This chapter considers one aspect of writing practice brought to light by conceptualism’s differential impact in the fields of art and creative writing. Namely, it asks why the dematerialisation of the aesthetic object prompted by the advent of conceptualism in the art world was apparently unavailable to conceptualism’s development in the context of writing; and, subsequently, how it is that Conceptual Writing frequently effects, in fact, an inverse manoeuvre, in which the pliability and opacity of language—and the resulting materiality or ‘thingness’ of writing—is brought to the fore. One part of my answer to these questions is that the specific socio-historical circumstances of the writing scene of the early twenty-first century in (mainly) North America have almost guaranteed that conceptualism be theorised in creative writing in the way that it has. In effect, the current digital climate in this setting makes available to writing a critical and creative response to its materiality that was simply beyond the reach of the 1960s Conceptual Art movement.

But I contest the idea that the particular take on materiality championed in this context is inevitable or, indeed, always profitable. After recalling Conceptual Art’s critique of the crafted object, I will detail Kenneth Goldsmith’s highly influential 2011 postulation of Conceptual Writing not as a brand of creative writing but as the ‘uncreative’ ‘management’ of language in a digital age (2011a: passim). To accept his proposal, I will argue, entails a wrong-headed and unconstructive reading of materiality, a potential side effect of which is the occlusion of the radically inventive and political potential of Conceptual Writing. Goldsmith figures digital language as differentiated from the analogue by dint of its supposed status as an endlessly manufacturable, abundantly available and inert material, but this is a move that, though couched as exaltation, in point of fact constructs a deeply problematic divide between
digital and analogue that reprises the familiar Cartesian split: there is no room here for matter that is dynamic on its own terms, nor, it follows, for the writer’s immersion or entanglement with it except as its master or ‘manager’. This currently predominant—and largely uncontested—framing of Conceptual Writing thus overlooks the significance of the profound writerly embodiment evident in some of what is surely the most successful Conceptual Writing happening today.

Background to Conceptualism

Emerging forty-five years after the precedent set by Duchamp’s upturned urinal and in the lead-up to the immense political and social upheavals of the mid-1960s, Conceptual Art sought to displace aesthetic and formalist commitments from the centre of institutional discourses on art (Costello 2007: 94).² In practice, this meant bringing together and amplifying four currents in aesthetic practice, namely:

- a self-reflexive disassembling of the principles of technical virtuosity, singularity and originality;
- a problematization of the conventions that regulate how artworks are communicated or displayed;
- a negation of aesthetic content, aligning art more closely with information than with emotive expression; and
- a tendency toward the complete dematerialization of the conventional art object (Alberro 1999: xvi-ii).

Independent pockets of loosely affiliated Conceptual artists thus converged in challenging the perceived circumscription of the art world according to a Kantian aesthetic imperative (Costello 2007: 93).³ Importantly, both fostered by and perpetuating the radical political climate from which they emerged in Western Europe and North America, such artists did so by rebuffing the seeming ordinance that the artist should produce a particular kind of commodifiable material object. This critique is clear in, for instance, Piero Manzoni’s Merda d’artista (Artist’s shit, 1961), a tongue-in-cheek repudiation of the industrial coveting of the art object and the accompanying reverence shown for the artist’s ‘product’. For this work, Manzoni presented ninety ‘freshly preserved, produced and canned’ 30-gram tins of his own excrement (according to the tins’ labels) and sold each of these off at the price of its weight in gold. Disparagement of the art object extends easily to its attempted dematerialization. Exemplary of this approach is Yves Klein’s frequent recursion to a so-
called ‘zone of immateriality’ or ‘void’, at play for instance in his La spécialisation de la sensibilité à l’état matière première en sensibilité picturale stabilisée, Le Vide (The Specialization of Sensibility in the Raw Material State into Stabilized Pictorial Sensibility, The Void, 1958). Here, spectators were invited to enter and view an empty, whitewashed gallery—or, more accurately, invited to experience it, since the spatial art object survived only as invisible sensation and affect.

