines of becoming (smooth movement). "Blurred neighborhoods slid past the glass: indulged white sculpture, burnt odour

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[99] Ibid., 207.

[100] Ibid., 204.

[101] Ibid., 196.

coming forward, glass grid, fringes of dust, errant monument, lit inscription and

condensed ornament, darkened market, republican lustre of oil on canal water,

threshold, embassy, paper, mast."[102] Grids and thresholds are folded into a mix, which

is in turn accompanied by a certain emollience, in this case providing a low-grade

affect shared by the "I" and its guide: "a happiness that circulated as a substance or a

vapour might, sometimes to linger at the churlish skin, at other times to rush through

the limbs as a mobility of means…"[103]

The affects, for Robertson, are fundamental to the description of space. The

subject, already collective, is made multiple and atmospheric in its walks amid the

urban landscape, by way of affects:

> 'Our happiness' 'our naïveté' 'our attraction' 'our regalia' 'our humiliation' 'our
> intention' 'our grooming': this is the habitual formula I have used. While
> normally such a grammar would indicate a quality belonging to us, in this
> landscape the affects took on an independence. It was we who belonged to
> them. They hovered above the surfaces, disguised as clouds or mists, awaiting to
> porousness of a passing ego. By aethereal fornications they entered us.[104]

Places are not primarily inhabited by subjects, but by the moods or *Stimmungen* to

which subjects belong and share amongst each other. This is a communal erotics, an

impossible form of public intimacy. The rooms and parks and streets have affects, and

here one thinks of Gertrude Stein and the "hurt colors" of her rooms and interiors.

The affects of nonhuman spaces can be thought of as the "expressions" those spaces,

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[102] Ibid., 215.

[103] Ibid., 218.

[104] Ibid., 200.

and while they are not their "essences" they have a certain aspect of dependence upon them.[105]

The discovery of affects as psychogeographic ambiances, expressed by spatial "propositions," and their subsequent description and taxonomization can be in part credited to the Situationist International. Debord defined the famous *dérive* precisely as a "technique of rapid passage through varied ambiances"; it was distinguished from the mere "journey" or "stroll" by its aspects of ecological analysis and microclimatology. Not merely a form of passionate enjoyment or entertainment, *dérive* would involve collaborative surveying, cataloguing, and mapping. "The objective passional terrain of the *dérive*," Debord writes, "must be defined in accordance both with its own logic and with its relations with social morphology."[106] Such taxonomic activity would condition new, unforeseen movements and becomings. "Beyond the discovery of unities of ambiance, of their main components and their spatial localization," astute and creative psychogeographers would be able "to perceive their principal axes of passage, their exits and their defenses," and could then find "psychogeographical pivotal points" of intervention.[107]

For Debord, one might argue, the liberal guilt of (non-)enjoyment and the shame of (non-)participation in the "spiritual diorama" is productively bypassed by the task at hand, the task of mapping ambiances and finding new ways of inhabiting space. But there is always a danger of failure, and becoming totally lost. Robertson dramatizes this at length in the *Seven Walks*, particularly in the extraordinary "Third

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[105] See Nigel Thrift, "Intensities of Feeling: Towards a Spatial Politics of Affect," *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography*, Vol. 86, No. 1 (2004), 57-78.

[106] Guy Debord, "Theory of the *Dérive*," trans. Ken Knabb, 2. http://www.ubu.com/papers/debord_derive.html. Accessed 11 Apr. 2017.

[107] Ibid., 5.

Walk," which narrates a culinary *dérive* through the ambiances of high-end restaurants in an overdeveloped city. Here, "anodyne architectures" align with the "complicit banalities of our soul." Bodies and roles are again defigured in a kind of psychasthenic process, and then assimilated into "figured inaccessibility," through which "we do not understand whether we are guests or clientele."[108] Here, in the heart of the diorama, subjectivity dissolves into creams, foams, and dim lighting. "We cannot discern whether we have entered a microcosm or a landscape or a lackadaisical simulation of time. Pleasure is a figured vacuum that does not recognize us as persons. We stand annulled in our ancient, ostentatious coats."[109] It is not only the minimalist restaurants and their patrons that are mutually expressed as atmospheres; even the food itself is an ambient proposition. "The blurred arrival of exquisite courses is a sentence."[110]

Drawing on Roger Callois' "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia," Elizabeth Grosz has associated the prototypical experience of contemporary architecture with the psychasthenic: "a depersonalization by assimilation to space," such that "the boundaries of personal identity are collapsed and the subject is no longer able to distinguish what is inside from what is outside, what is self and what is other."[111] Callois writes that, under this condition, the embodied organism

> is no longer the origin of the coordinates, but one point among others; it is dispossessed of its privilege and literally *no longer knows where to place itself...* The feeling of personality, considered as the organism's feeling of distinctness from

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[108] Robertson, *Occasional Work*, 206.

[109] Ibid., 207.

[110] Ibid., 206.

