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Hélène Aji

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Hélène Aji

Université Paris Nanterre

“Vanessa Place: Documenting the End”

What happens when the poetic text changes status and becomes what Franck Leibovici, in *des documents poétiques*, calls a “redescription” (55)? When it integrates the entire process presiding over the collection of facts, their narrativization and an account of the obstacles to their intellection and interpretation? In the introduction to Leibovici’s book, Christophe Hanna attempts the characterization of the document, outlining the conditions for an artefact to acquire a documentary function:

- it should effect the creation or desinvisibleization of a public issue;
- it should be recognizable and liable to be processed as the object of various types of discourse;
- it should not be confined to immanence, but susceptible to integration into other media, and to circulation over diverse communication networks, to the extent that this does not cancel its significance but on the contrary gives it consistency;
- its enunciation should allow for its commuting from a particular mode to an indeterminate collective mode, turning the subject that produced it into a mere *position*. (Leibovici, *des document poétiques*, 11, my translation)

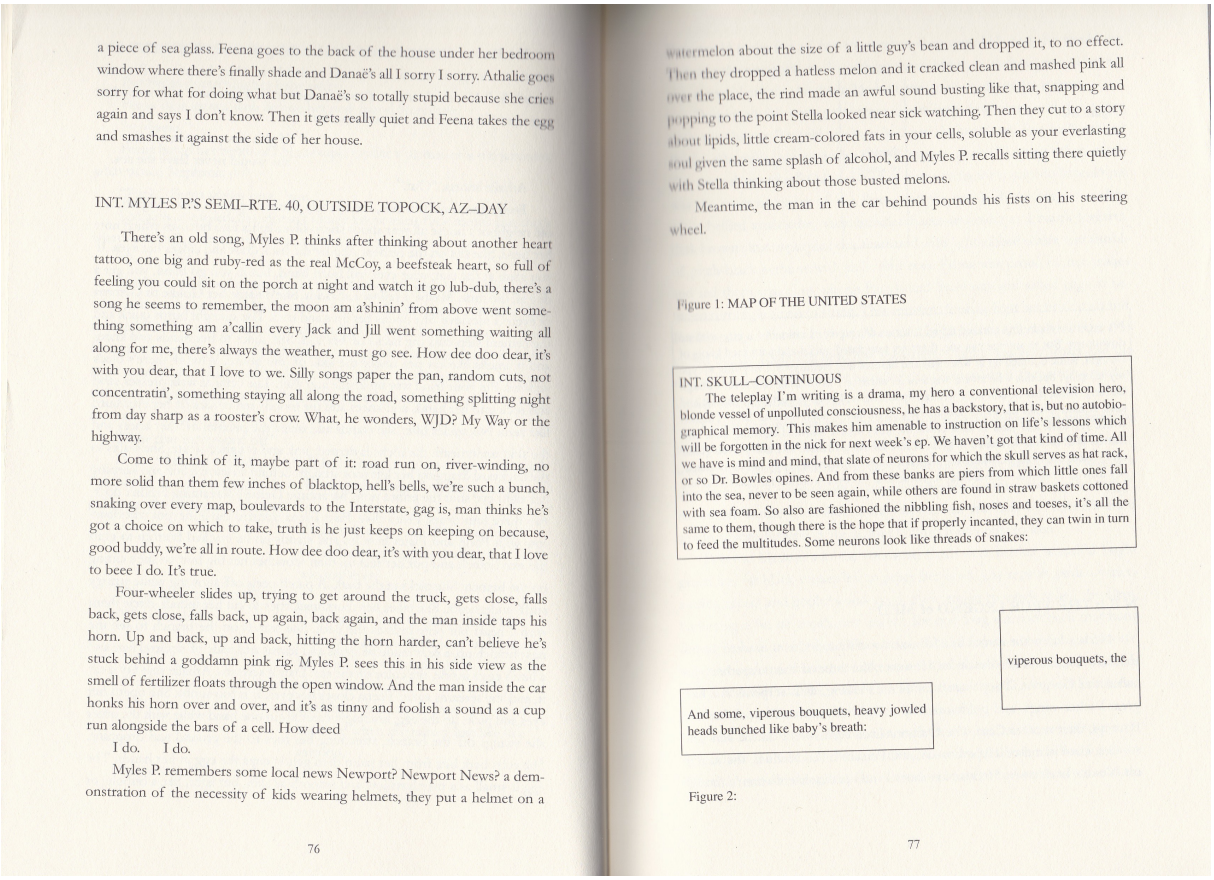
Many of Vanessa Place’s books proceed from a double movement, one in keeping with Hanna’s definitions, the other addressing the “public issue” of “the end”: they seem fascinated with the moment of interruption in cycles or processes that are construed as endless, or whose end is endlessly postponed or ignored. Thus in *Dies a Sentence*, the entire book is based on the idea of a man's last breath, the endless moment when time seems to expand just as it comes to an end for the individual.