Thus, Conceptual Art deflated long-standing confidence in the very premise of the unique—or even visible—visual arts object. Indeed, artist Sol LeWitt’s 1967 manifesto ‘Paragraphs on conceptual art’—the first publication to assemble observed tendencies under this rubric—proposes the term ‘conceptual’ as oppositional to what he labels ‘perceptual’, i.e. visual, art (LeWitt 1999: 13). Promoted in its place was a creative practice for which ‘the idea is paramount and the material form is secondary, lightweight, ephemeral, cheap, unpretentious and/or “dematerialised”’ (Lippard 1973: vii). Nonetheless, ‘dematerialised’ as it may seem, the readymade or absentee artwork can’t dodge presentation altogether. One frequent tactic (among others) was to supplement, if not entirely substitute, the object with written text—with a view to the work’s explication or its further obfuscation, as the case may be. It seems significant that Lucy Lippard and John Chandler were forecasting the art object’s becoming ‘wholly obsolete’ in 1968 (1973: 36)—the same year that Roland Barthes was consigning the author function to the grave. That so many artists during this same period were taking recourse to language as the replacement for the aesthetic object suggests that this gesture, like Barthes’, was predicated on the detachment of linguistic systems from a representational relationship with objects and steeped in the idea that language claims a free-standing ontology—an ontology that can be set up to complement or complicate that of the supposed referent. An obvious example is Robert Rauschenberg’s 1961 portrait of Iris Clert, which sat alongside other drawn or painted tributes in Clert’s Parisian gallery, though Rauschenberg’s portrait consisted simply of a single telegrammed line of type: ‘THIS IS A PORTRAIT OF IRIS CLERT IF I SAY SO’. The portrait recalls René Magritte’s much earlier The Treachery of Images (1928), but whereas the written text in Magritte’s painting—Ceci n’est pas une pipe—points with uncertainty towards an image that in turn points to an absent ‘real’ pipe, Rauschenberg erases intermediaries: by rendering text as the object in place of an imagistic vehicle—by rendering text, in effect, the imagistic vehicle—the unique properties of written language that enable it to refer to something beyond it and act as referent in itself are emphasised. This was art furnishing what artist Robert Smithson
adamantly defined as ‘LANGUAGE to be LOOKED at’ (in Dworkin 2011a: xxxvi). Similarly, Joseph Kosuth’s *Titled (art as idea as idea)* (1968), comprising printed and pasted-up dictionary definitions of the word ‘nothing’, engenders a consideration of the operations of language and reference. But, like the portrait of Iris Clert, it does so by stripping language back to its structural mechanics: playing on the indeterminacy of words’ referentiality, the spatial presence of these verbal definitions nonetheless points to words’ immutability—we can’t talk about something (or nothing) without conjuring a material referent (in this case, the printed word), even as the amorphous nature of definitions means that this conjuring is simultaneously a negation of singular, positive correspondence. Sacrificing the multi-layered capacity of Magritte’s *The Treachery of Images* to comment on words and images, on words and things, Kosuth transforms words from being a counterpoint to, or even distinct from, things and positioned instead as things. In both cases, as with many instances of Conceptual Art, responding with lines of type to the spectator’s contextually determined expectation of a visible, tactile surface encouraged that the printed words register as signifier and signified simultaneously.