[111] Elizabeth Grosz, *Architecture from the Outside: Essays on Real and Virtual Space* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001), 20-21.

its surroundings, of the connection between consciousness and a particular point in space, cannot fail under these conditions to be seriously undermined.[112]

Indeed, in Robertson, the above moment of fine dining is figured precisely as a play of mimicry. As the edges of the subject soften, subjectivity does not simply disappear *tout court*. Instead it absorbs, and it absorbed by, the acentered blocs of affect and clouds of sensation through which it moves. In Callois and Grosz, this absorption is pathological, coded as psychotic (in the loosest sense), but in its more low-grade forms, it involves pleasure, associated with the city, with loitering and drifting, and with the "junkspace" of airports and malls. In short, it is the pleasure of Robertson's "spiritual diorama."

Throughout the *Seven Walks*, Robertson is continually indicating the risks of becoming immanent to the flows of pleasure in the overdeveloped city, the risks of abstracting the body to this extent, unknitting and removing its organs and making it into a modulable cloud, an "instrument played by weather and chance."[113] The examples are innumerable. And there is still the question of the non-normative body, and especially of the non-cis-male body, and of how this body is more or less susceptible to such dangers. The presence of these risks is why the work of the Office is so ambivalent and so "preposterous"; ultimately, it must be abandoned. But its careful reworking of the lyric into the *dérive*, and of affect into ambience, is largely careful, nuanced, and singular. It will be taken up in parallel, in a certain way, by Tan Lin.

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[112] Quoted in Grosz, 38.

[113] Ibid., 219.

4 "SPACES WE MIGHT NOT HAVE INHABITED"

The full title of Lin's 2011 book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking [AIRPORT NOVEL MUSICAL POEM PAINTING THEORY FILM PHOTO HALLUCINATION LANDSCAPE]* presents a set of quasi-generic reading formats. These are in a sense the titular Controlled Vocabularies upon which the book touches (although there are, strictly speaking, more than seven of them). There is the obituary and the cookbook, but also the airport, the novel, and the airport novel; there are the more traditional "arts" or "media" (poetry, painting, film, photography, the musical), but also the genres "landscape," "theory," and "hallucination." (And the syntax here or lack thereof enables still other mixtures: "musical poem," "painting theory," "poem painting," and so forth.) The book's title, author, barcode, and Library of Congress classification information are unexpectedly printed on its back cover, which, like the front, is an innocuous eggshell blue; the title and author are handwritten while the rest

of the text—and the rest of the book—is set in FF Scala Sans.[114] Accompanying the title

is a subtitle: "A BOOK OF META DATA [STANDARDS] DOWNLOADED, RECIPES,

WITH PHOTOGRAPHS FROM A FLEA MARKET."

On the front cover of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies* (*7CV*) are two numeric codes

—"11.07" and "22.95"—which function, according to Lin, as acknowledgements of

individuals who contributed to the book's production.[115] On the right half of the

cover, accompanying the numbers, is a formally complete but fictional set of Library of

Congress cataloging-in-publication (CIP) metadata written by Lin himself: ISBNs,

classifications, the genre terms "Poetry/New Media/Literary Studies/Fiction," and

various subject terms including "1. China—poetry," "4. Literary form—data

processing," and "5. Poetry—therapeutic use." These subtle inventions, on one reading,

confound and defamiliarize taxonomy in a familiar and perhaps uninterestingly

nominalist way ("China," other than referring to the author's ancestry, might here also

recall Borges' "Chinese encyclopedia," Bob Perelman's poem "China"—made famous in

Jameson's *Postmodernism*—and the Orientalist fantasy of a foreign and possibly

schizophrenic order of things). More significantly, though, the metadata's prominence

marks the materiality of the interface (the book) that purports to be an information

delivery system. As paratext or parergon, the CIP serves as an unstable "container";

while supposedly on the outer edge or surface of the text, framing it, naming it using

strings that imply the nature of its contents, and designating its addressability as a

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[114] FF Scala Sans is a typeface designed in 1988 and released through FontFont Library in 1993. It was one of the earliest fonts available for the Mac. As Lin notes, it was used for the *Chicago Manual of Style* for a period until 2010. Lin, interviewed by Chris Alexander, Kristen Gallagher, Danny Snelson, and Gordon Tapper, *Appendix* (N.p.: Edit Publications, 2010), 30.

[115] Lin, *Appendix* (N.p.: Edit Publications, 2010), 9. "11.07" is said to refer to "wives"; "22.95" remains undefined.

work, the CIP itself dissolves into the "reading environment" from which it cannot be separated, and while doing so foregrounds the particular "perspective of the book." Meanwhile, as in *BlipSoak01*, much of this (para)textual apparatus remains illegible, punctuated by data strings to be literally or figuratively read by machine readers: barcodes, QR codes, and numerical sequences, often as titles of the poems ("FW HW 11/4" – 1," "EA V1 m: 1nm: 0," "4C -NESS," "04100261 GREEN," "RPT MC-60 00.27 8," "PDF417," etc.) but also as part of the scanned print materials which Lin has inserted into the text.