> The maw that rends without tearing, the maggoty claw that serves you, what, my baby buttercup, prunes stewed softly in their own juices or a good slap in the face, there’s no accounting for history in any event, even such a one as this one, O, we’re knee-deep in this one, you and me, we’re practically puppets, making all sorts of fingers dance above us, what do you say, shall we give it another whirl, we can go naked, I suppose, there’s nothing to stop us [...]. (Place, *Dies*, 3)

Place propels the reader into a dying Civil War soldier's psyche, adding the dimension of an integral transcription to the more canonical compassion of Whitman’s elegies or Crane’s

realistic free indirect speech. It is an uninterrupted, rhythmic, continuous flux that takes both life, and the Modernist technique of stream of consciousness to their ends.

With *La Medusa*, a stochastic mapping of Los Angeles's intricate sprawl as the apocalyptic stage for the end of a man-sized environment, creative work occupies a more and more threatened space, as Place works on documenting the end of the poem (since the very definition of poetry is radically obliterated through the proliferation of more and more alien texts that defy categorizing).



a piece of sea glass. Feena goes to the back of the house under her bedroom window where there's finally shade and Danaë's all I sorry I sorry. Athalie goes sorry for what for doing what but Danaë's so totally stupid because she cries again and says I don't know. Then it gets really quiet and Feena takes the egg and smashes it against the side of her house.

INT. MYLES P.'S SEMI–RTE. 40, OUTSIDE TOPOCK, AZ–DAY

There's an old song, Myles P. thinks after thinking about another heart tattoo, one big and ruby-red as the real McCoy, a beefsteak heart, so full of feeling you could sit on the porch at night and watch it go lub-dub, there's a song he seems to remember, the moon am a'shinin' from above went something something am a'callin every Jack and Jill went something waiting all along for me, there's always the weather, must go see. How dee doo dear, it's with you dear, that I love to we. Silly songs paper the pan, random cuts, not concentratin', something staying all along the road, something splitting night from day sharp as a rooster's crow. What, he wonders, WJD? My Way or the highway.

Come to think of it, maybe part of it: road run on, river-winding, no more solid than them few inches of blacktop, hell's bells, we're such a bunch, snaking over every map, boulevards to the Interstate, gag is, man thinks he's got a choice on which to take, truth is he just keeps on keeping on because, good buddy, we're all in route. How dee doo dear, it's with you dear, that I love to beee I do. It's true.

Four-wheeler slides up, trying to get around the truck, gets close, falls back, gets close, falls back, up again, back again, and the man inside taps his horn. Up and back, up and back, hitting the horn harder, can't believe he's stuck behind a goddamn pink rig. Myles P. sees this in his side view as the smell of fertilizer floats through the open window. And the man inside the car honks his horn over and over, and it's as tinny and foolish a sound as a cup run alongside the bars of a cell. How deed

I do. I do.

Myles P. remembers some local news Newport? Newport News? a demonstration of the necessity of kids wearing helmets, they put a helmet on a

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watermelon about the size of a little guy's bean and dropped it, to no effect. Then they dropped a hatless melon and it cracked clean and mashed pink all over the place, the rind made an awful sound busting like that, snapping and popping to the point Stella looked near sick watching. Then they cut to a story about lipids, little cream-colored fats in your cells, soluble as your everlasting soul given the same splash of alcohol, and Myles P. recalls sitting there quietly with Stella thinking about those busted melons.

Meantime, the man in the car behind pounds his fists on his steering wheel.

Figure 1: MAP OF THE UNITED STATES

INT. SKULL–CONTINUOUS

The teleplay I'm writing is a drama, my hero a conventional television hero, blonde vessel of unpolluted consciousness, he has a backstory, that is, but no autobiographical memory. This makes him amenable to instruction on life's lessons which will be forgotten in the nick for next week's ep. We haven't got that kind of time. All we have is mind and mind, that slate of neurons for which the skull serves as hat rack, or so Dr. Bowles opines. And from these banks are piers from which little ones fall into the sea, never to be seen again, while others are found in straw baskets cottoned with sea foam. So also are fashioned the nibbling fish, noses and toeses, it's all the same to them, though there is the hope that if properly incanted, they can twin in turn to feed the multitudes. Some neurons look like threads of snakes:

viperous bouquets, the

And some, viperous bouquets, heavy jowled heads bunched like baby's breath:

Figure 2:

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(Place, *Medusa*, 76-77)

Actually, many of the processes used by Place, from transcription or collage to the reformatting of *Gone with the Wind* into 140-sign tweets, make her work fall into the domain of procedural poetics. Her resorting to found material, "documents," may be construed as a retreat from authorship or creativity, but it rather shifts the burden of authorship from the production of the text to the modes of its circulation. The material borrowed is not emptied of content and significance, to remember Hanna's criteria for the document, as it is in fact turned into what Place and Rob Fitterman call "allegorical writing":

the process allegorically reactivates a discourse in a context that underscores its unacceptable implications.