**The emergence of ‘Conceptual Writing’**

So, if the dematerialization of the art object is implicated in and proportional to the materialization of language in its stead (Dworkin 2011: xxxvi), what can conceptualism mean for creative writing, where language was already this practice’s material of choice? The eradication of the object is harder to conceive of when it is precisely the presence of language that is ordinarily taken to mark writing off from other art forms. In fact, as we shall see, while the designation ‘conceptual’ portends a certain Platonism, privileging the idea of a text over its construction or actual presence, it is often precisely the pliability and opacity of language, the affectivity of its very ‘thingness’ or objecthood, that is brought to the fore in this genre. Initially, this effect recalls the Concrete poetics of the 1950s, concerned to counteract the perceived transparency of the physical word. Concrete Poetry paralleled Conceptual Art in directing heightened attention towards the embedded semiotics of the materials and contexts of the creative product, recuperating ‘the sound and shape of words [as an] explicit field of investigation’ (Rosemarie Waldrop in Perloff 2010: 59). But, that conceptualism did not merely revive a dormant Concretist poetics points to the centrality of historical context in differentiating these movements. Conceptual poet and scholar Kenneth Goldsmith argues that
the most salient aspect of textual materiality currently is not its supposed transparency but rather its *volume*—for Goldsmith, ‘our’ thoroughgoing immersion in digital media makes the minimalism of Concrete poetics an inauthentic or inappropriate response to the present (2011a: 158). While a sense of media saturation and textual exorbitance is not particular to the twenty-first century, certainly the networked and highly digitised environments in which Conceptual Writing has lately emerged have prevented dematerialisation of the kind encouraged by conceptualism’s original incarnation from taking hold as a meaningful literary response to this moment in the evolution of language. As poet Craig Dworkin stresses, ‘[the] task for conscientious writers today is not how to find inspiration but how to curb productivity’ (2011: xliii).

Conceptualism did not evolve directly from the fine arts into creative writing, despite the segue that the former’s growing textualization seemed to offer. In fact, when Goldsmith extrapolated the label from its visual arts context and applied it to his own practice some twenty-five years later, it was exactly this ‘lag’ between the visual and literary arts, apparently at the hands of the literary establishment’s conservatism, that he lamented (2011a: xxvii).4 At the same time, his espousal of Conceptual Writing as an epoch-making movement revolves around the premise that it was only upon the arrival of the digital that the literary techniques and interventions he advocates became possible. Conceptual Writing, he affirms, is of its time, ‘developed as an appropriate response for its time, combining historical permissions with powerful technology to imagine new ways of writing’ (2011b: xxi). Of course, the digital realm claims an especial relationship with language, given that alphanumeric code enables and literally underwrites all digital media, from images and sound to verbal text. Yet, importantly, Conceptual Writing is not e-literature or digital poetry, but writing that exhibits its having been written after digitisation has usurped analogue forms as the dominant technological mode. After immersion in this realm, all writing strategies, whether by hand or keyboard, are ‘informed by the workings of computers and the Web: [aspects like] word processing, databasing, recycling, appropriation, intentional plagiarism, identity ciphering, and intensive programming, but to name a few’ (Goldsmith 2012), infiltrate the way the writer relates to and manipulates language—as it is encountered through both digital and analogue technologies. In other words:

[although often] bound between covers, it’s hard to imagine [Conceptualist texts] existing before the internet. While these physical artifacts might not appear much different from those produced over the past few decades, it’s the ways in which they’ve been conceptualised and produced that
distinguishes them from poetry written before the internet (Goldsmith 2012).

Marie Buck’s (2011) ‘Whole Foods’ from 2007, for example, is a sequence of poems made possible by the flow-on behavioural effects of extreme inter-connectivity, including the ‘climate of pervasive participation and casual appropriation’ at play in social media (Dworkin 2011: xlii). Within each of her prose-poems, three unmarked sources seamlessly ‘interface’—Buck’s term (2008)—with each other: a found anarchist print pamphlet; an online etymological dictionary; and smarmy marketing-speak lifted from the website of Wholefoods Market, a multi-billion-dollar US chain retailer whose branding imitates the countercultural, small-town organics store:

Brie
You may already be an anarchist. It’s true. Nothing is finer, more sublime or creamy. In its long history, when you come up with your own ideas and initiatives and solutions, it should bulge slightly. Not all brie is created equal. Poetry is made by all, not one, and at our cheese counter lies a cheese monger’s tip. (Buck in Dworkin & Goldsmith 2011: 121)