These scans, in black-and-white ("because B/W is more soothing than color," says Lin) are mostly paratext for other textual objects, not so much illegible codes as pure surfaces for which the so-called "content" (of the other textual objects) is absent.[116] The scans include: page-sized facsimiles of forewords and indexes (such as from Laura Riding Jackson's *Rational Meaning: A New Foundation for the Definition of Words and Supplementary Essays*), small facsimiles of the back covers of books (such as Adam Kalkin's *Architecture and Hygeine*, Douglas Huebler's *Variable Piece 4 Secrets*, Kathy Acker's *The Adult Life of Toulouse Lautrec by Henri Toulouse Lautrec*, Lawrence Weiner's *A Tale of a Maiden or Two*, Jack Spicer's *The Train of Thought*, and Irma S. Rombauer's *The Joy of Cooking*), a MetroCard, a bank account user's guide, a book of toothpicks from the New York restaurant WD-50, the perforated bottom surface of a plastic pill container, a postcard from Swiss Institute, a Union Bay clothing tag, a slip from a fortune cookie, a Jever beer brand coaster, and the back of a National Towelette Co. (Cinnaminson, NJ) Moist Towelette packet ("Here is your Moist Towelette. It will clean

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[116] Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 18.

and refresh your hands and face without soap and water. Self dries in seconds, leaving skin smooth and soft. Directions: Tear open packet, unfold towelette and use").[117]

But even prior to one's opening it, Lin's book seems to recommend a shift in critical vocabulary from paratext (Genette) and parergon (Derrida) to computer-scientific terms like metadata, and, by extension, protocol, environment, string, program—a vocabulary better suited to nonhuman, i.e., machinic reading and writing. ("6. Literary criticism and the computer," in the fake CIP.) In this book, and indeed throughout his work, Lin is constantly playing with the notion of author-text assemblages that instruct the reader and tell her what to do with the encoded data, such as by announcing the format(s), syntax, version, and so on. This takes shape in the critical texts that Lin has published about his own books, in the interviews he gives that sound more like poems than interviews, but also within the pages of the books themselves or in the metadata that alternately composes them. Such formatting can of course be undermined, or ignored, but what matters is that a reader-text system, a literary machine, is set in motion by rules that seem to be explicitly embedded in the work and not stored elsewhere (such as in the "mind" of the author). It is a model with a history, certainly, in postmodern literature and art. Lin's particular inflection, however, is to make all of this activity relaxing and ambient, rather than difficult or didactic: a strange coexistence of the critical and the (pseudo-)therapeutic, like a moist towelette to be unfolded.

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[117] Ibid., 75.

Metadata, in simple terms, is data about data. It implies a vertical-hierarchical organization of data. Metadata is higher-order data. Metadata systems clearly predate digitalization, and, as Yuk Hui points out, studies of metadata have played a role in Western thought at least since Aristotle's categories, developing significantly in the Enlightenment with Kant's schemata.[118] Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* (1966) might also be considered as a more recent history of metadata. However, digitalization, beginning as early as Lovelace and Babbage's Analytical Engine, has precipitated a rapid proliferation of *machine-readable* metadata.

The media theorist Matteo Pasquinelli describes the emerging "Metadata Society" as a "technopolitical form that emerges alongside and within the network society," made palpable by the growth of "big data" and planetary-scale computation under cognitive and information capitalism, expressed in the establishment of financial and consumer algorithms and the maintenance of vast datacenters and datasets on the parts of states and corporations.[119] Metadata, like protocol, is one of the ways in which verticality emerges in what appears as an absolutely horizontal "space of flows" of information, the expression of would be called the network

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[118] See Yuk Hui, *On the Existence of Digital Objects* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016). Such studies, or ontologies, could also be called metadata schemes: structures that give semantic and functional meaning to metadata. Indeed, in the terms of computer science, "metadata scheme" is synonymous with "ontology."

[119] Matteo Pasquinelli, "Metadata Society," in *Posthuman Glossary*, Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova, eds. (London: Bloomsbury, forthcoming), 1.

society.[120] It also serves as a matrix of what Deleuze called the "dividual," appending further coordinates to the informatic subjectivity that is not individual and atomic but a sampled and forecastable aggregate or "bank."[121] (Pasquinelli thus also considers the metadata society to be the current evolution of Deleuze's control society.)

Online trend forecasting, the "attention economy," and the cybernetic feedback of control, or of what Deleuze and Guattari termed "machinic enslavement," depend on metadata for the organization and interpretation of data sets. (This metadata is necessary for tracking things like purchases, clicks, and 'engagements,' allowing them to be converted into informatic commodities to be sold to advertisers, or else reincorporated into the circuits of production-consumption from which they emerged.) Deleuze and Guattari use the concept of machinic enslavement "in a sense akin to that used in cybernetics: in other words, remote control, feedback and opening up to new lines of possibles."[122] In their prescient analysis, the television viewer provides a model for the transformation of consumer or user into a component of the system:

> …one is subjected to TV insofar as one uses and consumes it, in the very particular situation of a subject of the statement that more or less mistakes itself for a subject of enunciation ("you, dear television viewers, who make TV what it is . . ."); the technical machine is the medium between two subjects. But one is enslaved by TV as a human machine insofar as the television viewers are no longer consumers or users, nor even subjects who supposedly "make" it, but

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120 See Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Decentralization* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006). The "space of flows" is Manuel Castells' term, defining "the material organization of time-sharing social practices that work through flows" (of capital, information, technology, images, sounds, symbols, etc.). Manuel Castells, *The Rise of the Network Society. 2nd ed. Vol. 1. The Information Age: Economy, Society, and Culture* (Cambridge, UK: Blackwell, 2000), 442.