> Allegorical writing (particularly in the form of appropriated conceptual writing) does not aim to critique the culture industry from afar, but to mirror it directly. To do so, it uses the materials of the culture industry directly. This is akin to how readymade artworks critique high culture and obliterate the museum-made boundary between Art and Life. The critique is in the reframing. The critique of the critique is in the echoing. (Place & Fitterman 20)

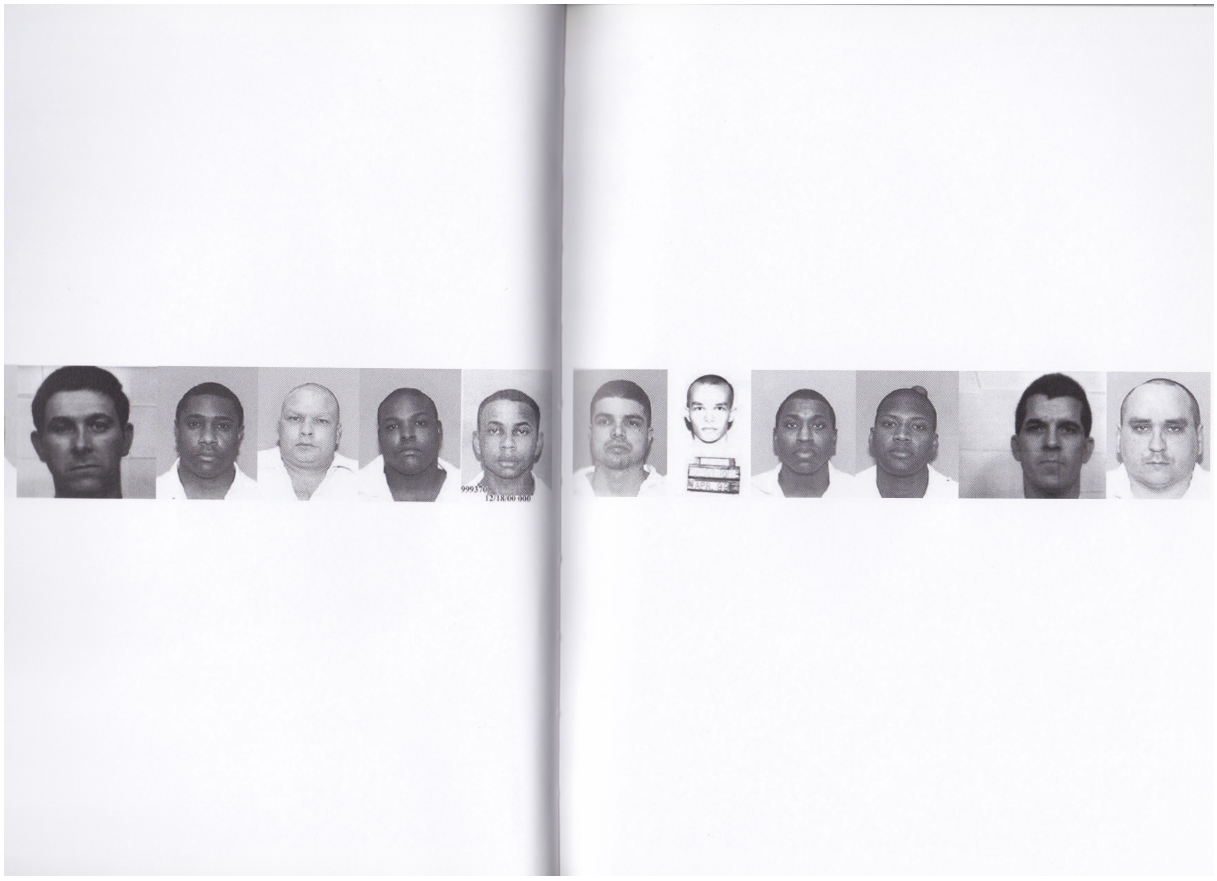
In *Notes on Conceptualisms*, Vanessa Place and Rob Fitterman define the practices of conceptual poets as modes of appropriation and allegorization of endemic discursive modes that fail to question their own sources and validity to impose dogmatic ideological diktats. To rethink the notion of allegory, and to imagine their own techniques of composition as "allegorical writing," they relocate the nodal points of poetic creation in a way that symptomatically eschews the poetic as result or product.