It is not that two of her sources are electronic that make these printed poems conceptualist texts, but rather that the poems’ construction and form respond to the continuous overlapping in an online environment of contrary and often sardonic or misjudged discourses, in this case, as Dworkin and Goldsmith observe, ‘of collectivism, autonomy, and radicality’ (2011: 121). Buck has described, in reference to another of her texts, her fascination with the way that online spaces that are designed to facilitate subjective expression (for example, MySpace and Facebook) are heavily mediated by marketing devices, to the extent that these are internalised in a way that recalls Baudrillard’s hyperrealism or Haraway’s cyborg entities: consumer products are ‘completely embedded’ in private online spaces, such that the marketing of one’s preferred products becomes a tool for the expression of individuality (Buck 2008). ‘Genuine subjectivity and affect,’ she says, are ‘shot through with the commodities that one likes’ (Buck 2008). Commentator Molly Brodak furthermore points to a ‘flooding glut of content’ as responsible for the development of ‘a Pinterestism that winnows out selves’ (Brodak 2012). This is not to say that grafting from print sources is no longer possible, but rather that an experience of language in a networked setting as pervasive and internally incoherent as Buck’s will irreversibly colour the poet’s sense of what language is; her experience is aptly reflected in the juxtaposition of these particular sources without regulatory commentary or distinguishable
internal boundaries. In these poems, allegorical devices at the level of the
word are supplanted by her method’s allegorising of the wider textual
climate.

Goldsmith’s own Day—a hard-copy book comprising a single day’s
print edition of the New York Times, retyped—similarly sees writing
technologies extended to interrogate their own processes and outcomes.
Recalling the reframing devices of appropriative photographers like
Sherrie Levine, Goldsmith transcribed the dense space of a newspaper’s
competing, nominally bracketed news and advertising texts and its
paratexts, typing them out into a sequential, linear format. The result,
mundane and mostly unreadable, nevertheless has a heft that physically
impresses: holding these 836 pages, one feels the weight of the ordinarily
unmeasured textuality encountered in abundance daily. Again, there are
precedents for considering the implications of copying works word-for-
word (although Borges was content to describe Pierre Menard’s feat rather
than have him perform it); but Goldsmith’s manoeuvre resounds loudly in
a context where text proliferates to keep up with proliferating textual
outlets, and writing technologies are continually refined apace. The very
unreadability of the text, with its instantly dated news stories and product
promotions, accentuates the rapidity with which the present moment is
superseded by ever-newer textualisations. Goldsmith uses an analogue
source and produces an analogue artefact, yet there is a sense in which it is
thanks to electronic technologies that his book can have any impact—
when and if it is received in a networked context in which the idea of a
book-length work of this kind being read cover-to-cover while an
electronically navigable version is available is an absurdity. Whereas
‘there was nothing native to the system of typewriting that encouraged the
replication of texts’ (2011a: 6), Goldsmith’s strategy seems to carry to a
full or exaggerated extent the inherent attributes of computerised, digital
file-making and word processing.

Expansion of creative writing’s object

The capabilities of textual materiality after digitality are clearly central for
Conceptual Writing, but what also emerges from these examples is that for
the idea or concept to be evident and thus assessable in the written text,
what must be visible is the trace of that concept having been carried
through in writing practice. When Goldsmith, Dworkin and other critics
single out the fact of writing post-digitality as a grounding principle of
Conceptual Writing, they appear to overlook the role of one of the effects
of this principle in marking conceptualism’s differential impact in the field
of writing. The effect is this: unlike Conceptual Art which drew creative, critical attention to the materiality of the aesthetic *product*, since digitality, the conceptualist impulse has found itself extended to engagement with the materials and contexts of the writing *process*—that is, with writing technologies and the situated, embodied trysts they enable. Conceptualism in creative writing works less to dematerialise the field’s object than it does to redefine the object’s scope: if, in the arts, the conceptualist critique—of virtuosity, singularity and originality; of presentation; and of aesthetic content (Alberro: xvi-ii)—was applied primarily to self-reflexively dissembling the material product, conceptualism in creative writing brings this critique equally to the materiality of composition. In other words, conceptualism encourages redefining the aesthetic object of creative writing to include creative process, in addition to the finished product, in what might be described as a shift from a three-dimensional (or spatial) to a four-dimensional (or spatio-temporal) conceptualization of the object of writing.