121 Deleuze, "Postscript on Control Societies," 5.

122 Félix Guattari, quoted in Maurizio Lazzarato, "The Machine," "Machines and Subjectivation," *Transversal* 11/06 (2006). http://eipcp.net/transversal/1106/lazzarato/en. Accessed 8 Apr. 2017.

> intrinsic component pieces, "input" and "output," feedback or recurrences that are no longer connected to the machine in such a way as to produce or use it. In machinic enslavement, there is nothing but transformations and exchanges of information, some of which are mechanical, others human.[123]

Of course, as the visual and cinema theorist Anna McCarthy has argued, television, even broadcast television, is a paradigmatically ambient medium.[124] The machinic enslavement described here by Deleuze and Guattari does not operate through on an individual viewer whose attention is concentrated on a single television screen, nor even through a collectivity of individual viewers whose attention is concentrated on a single television screen. It operates through the dispersed attention of dividual viewers: not only in living rooms but as an environmental factor in public spaces and in taverns, in airports, in schools, in stores, like a kind of moving-image Muzak. And today this same phenomenon has overspilled television sets, however ambient they already were, and now manifests in semi-interactive digital displays, scrolling readouts, crowdsourced visualizations, and more. Advertisers, beginning in the 1990s, have referred to these as "ambient media."[125]

Again, highlighting the distinction at work in Deleuze and Guattari, it is important to understand that such ambience does not exactly interpellate or consolidate a subject by recognizing, representing, and/or commanding (subjection); rather, its address is on another level, the molecular and not the molar. Maurizio Lazzarato writes that machinic enslavement, in this understanding,

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[123] Deleuze and Guattari, 458.

[124] Anna McCarthy, *Ambient Television: Visual Culture and Public Space* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001).

[125] The term "ambient media" appears to have been first popularized in the literature of the advertising industry by the UK agency Concord in 1998. See Avi Shankar and Brett Horton, "Ambient Media: Advertising's new media opportunity?" *International Journal of Advertising* Vol. 18, No. 3 (1999).

consists in mobilizing and modulating the pre-individual, pre-cognitive and pre-verbal components of subjectivity, causing affects, perceptions and sensations as yet unindividuated or unassigned to a subject, etc. to function like the cogs and components in a machine. While subjection concerns social selves or global persons, those highly manipulable, molar, subjective representations, "machinic enslavement connects infrapersonal, infrasocial elements thanks to a molecular economy of desire which is far more difficult to maintain within stratified social relationships", and these are the elements that mobilize individuated subjects.[126]

Online, the molecular economy of desire first harnessed by television advertisers and shopping channels has reached an unprecedented level of expansion and intensification. Marketing services such as those run by Amazon, Google, and the social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram) integrate seamlessly and algorithmically into feeds. Even the most subtle consumer interactions are recorded, time-stamped, and used to predict and target future interactions more precisely. This is all to say that ambient media, in its expanded digital field, increasingly depends on metadata schemes that provide more efficient and flexible modes of value-extraction.

Tan Lin poeticizes metadata as well as the ambient media (advertising, television, online shopping) for which it serves as a matrix, making metadata itself into a palpable form of ambience. While metadata is prominent in *7CV*, it is perhaps most completely explored in a related series of PowerPoint poems Lin produced around the same time for the gallery Artists Space in New York. *Bibliographic Sound Track* (2012), 40 minutes long, and *The Ph.D. Sound* (2012), 15 minutes long, are sprawling PowerPoint presentations composed from SMS, Twitter, Tumblr, and bibliographic metadata along with cryptic snippets from the texts to which these metadata were once appended. The presentations were accompanied by perfumes and by a live sound

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[126] Lazzarato, "The Machine."

mix in the gallery space. Some parts of the work follow the minimal couplet form of *BlipSoak01*, while others take shape as grids, bullet pointed lists, word clouds, long blocks of text, and conversations. The poems are slow-moving and use default PowerPoint transitions like fades and wipes; words and numbers appear gradually, largely without cuts or jumps, creating a boring visual field in which the textual "events" are anticipated far in advance and unfold almost excruciatingly slowly. However, the fades and the perfumes, plus Lin's suggestion prior to the presentation that viewers "leave their phones on," create a durational but non-pressured reading environment in which the audience is encouraged to become distracted and somewhat inattentive, in a state similar to that of the *dérive*, to shopping, or to (internet) browsing.[127]