> In allegorical writing (including both conceptual writing and appropriation), prosody shuttles between a micro attention to language and macro strategies of language, e.g., the use of source materials in reframing or mixing. The primary focus moves from production to post-production. This may involve a shift from the material of production to the mode of production, or the production of a mode. (Place & Fitterman 16)

This rather obviously echoes and prolongs the Duchampian problematic, but also sends us explicitly back to Walter Benjamin, and his reflections on the status of the work of art in the age of mechanical representation. However Benjamin's idea of the allegorical status of art, and of a devaluation in the processes of art's commodification retains the Romantic nostalgia for an "aura" of the original and a fascination for the genius that produced such beauty. Duchamp does away with such pathos, and asserts the no-return situation of a modernity that has cancelled genius, unicity, and even beauty itself, to become the allegory for the unfolding history of capitalism, and postcapitalism.

Place's critique has in fact been on-going with such works as *Statement of Facts*, and more recently *Last Words*: she confronts the reader with the great paradox of dissemination and contamination which is one of the crucial issues of the age of social networks. Yet intermedial hybridity is not the only import of conceptual experimentation. Place's project cannot be summarized into the emergence of a "new formalism," which would equal a "new institutionalism" (Place & Fitterman 51); it actively participates in the ideological and political debate.

So Vanessa Place is not providing new texts but re-circulating and thus re-contextualizing pre-existing texts in other forms: these gestures, if they do not necessarily provide new texts *stricto sensu*, construct alternatives discourses that may prove complex to parse and elucidate. The focus of this "critique" that might at times be received as "not a critique" (Place & Fitterman 51) is varied, and global, as it undermines the entirety of established discourses and rampant misconceptions, while leaving the readers to their own devices as to what to make of the critique, how to verbalize it, and how to stabilize it.



(Place, *Last Words*, n.p.)

In *Last Words*, one is surprised upon opening the book to discover that it is devoid of printed text. Each page unfolds a frieze of mug shots from the dead, and one needs to listen to the recording to access words, that are their last words, as recorded in writing on the Texas Department of Criminal Justice website. Yet the voice is Place's voice as she reads these last words out loud, so that the alienation is duplicated and doubled. Several filters separate us from the executed inmates of Texas, but they do not seem to attenuate the intense malaise of being faced with man's ruthless enforcement of something that calls itself justice. In other

places than Texas, the death penalty as a punishment is banned as it is deemed "cruel and unusual," and implicitly forbidden by the Eighth Amendment to the American Constitution. Place's enactment literalizes both terms and makes them acquire full portent. The cruel in the vengeful, rather than lawful, distribution of death; the unusual in the outlandish realization of the suffering, physical and mental, the lethal injection inflicts. Place as medium for these words imposes a reflexive questioning on us, as a social constituted body, as perpetrators of these pains.

With her reactivation of these "documents," Place strategically threatens the collective fantasy of a privileged status for the poetic text, pure and untouched by the contradictions and violence of social interaction, and thus undermines the collective fiction of a guilt-free individual.

In her 2010 essay entitled *The Guilt Project: Rape, Morality, and Law*, there already emerged her commitment to a surgical dissection of the assumedly lawful as we collectively fail to face the impossibilities of compensation, retribution, and the construction of a moral society.

> Pretending that certain men are inhuman, or that evil lies outside logic, excuses us personally and politically from calculated mercy. At heart, mercy is simply the steady responsibility to safeguard the humanity of all, including those we hate. There will always be people guilty of great evil. But evil is an act, not a cultural metaphor, not a social backdrop, and not entertainment. As a people, we have to resist the temptation to make our morality contingent on anybody's innocence. (Place, *Guilt Project*, 10)

Perversely, the very mechanisms of correction reenact and reactivate the malfunctions, enforcing them rather than suppressing them. The "guilt" might also fall on the side of the innocent by-standers, the upholders of law and morality, that have staged so many obscene exhibitions of deviance, documenting the end of justice rather than its accomplishment.

Like *Statement of Facts*, that transposes the legal memoirs of Place as appellate lawyer to the domain of literature and, potentially, assimilate the body of her creative work as a lawyer into the body of her creative work as a poet, the performance of *Last Words* functions as an extremely disturbing reminder of the unspeakable violence and coercion inherent to what was planned as a system ensuring the freedom and the autonomy of the

individual and the community. The particular documents, to return to Hanna's words, produced by the legal system to enforce its legitimacy commute onto such a compelling level of collective signficance, that they jeopardize the system, turning both the performer and her readers into unwilling witnesses and putting them at high risk:

> Note: when the word is the wound (the site of failure), there are two extreme forms of mimetic redress: isolate and seal the word/wound (pure conceptualism), or open and widen the word/wound (impure conceptualism and the baroque). The first is the response of the silenced sobject, the second, the screaming sobject. (Place & Fitterman 55)

Despite the apparent minimalism of ther gestures, as she documents these individual and collective ends, Vanessa Place constructs herself and us as "screaming sobject[s]."

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