Conceptualism, therefore, is a poetic as attentive to the material, embodied event of composition as it is to the spatiality of the literary product. It is my position that this feature does more to identify the latitude and particularity of Conceptual Writing than does an exclusive focus on Conceptual Writing as born of digital technologies—even if this position plainly debunks the notion, championed by many commentators, that the genre’s virtue is in substituting embodiment with the production of ideas, mere ‘machines that make the text’ (Goldsmith 2005: 98; Perloff 2012). On the contrary, focusing critical attention on the writing process rather than or in addition to the resulting text allows that compositional technologies serve as devices for an ongoing inquiry into the nature of language *per se*—rather than into digital language alone. Or, as Canadian poet derek beaulieu would have it, conceptualism promises ‘a poetic where the author-function is fulfilled both by the biological ‘author’ of the text and the technology by which it is created’ (2006: 83). It is in this sense that Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman can stress in their pivotal Notes on Conceptualisms (2009) that all Conceptual Writing is necessarily allegorical. Its purported object is able to explicitly refer beyond itself to the larger narrative by which it is framed, where ‘narrative’ in this context ‘may mean a story told by the allegorical writing itself, or a story told pre- or post-textually, about the writing itself or writing itself’ (Place and Fitterman 2009: 15).

For instance, Goldsmith’s *Day* and his related transcription-based New York trilogy comprising *Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007) and *Sports* (2008) all emphasise the literal weight of virtual language, but they also highlight
the cumulative process of transcription itself: re-writing in Day is a painstaking and time-consuming conversion of a synchronic source into the diachrony of linear narrative time—while an online newspaper can ‘only partly dictate through design [the temporal progression of the reader]’ (Silliman 2006), the printed book into which the transcription is compiled is a paradigmatic linear spatial form. Reading in this way encourages that the order of reception mimic the order of composition. This is similarly the case for the trilogy, but here the appearance in print of audio weather and traffic reports and sports commentary works to instil in already diachronic and spontaneous verbal forms a deliberate and slow-paced character that emulates the fastidiousness of the writer’s act of transcription. Thus the writing process is brought into the orbit of the written object. In another example, derek beaulieu’s Flatland (2007) traces over Edwin Abbott’s 1884 novella of the same name, joining with a pencil line the occurrence of the same letters within a single page. Like a poetic join-the-dots or literary ECG taking the pulse of the text he reads, beaulieu’s book reflects the digital era’s flattening of language into data at the same time as it reveals the literal trace of his hyper-attentive creative process. In the author’s words, he reduces ‘reading and language into paragrammatical statistical analysis, [where] content is subsumed into graphical representation of how language covers a page’ (beaulieu 2008).

The suggestion is not that recognising writing’s ‘fourth dimension’ and capitalizing on situated play with materiality is always Conceptual Writing’s only or most
fertile creative or interpretative strategy, but rather that the tendency to do so is observable in too many instances of writing classed ‘Conceptual’ for these to be simply anomalous. Yet, certain predominant critics have insisted on excluding precisely this embodied focus as an aberration on a ‘pure’ conceptualism that should instead stand ‘against expression’ (see Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011), and have advocated registering the initial idea as paramount, its execution perfunctory and unaffecting. But this perspective rests on assumptions of privilege that perpetuate a recognised history of exclusion—of women, of the feminised characteristics of subjectivity and embodiment, of the notion of active rather than passive materiality—and, importantly, it closes down generative pathways for the continued production of creative writing of this kind.

### Enduring Cartesian spectres

Among the many features shared by conceptualism in art and writing, the most ominous, at least as it appears in Goldsmith’s account, is its masculine bias, together with the justifications implicitly offered for it. Laynie Browne (2012) has recently noted the gendered implications of rejecting embodiment and subjectivity as a defining feature of Conceptual works:

> [T]he term ‘conceptual writing,’ for better or worse, has thus far often been employed to describe a set of writing practices which seem, nonsensically, to preclude particular content. Not coincidentally, this content is often [that] chosen by women (2012: 15).