"AMBIENCE IS A NOVEL WITH A LOGO": BRAND AND LOGOTYPE

Inattentive viewing as a new paradigm of reading is repeatedly called for in *7CV*, where ambience is articulated in a revised and roughly book-length version of *BlipSoak01*'s manifesto-preface. The paragraph from "Duration (11:03)" with which I opened Chapter 1, finds its complement in *7CV*. Here, after a confusing series of title pages, acknowledgments sampled from another book (one that is not by Lin—namely, Timothy Bewes' *Reification*), and an editorial note (by Lin, in both English and
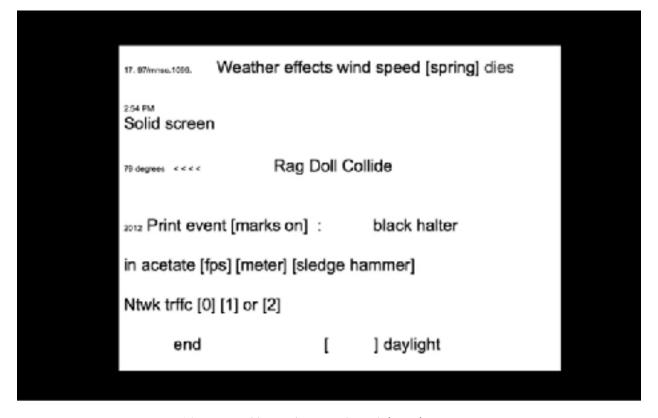
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[127] I cannot discuss it at length here, but the moving ambient poem has also been practiced and theorized in digital literature circles by John Cayley, who uses the term "ambient time-based poetics." See "Overboard: An Example of Ambient Time-Based Poetics in digital art," *dichtung-digital* 2 (2004). In contemporary art and video art, similar practices have already been quite widespread at least since the 1970s; Jenny Holzer, Richard Serra, and Tony Cokes are examples of practitioners who have made major moving-image works that are also almost exclusively text-based. (Cayley does not address this history.)

End
plaid

Lessons:
goldfish

End chaperone
I.e. the violet flour

Phenomena
vomiting

OS 10.4
Monday morning

pp.
delete

In front
A book about golf courses in America

Piano,
TX 75024

Juvenalia
Salad (tatsoi)

CARBONATED WATER, HIGH FRUCTOSE CORN
SYRUP AND/OR SUGAR, CITRIC ACID, NATURAL
FLAVORS, SODIUM BENZOATE (PRESERVATIVE),
CARAMEL COLOR, CANNE

11:03 pm Jul 30th, 2011
from web

(355 ml) from tweet deck
FONT mat.

2 shaded
Tbsp

Sent my my iPhone
2:48

Hurt,
Leffe in Antwerp

I meant "gas station attendant
2:44

Saturday + you =
so cautious

Then the outside
Plus or minus the inside

That was a day
I wrote a Lincoln

& rainy ^^ *
(I)   http://

Then color
Of reptiles

And baked myself awake
I swam all summer

www.boxvox.net/
2:50 well um I uh was

My dogs cried
The colors of vegetables

indeterminately
You: oblong

& I am falling
Where I repeat

2:52
I wrote you in the bath tub

comets
You:

A pattern
In the table cloth

Gymnasium
Ohio inside a river I was

Thumb
velvet

Then termperature C
And a house.

Return
I was inside a river

In an
indentalic

Tan Lin, *Bibliographic Sound Track* (2012), excerpt

Tan Lin, *Bibliographic Sound Track* (2012), excerpt

Chinese), it appears at the beginning of the first section, "A Field Guide to American Painting, ES, 13 plates."

> 5:27 35°
>
> What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn't have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading.[128]

The passage was originally written by Lin for a work produced almost ten years earlier, entitled *Eleven Minute Painting: Reading Module v. 0.1 (dub ver.)*. Executed in Adobe Director, a now outmoded multimedia software similar to Adobe/Macromedia Flash, *Eleven Minute Painting* (2002) is a subtitled reading of a poem using a synthetic computer voice and lo-fi waveform visualizer, first exhibited at the Spike Gallery (New York) and later at the Whitney Museum of American Art and the Drawing Center. Large portions of this poem have been reprinted at the beginning of *7CV*, and so the printed book translates the text from its original video installation, a form which of course lends itself to "being looked at, like placemats."[129] "The problem with most poetry, like most design and architecture, is that it is a little too bourgeois," the video reads. "For this reason, the poem should never be turned off. Like a thermostat, it should regulate the room's energies. This allows the piece to constantly erase itself. As we all know, poetry and the novel should aspire not to the condition of music but to

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[128] Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 16.

[129] In 2001, Lin created a poem entitled *HOME + LIFESTYLE variation 3*, which was thermal printed on placemats in 8 different colors in an edition of 250.

the condition of relaxation and yoga." Again, covering much of the same territory as *BlipSoak01, 7CV / Eleven Minute Painting* describes an anaesthetic, disappearing poem that effaces feelings: "No poem should be written to be read and the best form of poetry would make all our feelings disappear the moment we were having them." Echoing Smithson, Lin writes of "'Paintings to be read' → 'Poems to be looked at.'" "A beautiful poem should rewrite itself one half-word at a time, in predetermined intervals," he continues. "With their numerous circuit boards, televisions and computers do this; together, they enhance the microproduction and sequencing of feelings heretofore thought inaccessible, complex, or purely entropic."[130] What *7CV* adds to all this exaltation of molecular, ambient, affective microprocessing and climate control—and this is its strength—is a more explicit cultural politics that negotiates a space not outside but within the ambiences of consumer culture.

