

Cross Referencing in *stack*

This essay, part of a thesis is provisionally titled *Stack: Minimalism, Literalism, Slowness*, examines cross referencing in *stack*, a poem written as part of a practice based PhD at The University of Roehampton.

Cross referencing, used creatively, is a style that can create slowness by disruption and therefore has been a tool that I have been keen to adapt in *stack* through the use of repetition and footnotes. In his book *No Medium* (2013) poet and critic Craig Dworkin points out that using footnotes in creative texts creates defamiliarisation and “slows the reader’s habitual consumption of the communicative content” (66). The standard way to read a poem is from left to right, from start to finish until the poem makes sense, until an image, argument or narrative is followed through. This limited way of reading has been challenged regularly and variously by modernist and post-modernist schools which means that a good many readers are *au fait* with the proposition that any text can (and must) have multiple types of discourse and therefore be potentially open to hypertextual readings. *stack* uses two chief methods to direct the reader to elements of its hypertextuality: footnotes and repetition. Footnotes in *stack* are used both in line with and against their normative systems. Repetition in *stack* is carried out by duplicating lines and also by using what French group Oulipo calls the *clinamen*, a swerve away from symmetry that creates manifold layerings.

Much minimalist poetry has traditionally used cross referencing, most especially utilising repetition, to direct the reader towards varied and hypertextual discourse, sometimes obliquely, engineering a writing that is rich and slowed, leaving readers to ascertain procedures and functions of these discourses. One could easily argue that structure is the chief agenda of minimalist poetry; Robert Grenier’s book length poem *Sentences* (1978) and Ron Silliman’s long poem “Ketjak” from *The Age of Huts* (1978) being key examples of when this might be the case. In *stack* the hypertextuality created by the use of footnotes and repetition is cross referential and functions to create slowness by taking the reader away from a ‘page-one-until-the-end’ approach.

In *stack* I use a contemporary footnoting system, employing Arabic numerals (indicators), which flag that a note is at the foot of the page. By obeying the footnote indicator in “rocks¹” (the opening line of *stack*) the reader is prevented from taking a linear approach as soon as they have started, as a result of the reading

taking place outside of the main body of text. The note “rocks¹”, to which the indicator refers, does not adhere to any regular system of footnoting, “by obviating the intended communicative value of the notes in their original context and frustrating their functional utility” (Dworkin 66-67). The note *also* has an indicator which is either out of place or refers to a note that is elsewhere and thus causes more slowing as the reader decides how to process a system with flaws. Footnotes used in a standard way interrupt the main body of text, and are treated by many as being optional, ancillary or even superfluous. The use of footnotes in creative texts, if not suggesting a far greater degree of amalgamation with the main body of text, certainly gives them a higher degree of importance. Footnotes in *stack* are used to substantiate statements made in the text and to a lesser degree to present supplementary information in a similar way to standard uses of footnotes, yet the notes should clearly strike the reader as peculiar and therefore they are foregrounded.

The use of footnotes in *stack* and all its other stylistic features, as well as minimalism as a whole, can be considered using Stephen Bann’s notion of *transumption*, as applied by Mark Botha in his *The Persistence of Minimalism* (2011). For Bann transumption is “a poetics involving transference from one part or place to another, and marking that transference in a material way” (14). Botha notes that acts of minimalist transumption can be “expressed by three principal types of modalities: containment, distension and distribution” (371). In *stack* this triplet is prevalent throughout the poem. The first line “rocks¹” and its note “rocks¹” is an example of containment: “eschewing external reference and being occupied self-reflexively” (372). It is also an example of distension: “art which attempts to grasp its own processual taking-place” (382). A later note in *stack* “August 1st 2013”, referring to the repeated line “rocks¹” on page thirty eight, continues to be transumptive in terms of containment and distension but also works towards distribution, an outcome which Botha describes as “the constructive role of the perceiver in defining the parameters of the artwork” (390). We can start to make external images since the beginnings of a narrative are suggested by the date as indicated in the note.

Vito Acconci’s short untitled poem beginning “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” (33), first published in issue 5 of *0-9* magazine (1969), has all three elements of Botha’s triplet taking place and highlights how the reading process is slowed down:

Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,² basins,³ baskets,⁴ birds,⁵ boards,⁶ boats,⁷ boots,⁸ bottles,⁹ boxes,¹⁰ branches,¹¹ bricks,¹² brushes,¹³ cakes,¹⁴ cards,¹⁵ carriages,¹⁶ cats,¹⁷ chests,¹⁸ clocks,¹⁹ coats,²⁰ combs,²¹ cords,²² cushions,²³ dogs,²⁴ doors,²⁵ drawers,²⁶ drops,²⁷ ears,²⁸ eggs,²⁹ engines,³⁰ farms,³¹ feathers,³² fish,³³ flags,³⁴ floors,³⁵ forks,³⁶ frames,³⁷ gardens,³⁸ gloves,³⁹ goats,⁴⁰ hair,⁴¹ hammers,⁴² hats,⁴³ hooks,⁴⁴ horns,⁴⁵ houses,⁴⁶ islands,⁴⁷ jewels,⁴⁸ kettles,⁴⁹ keys,⁵⁰ knives,⁵¹ leaves,⁵² legs,⁵³ lines,⁵⁴ locks,⁵⁵ maps,⁵⁶ matches,⁵⁷ mouths,⁵⁸ muscles,⁵⁹ nails,⁶⁰ necks,⁶¹ nets,⁶² offices,⁶³ oranges,⁶⁴ ovens,⁶⁵ parcels,⁶⁶ pins,⁶⁷ pipes,⁶⁸ planes,⁶⁹ plates,⁷⁰ pockets,⁷¹ pumps,⁷² rails,⁷³ receipts,⁷⁴ rings,⁷⁵ rods,⁷⁶ roofs,⁷⁷ sails,⁷⁸ scissors,⁷⁹ seeds,⁸⁰ shelves,⁸¹ ships,⁸² shirts,⁸³ sponges,⁸⁴ springs,⁸⁵ stations,⁸⁶ stems,⁸⁷ sticks,⁸⁸ stores,⁸⁹ tables,⁹⁰ threads,⁹¹ tickets,⁹² trains,⁹³ trays,⁹⁴ umbrellas,⁹⁵ walls,⁹⁶ whistles,⁹⁷ windows,⁹⁸ wires,⁹⁹ move.¹⁰⁰