Precluding *kinds* of content from the Conceptual rubric should be nonsensical since Goldsmith’s own various Conceptual manifestos fulminate against the codifications and restrictions of the ‘normative economies’ outside of which, he argues, artists and poets have always operated (Goldsmith 2011a: 123). Alluding to Goldsmith and Dworkin’s predominantly male-authored anthology *Against Expression* (2011), Browne avers that, in fact, ‘[process] and restraint driven writing is often expressive and intellectual; … the assumption of a dualistic paradigm which claims that conceptual writing creates only ego-less works is actually another false construction’ (2012: 15).7

Enabling this partition is the tacit valuation of the activity of the author, now ‘manager’ of digital language and structures, over and above the supposed inertness of digital language, and the separation of these two components—human and language—into discrete entities. Of course, that language has a physical aspect is not at all in dispute. Rather, it is *the*
particular understanding of materiality celebrated by Goldsmith (see, for example, ‘Language as Material’ in Goldsmith 2011a: 34-62) that imbues the predominant articulation of Conceptual Writing with the conceptual mind-body split that historically has been overwhelmingly influential in the discursive organisation of social power. With Browne and other feminist writers, I argue that an approach to writing that is multi-modal, interested in visual, sonic and/or haptic modes of writerly embodiment, and that is engaged with questions on the ontology of language as it manifests in a digital context cannot be adequately served by an allegiance to the Cartesianism that was a feature of the art movement Goldsmith claims as Conceptual Writing’s progenitor.

The critical and creative output of Goldsmith—whom Ron Silliman has described as ‘the most critically well-inspected writer now under the age of 50 in the United States’ (2006)—can be seen as actively determining the boundaries within which Conceptual Writing is defined. His monograph, *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age* (2011a) is forthright in eschewing the singular artist: the poet’s role is to ‘manage’ existing language (15) rather than engender more profusions of it (28); the status of language itself is as data or code, rather than genre- or syntax-bound arrangements (17, 34-6); the operation of writing is via (sometimes mechanical) citation (109-124) rather than the visitation of genius (2011a: 1-2). Undoubtedly, too, Conceptual Writing from this view denotes a body of work inherently concerned with materiality: the instrumentalization of language at the hands of recent technologies (say, as alphanumeric code in digital imaging) is celebrated as releasing language from a semantic burden in order that its concreteness might trigger extra-literate effects (34-6). There is a line between writing and figuration, legibility and visibility, and Goldsmith is cognizant of the generative and provocative potential of the digital arena’s role in blurring it.

At the same time, Goldsmith’s volume applauds a logic of incision into and expropriation of matter that seems not to suffer from any self-consciousness in its uptake of a very traditional binary. For Goldsmith’s discourse celebrates digital platforms as enabling the treatment of language as material in a way that analogue platforms apparently cannot. Digital text is malleable, is ‘language as putty, language to wrap your hands around, to caress, mold, strangle’ (Goldsmith 2011a: 27). Though seemingly anodyne, this enthusiasm seems to demarcate different kinds of substance on the basis that one of those kinds is readily manipulable. That is, the digital is considered ‘more material’ than the analogue because the former gives itself to annexation, to appropriation. This view seems to carry the unvoiced caveat that the elasticity of language is not owing to
any dynamism inherent in matter itself, but rather that, precisely because it submits itself to be caressed, moulded, strangled, the digital can be classed as material. The characterisation is startling when we recall a tradition of association at least since Plato’s *Timeaus* between material, nature, the body and, of most concern here, the female and femininity (Bordo 1987: 98-9). Goldsmith’s perspective positions the writer as an equivalent of spirit or mind, which Cartesian metaphysics—largely unpopular within contemporary philosophical currents yet responsible for a lasting cultural inscription—has rehearsed as oppositional to *res extensa*: the writer as a ‘pure potentiality that can bring itself to actualisation through matter but is never reducible to any of its material instances’ (Colebrook 2008: 59).