Through the logo, the brand, and the "lifestyle," the commodity becomes ambient. Philip T. Kotler's models of "atmospherics" in marketing are, in Lin, transposed into poetics, and the innovations of branding are undoubtedly a source for some of the most ambient forms of reading. Lin's interest is in the poem-as-logo and in the logo-as-poem; in a section of *7CV* entitled "LOGO," he writes of logos as "furniture texts," texts that behave like metadata, texts that are looked at and felt more than they are read, texts that repeat themselves endlessly and proliferate across different supports. "A logo-like text is text and reading instructions as one, and thus transforms the activity of reading into a mechanical and premonitory activity wherein things that are read become endlessly static and recognizable."[131] (Lin's own texts take

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[130] Ibid., 24.

[131] Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 70.

on this modality quite frequently, as we have already seen.) And because it is ambient,

circulating in such a way, a logo also becomes an affective label, a way of

backgrounding that has an anticipatory temporality typical of the metadata society. It

is a form of solicitation, as in Mark Hansen's atmospheric media, that addresses the

infrastructure of consciousness itself. "Like shopping malls and other enclosures,

consciousness is merely a generic mode of duration or thinking 'without

preconditions,'" Lin writes. "Like everything else, consciousness is in need of micro-

branding and rehearsal...The logo is an anonymous murmur. MF [Michel Foucault]

said that."[132]

> What are emotions we are about to have in a future already present? The era of
> emotions is over. One prefers a mood or mood predictor (mood-rings, glo-balls,
> biofeedback devices, etc.), which in turn become logos for products, which in
> turn become product-emotions, which in turn become consumers (byproducts).
> In this way the consumer is always ahead of the feelings she is having, just as
> with Muzak, whose décor can minimize any room or elevator in the minute
> *before* one walks into it. The emotions one *almost* has just before and after
> purchasing something are among the most delicate species of emotions
> imaginable. They cannot be imagined. Such a state of pre-anticipation leads to
> relaxation.[133]

Moods as logos for products as emotions as consumers. By way of the logo (mood),

subjectivity "*almost*" resolves into emotions, which at the level of the logo are

attenuated and indeterminate ("delicate"). Lin focuses on this moment—the affective

and microtemporal moment of brand-atmosphere pre-recognition—and stages it

formally in his writing and in the digital reproductions of covers and objects that fill

the pages. He suggests reading, for instance—though "not in any meaningful way"—the

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[132] Ibid., 73.

[133] Ibid., 138.

labels of clothes, insisting that it is best to read by skimming "at the point where [items] blur in relation to their multiple users or focal points."[134] "After all," he asks, "who has really read a bag by Louis Vuitton or a sweater with a deliberately unraveled collar by Martin Margiela although I have read these things for many hours of the afternoon?"[135] The logo is a sort of reading format that is closest to what "the most beautiful poems suggest," which is to say, "[   ] experiences that are highly inattentive and unwritten," poems as "superficial indicators for other sorts of peripheral, coded, programmatic, functional or directional information that is applied to the surface of things like postcards, flat-panel displays, parking lots, brochures, street signs or other depthless objects."[136]

Other than the proliferation of metadata, some of the ways in which Lin achieves this sort of "beauty" in his own work is through devices like empty brackets (as above), grids of terms and phrases, repetitive citations (theorists and artists as brand names or logotypes, "Mies was wrong," "Mies was right," "Deleuze was wrong," "Ad Reinhardt was wrong," "Donald Judd was wrong"), and, especially, Steinian lists inserted into the middle of a statement that replicate a short catalog of brand choices. The resulting "beauty"—almost in the Kantian sense—could be said to condition an ambivalent and ateleological kind of freedom, a virtual freedom for which there is no concept, a freedom which remains to be articulated.

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[134] Ibid., 68.

[135] Ibid., 66.

[136] Ibid., 80.

> The history of architecture, dining out, cosmetics, and reading boils down to a small number of "effects": incandescent light bulbs, forced-air heating, load-bearing walls, the restaurant and its menu, synthetic scents like Chanel No. 5, nouvelle cuisine, declassified information, three-martini lunches, conspicuous consumption, fluorescent lighting, the quarto, the Usenet, *Le guide Michelin* (1900), fast food, the internet, task lighting, Zagat guides, junk food, pulse-code modulation, fusion food, central air (1902), newsbyte, and conceptual dining.[137]

Developments in retail and leisure, like those listed here by Lin, are inextricable from the organization of architectural space and from the architecture of reading. As we already saw in Robertson, the atmospherization of media and of the self registers also as a mutation of the built world and the landscape, in the style of "soft architecture." And this is irreducibly a mutation of reading, too, which, for these authors, is never hermetic and individualized but dispersed in the world across public and private surfaces. Lin is highly interested in landscapes and architectures; among the reading formats that *7CV* integrates—which, as I have already indicated, include recipes, (auto)biographical anecdotes, television viewing, grocery lists, menus, and so on—is architectural reading and the psychogeographic *dérive*.

In Lin, as in Robertson, the *dérive* is figured as microclimatological. There is however what I would call a non-monumental scale, one which opposes Debord's own microclimatology to his theory of the spectacle, a kind of macroclimate that synthesizes all sociality into relations of exchange. This is the boring non-monumentality of the airport, the golf course, the suburban. "Debord was wrong," writes Lin. "Golf is not about spectacle it is about the absence or total absorption of spectacle into a definition set. What is the *dérive* but erasure: the 'bland re-surfacing

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[137] Ibid., 131.

through the lack-luster changes of an environment's information levels.'"[138] Instead of spectacle or monument, built space is increasingly composed of generic atmospheres that emerge from networks of small ambient features—fountains, screens, labels, lighting—designed to behave like flowcharts and to create zones of constant comfort. Built space is today an unremarkable reading machine, written in global English, made to be transparent, ignored, or forgotten.

NO 1

AWE BUILDINGS = READING MACHINES

What are the forms of American Written English [AWE] but a series of spaces we might not have inhabited had we lived less [coercive lives], eaten more organic vegetables or taken Xanax at night before retiring? The [words] like the buildings of our era are utterly indiscriminate and by indiscriminate I mean already forgotten. Like us they have been reflected back to us by other more efficient modes of relaxation such as the shopping mall, the television, abandoned lots, landscapes that have been photographed, interactive e-billboards, backs of books, the disco, electronic signatures, and fast food. All labeling schemes shall be as non-descriptive as possible.

2B 4H

The forms of our quietude are various and quotidian. Ever since she got married

(11/7/03)

my ex-girlfriend likes to listen to Wagner and the Mekons. Today [tomorrow] the things we do or do not read are just an accessory for the various things that connect us to our lifestyles. Nothing w/o a label can be valuable. A fountain like a book is an index of its own expiration. Nothing w/o a date can be forgotten. In the future, all buildings shall function as product logos and instructional diagrams.[139]

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[138] Ibid., 160.

[139] Ibid., 62.

Lin's vision seems akin to the "Junkspace" that Rem Koolhaas first described in 2001, a space whose essence is "continuity," deployed by "the infrastructure of seamlessness: escalator, air-conditioning, sprinkler, fire shutter, hot-air curtain."[140] Junkspace, for Koolhaas is an endless, total interior, a "fuzzy empire of blur" that testifies to the meltdown of structure, the disappearance of architecture into gaseous circulation. "Air-conditioning has launched the endless building," he writes. "If architecture separates buildings, air-conditioning unites them. Air-conditioning has dictated mutant regimes of organization and coexistence that leave architecture behind."[141] Junkspace is a continuously varying duty-free space that is "flamboyant yet unmemorable, like a screen saver; its refusal to freeze ensures instant amnesia."[142]

"Junkspace," the Koolhaas essay, is often thought of as performing, at the level of language and form, the phenomenon it purports to describe. A paratactic, 16-page piece unbroken by paragraphs, "Junkspace" is read, for instance by Fredric Jameson, as an exercise in "finding synonyms, hundreds upon hundreds of theoretical synonyms, hammered one upon the other and fused together into a massive and terrifying vision, each of the 'theories' of the 'postmodern' or the current age becoming metaphorical to the others in a single blinding glimpse into the underside."[143] And while it builds this vision up, "Junkspace" simultaneously becomes a "battering ram" whose sentences boom with "repetitive insistence…pounding on the hollowness of space itself…their energy now foretells the rush and the fresh air, the euphoria of a relief, an orgasmic

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[140] Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace" *October* 100, Obsolescence (2002), 175.

[141] Ibid., 176.

[142] Ibid., 177.

[143] Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review* 21 (2003), 73.

breaking through into time and history again, into a concrete future."[144] But such a violent and triumphant return of the "fresh air" of History, rendered in high-definition here by Jameson, is nowhere to be found in Lin (or in Robertson, for that matter), whose poetics are ambient. With Koolhaas, we get an unceasing stream or litany, highly compressed, with hardly any dynamic range or "space to think," as Eno might say. With Lin, we get sparsely distributed word forms and garbled codes: paratactic, but without the bombastic, almost macho insistence of Koolhaas' prose. There is the same narration of an atmospherization of architecture, but it is softer and quieter, characterized by a sense of unemotional loss, rather than hyped-up cyberpunk delirium.

"Mies was wrong," writes Lin.[145] "The era of [granular] architecture and finished buildings and destination shopping is past. In the coming century, the function of architecture and commodities shall be to destroy memory and historic places of interest at a standard rate and so disappear more completely into their surroundings.[146] And, later:

> All emotions like commodities can evaporate more rapidly outwards into parameters for other emotions or genres of emotions. Buildings resemble receipts or home furnishings. Shopping malls modulate into airports and street-level museum stores. Books like food become atmospheric.[147]

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[144] Ibid., 77.

[145] Lin could very well be sampling this phrase from Koolhaas' essay "The Generic City," wherein the latter claims that "Mies was wrong" when he committed to the production of boxes in his architectural practice. For Koolhaas, the contemporary "Generic City" is characterized not by Miesean boxes but by plastic, malleable, and "beautiful" non-forms. Koolhaas, "The Generic City," in Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S, M, L, XL* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1995), 1260.