Susan Bordo puts it this way: the ‘end-result [of Descartes’ dualism] is a philosophical reconstruction which secures the boundaries [that] in childhood … are so fragile: between the “inner” and the “outer”, between the subjective and the objective, between self and world’ (1987: 98).

Evidently for Goldsmith, the writer’s relationship with language after digitality is not characterised by immersion or entanglement. Rather, his schema presents a deeply problematic divide that sadly reprises a logic of mastery over any potential that matter—in this case, language—might have to speak back: to infiltrate the subjectivity and body of the writer.

If this understanding of Conceptual Writing entails disregarding the extent to which, in Place’s phrasing, the idea is always ‘embodied in the writing, the writing ideated in the body’ (Place 2008), this is all the more unfortunate given that work routinely classified under the conceptualist banner can in fact be read as constituting precisely that set of manoeuvres best placed to show up the fallaciousness of the perceived distinction between ideation and materiality. Some indication of the potential latent in challenging Goldsmith’s sentiment is clear in Claire Colebrook’s affirmation that a ‘[recognition] of matter’s own dynamism—its role in the trajectory of human history—will allow us to harness matter’s potentiality such that human life can live in accord with its own material nature’ (2008: 64).

**Conclusion: Recasting bodies of thought**

Given that it was also true of conceptualism in the visual arts that it was less feasible for women artists to practice it—let alone be recognised for it—to the same degree as men (Norvell 2001: 9), the wisdom behind forging historical links with a movement that predated the contributions of feminism, post-structuralism and (new) materialisms, among others, to exposing the fallacies of Cartesianism is surely contestable. In fact,
Goldsmith himself is adamant that Conceptual works are capable of affect. Despite the insistence that ‘[it] is the objective of the author who is concerned with conceptual writing to make her work mentally interesting to the reader, and therefore usually she would want it to become emotionally dry’ (Goldsmith 2005: 98), he nevertheless claims at the same time that Conceptual Writing can be ‘as expressive and meaningful as works constructed in more traditional ways’ (Goldsmith 2011a: 15). One way that this expressivity comes about is in the formal re-contextualization that the production of such texts frequently constitutes (Place & Fitterman 2009: 10). This is another way in which Conceptual Writing recognises writing as ‘four-dimensional’, permitting the creative process to be evidenced in the final work as a robust actor in the generation of textual affect. It also dovetails with the digital capabilities that ground conceptualist poetics: the ‘“-re-” gestures’ (Goldsmith 2011b: xix) of networked digital language—re-blogging, re-tweeting, re-posting—are rife and encourage writers to understand language as inherently available to filtering through and into new contexts. Marjorie Perloff, too, notes that ‘transcription, citation, “writing-through”, recycling, reframing, grafting, mistranslating, and mashing’ are all ‘forms of what is now called Conceptualism … [and] are now raising hard questions about what role, if any, poetry can play in the new world of instantaneous and excessive information’ (Perloff 2012: 64). The case is that re-contextualisation—think again of Goldsmith’s Day—works to frame the entire selected text within the writer’s decision-making process, inexorably marking-up the new text with the writer’s stance in regard to the source text, with his having at one time been interpolated by it. Not only is the writer’s subjectivity at play here; witnessing the trace of authorial practice, a reader enters what Ralph Rugoff has called ‘an aesthetic of aftermath,’ or a space akin to a crime scene: ‘a place where the action has already occurred’ and has left indelible clues as to the event of its unfolding (in beaulieu 2005: 61).