[146] Lin, *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, 85.

[147] Ibid., 131-132.

What Lin's poetics are able to achieve, contra Koolhaas, is on the one hand a sort of matter-of-factness, a sense of the ordinary that leads almost to the point of passive resignation (this is the way the world is). The statements that Koolhaas makes—in the postmodern register of sublime disorientation, collision, disintegration, horror—are in Lin almost entirely banal. The repetition of *7CV* does not create a great battering ram of History (Jameson) but rather an involuntary background or wallpaper, "like plants or a sofa."[148]

Neither Lin nor Koolhaas are entirely cynical in posture. Neither, I would argue, believes in anything so crude as an end of History or "incredulity towards micronarratives" (Lyotard). But the question is one of practice: how to produce work, and what work to produce, under the Junkspace conditions of what I have been describing as a society whose modes of control are largely ambient, atmospheric, affective, anticipatory, and microtemporal? Every time Lin facetiously declaims, throughout *7CV,* how a poem today should be(come), he is not so much answering this practical question as *opening* it, under certain parameters and within a certain formulation of the problem. Koolhaas refuses to submit, even ironically, any suggestions as to what architecture should positively be or become; his writing depends on a sheer accumulation of horror, occasionally interrupted by beauty. The subtlety, the uncanny ambivalence, of Lin's poetic posture thus seems ultimately more rewarding and productive even as it is also more forgettable, generic, and machinic.

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[148] Ibid., 22.

CONCLUSION

> Blocked soliloquy. Tacit. New face of cloud presented. Body of cloud of our minds. We want to speak the beautiful language of our times. Lashed by change. With no memory. Without admonishment.
>
> —Lisa Robertson[149]

"No more vapor theory anymore," wrote Geert Lovink in 2002.[150] The term "vapor theory" seems to have been coined by the media theorist Peter Lunenfeld in his 2000 book *Snap to Grid.* It refers to an approach to media and technology criticism that follows a certain "dialectical immaterialism," "untethered to the constraints of production"[151]—or, less generously, "a gaseous flapping of the gums about technologies, their effects and aesthetics, usually generated with little exposure, much less involvement with those self-same technologies and artworks."[152] (The term comes

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[149] Robertson, *The Weather* (Vanvouver: New Star Books, 2014) 58.

[150] Geert Lovink, *Dark Fiber: Tracking Critical Internet Culture* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2002), 10.

[151] Peter Lunenfeld, *Snap to Grid: A User's Guide to Digital Arts, Media, and Cultures* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2000), 174.

[152] Lovink, "Enemy of Nostalgia, Victim of the Present, Critic of the Future: Interview with Peter Lunenfeld," *nettime.org* (2000). https://nettime.org/Lists-Archives/nettime-l-0008/msg00008.html. Accessed 13 Apr. 2017.

in part from the term vaporware, which signifies undeveloped or merely speculative technologies—hardware/software for which there are only vague ideas.)

Although I have dealt with the ambient and atmospheric, even with vapors, clouds, and gases (if only, usually, metaphorically), it is to extend the bandwidth of materiality rather than to profess any kind of immaterialism. Furthermore, the hasty denigration of these seeming immaterialities risks a real engagement with the ambient and therefore with media. Here I agree with Wendy Chun, who agrees that the naïve immaterialism denoted by vapor theory is a concerning blockage, but that the "rush away from what is vapory—undefined, set in motion—is also troubling because vaporiness is not accidental but rather essential to new media and, more broadly, to software." Chun argues that "a rigorous engagement with software makes new media studies more, rather than less, vapory."[153] Vapor, interpreted here as the unrealized and speculative—ubiquitous computing and ambient intelligence, Muzak and furniture music, too, to a certain extent, and even ambient poetics as Lin formulates them—as well as the atmospheric and ambient modes of media more broadly, is of critical importance today. What John Durham Peters dismissively refers to as "fantasies of atmospheric media" may not have been realized as the '90s ubicomp theorists foresaw —and these fantasies certainly cannot be detached from the material infrastructures that condition them—but they must be taken up, both in theory and in poetic and artistic practice.[154] We must speak, creatively, in the language of our times. This language is ambient.

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[153] Wendy Hui Kyong Chun, *Programmed Visions: Software and Memory* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2011), 21.

[154] John Durham Peters, *The Marvellous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press), 332.

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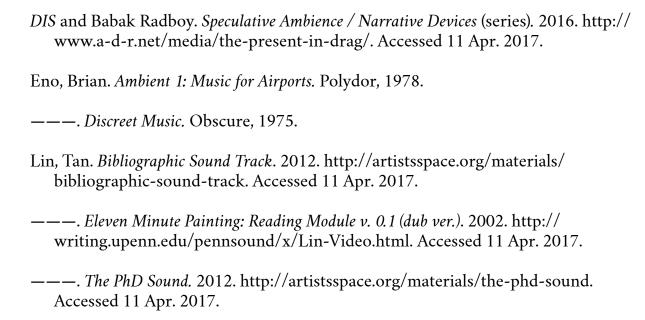The University of Chicago Press, 2010.

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