Importantly, appropriation and re-contextualization link Conceptual Writing to a host of literary forerunners. The historical, political value of these, I would argue, are perhaps more worthy of inclusion in this genre’s genealogy than a stymying set of conceptualist precepts. The way forward for Conceptual Writing ultimately lies in reconfiguring the manner in which material is understood, and is understood to take part in composition. Only then can this emergent genre provide writers with an invigorating vantage point for developing their own practice.
Notes

1. My thanks to early readers of this chapter, in particular Paul Magee, whose generous engagement strengthened its argument

2. While there is a case for recognizing conceptualism as an ongoing tendency in the arts (Goldie & Schellekens 2007: viii), some scholarship grounds Conceptual Art firmly within a restricted historical milieu ending in 1972 (see e.g. Stimson 1999). The historical emergence of a movement is indicated in this chapter by the capitalised ‘Conceptualism’; with ‘conceptualism’ I refer to the general philosophy, contained by these four principles, that arguably continues to inflect the creative arts

3. But cf. Costello’s (2007) suggestion of a potential aesthetics of Conceptual Art, and the corrective to the usual Greenbergian interpretation of Kant’s aesthetics that he makes to this end

4. Though Goldsmith claims to have originated the genre in 1999 (Goldsmith 2009), the first academic monograph on Conceptual Writing was not published until 2010 (Perloff), while the two standing anthologies of writing of this kind were released as recently as 2011 (Dworkin & Goldsmith) and 2012 (Bergvall, et al.)

5. The reference is to Pinterest, the social media site on which a user ‘pins’ content discovered around the Web onto their own virtual, shareable corkboard, effectively curating out of the Web’s exorbitance a personalised niche

6. ‘It is a laborious madness and an impoverishing one, the madness of composing vast books—setting out in five hundred pages an idea that can be perfectly related orally in five minutes. The better way to go about it is to pretend that those books already exist, and offer a summary, a commentary on them’ (Jorge Luis Borges in Hurley 1998: 67). Borges’ proto-conceptualism differs from contemporary practices, then, precisely in its faith in the self-sufficiency of the idea and its eschewing of the complementarity of the idea’s materialization through writing process. Thanks to Chris Andrews for the Hurley reference

7. Dworkin (2011) justifies that volume’s circumscription of the movement as an attempt to ‘offer a snapshot of an instant in the midst of an energetic reformation, just before the mills of critical assessment and canonical formation have had a chance to complete their first revolutions’ (xliv), but this seems naïvely to disregard the canon-forming function fulfilled by such anthologies themselves. Against expression’s male-centeredness—only 29-30 of its 112 authors are female (one is anonymous)—also seems delegitimised by the appearance the following year of Bergvall, Browne, Carmody and Place’s well received, 455-page, all-female anthology (Bergvall, et al. 2012)

8. New Materialist scholars have repeatedly put forward this alternative approach (knowledge through entanglement rather than objectification). Their provocations far exceed the allotted space here, though they frame my broader research, of which this chapter is a part. See, for example, Barad (2007) and Bennett (2010)

9. It is significant that women artists, around the time of Conceptual Art, were converging around performance and body-based art instead. Goldsmith recently criticised the performance piece ‘Foulipo’ by Conceptual writers Stephanie Young
Kay Rozynski

and Juliana Spahr as being ‘awash in nostalgia’, precisely because it referenced the political concerns of 1960s/70s female performance work (Goldsmith 2008). His dismissal, I think, highlights a commitment to a particular genealogy of Conceptual Writing that has the effect of obscuring the suggestion of an alternative genealogy, one that continues to designate the embodied means of creative production as politically significant.

10 Indeed, what I describe as a masculine bias in Goldsmith’s formulation of the genre manifests less as a careful though blindsided argument than it does as a thesis based on a series of internal contradictions. (The 2005 statement is reiterated in 2011a: 128.) In fairness to Goldsmith, this therefore suggests that there is a radical intent here, but that it has unfortunately not been carried through to a more rigorous consideration of some of the thesis’s foundations.

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Author/s: ROZYNSKI, K

Title: Spectral bodies of thought: a materialist feminist approach to Conceptual Writing

Date: 2014

Citation: ROZYNSKI, K, Spectral bodies of thought: a materialist feminist approach to Conceptual Writing, Creative Manoeuvres: Writing, Making, Being, 2014, 1, pp. 95 - 111

Persistent Link: http://hdl.handle.net/11343/111979

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