1.no angles, 2.no apples, 3.no arches, 4.no bags, 5.no basins, 6.no baskets, 7.no birds, 8.no boards, 9.no boats, 10.no boots, 11.no bottles, 12.no boxes, 13.no branches, 14.no bricks, 15.no brushes, 16.no cakes, 17.no cards, 18.no carriages, 19.no cats, 20.no chests, 21.no clocks, 22.no coats, 23.no combs, 24.no cords, 25.no cushions, 26.no dogs, 27.no doors, 28.no drawers, 29.no drops, 30.no ears, 31.no eggs, 32.no engines, 33.no farms, 34.no feathers, 35.no fish, 36.no flags, 37.no floors, 38.no forks, 39.no frames, 40.no gardens, 41.no gloves, 42.no goats, 43.no hair, 44.no hammers, 45.no hats, 46.no hooks, 47.no horns, 48.no houses, 49.no islands, 50.no jewels, 51.no kettles, 52.no keys, 53.no knives, 54.no leaves, 55.no legs, 56.no lines, 57.no locks, 58.no maps, 59.no matches, 60.no mouths, 61.no muscles, 62.no nails, 63.no necks, 64.no nets, 65.no offices, 66.no oranges, 67.no ovens, 68.no parcels, 69.no pins, 70.no pipes, 71.no planes, 72.no plates, 73.no pockets, 74.no pumps, 75.no rails, 76.no receipts, 77.no rings, 78.no rods, 79.no roofs, 80.no sails, 81.no scissors, 82.no seeds, 83.no shelves, 84.no ships, 85.no shirts, 86.no sponges, 87.no springs, 88.no stations, 89.no stems, 90.no sticks, 91.no stores, 92.no tables, 93.no threads, 94.no tickets, 95.no trains, 96.no trays, 97.no umbrellas, 98.no walls, 99.no whistles, 100.no windows, wires, move

“Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” is written in two prose blocks. Each block consists of the same 102 words, with the first 101 words being concrete and every-day. In the main body of text, after the first three words, indicators are attributed at a rate of one indicator per word, numbering one to one-hundred. Each note consists of the negation “no” and a word from the main body of text, one at a time in sequential order, beginning with “angles”. This system therefore means that the final note consists of the negation “no” and three nouns “windows, wires, move”. The notes are structured asynchronously to the main body of text, shadowing it, and sharing similar concerns to minimalist sculptors such as Acconci’s contemporary Carl Andre.

Andre’s companion pieces “Equivalents I-VIII” (1966) and “Cuts” (1967) highlight how a thing’s non-existence necessarily alludes to its existence. “Equivalents I-VIII” is the eight finite set of combinations of 120 firebricks (if symmetrical and two tiered). “Cuts” speaks of the absence of the eight equivalent structures yet foregrounds the importance of space and its connection to the structures. It highlights this to such an extent that it claims space as one of its materials in a similar way as does Acconci’s poem in the physical transition from indicator to note; the eye moves through the spatial elements on the page.

In “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” the words in both the main body of text and the notes are in alphabetic order¹. For each indicator the note, as previously mentioned, is a concrete noun from the main body of text but written in negation. This would suggest containment if the indicators and notes were synchronised; they would in a sense be replicas and would not immediately suggest an external dialogue. But due to the foregrounding of the defamiliarised structural elements, the negation and the asynchronicity, the poem displays distension. That is to say that attention is drawn to structural elements because the poem looks as if it may be applying its indicators incorrectly. If the notes were synchronised correctly, as they at first appear to be, then they would consistently add neither substantiation nor supplementary information about the words in the text other than to say that the body of the text is a lie (i.e. “Angles / no angles”). At first then “Angles, apples, arches,¹ bags,²” follows the minimalist trend to attempt to write nothingness. However if the notes are treated verbatim then the word in the main body of text and its note pair up to create patterns such as “Bag / no apples”, “Basins / no arches” and so on which creates infinitive possibilities in terms of distribution since with such little information the images that the reader can concoct are manifold. In addition one could say that if there are no apples then there are also an infinite amount of things which could be ‘not’ and therefore by this logic the reader might either add or imagine an absence of something in (non)relationship to the concrete noun in the main body of text.

In *stack* the line “jug¹” on page three of the poem, where the note is empty, attempts to take this one step further by not alluding to any image. Acconci’s negative signifiers allude to describing a thing’s non-existence but perhaps serve the primary purpose of alluding to the signified in the positive or towards something antonymic. Nowhere is this more famous than in Shakespeare’s opening line to *Sonnet 130* “My mistress’ eyes are nothing like the sun”. In my more austere combination of “jug¹” and its blank note I attempt the impossibility of leaving the thing to speak for itself by retelling the koan “Kicking Over the Water Jug” as recounted in Yamada’s commentary on 13th Century Zen Koans in *The Gateless Gate* (2004). Zen informs many of the interventions that are documented in *stack* and also many of its textual elements. In the koan a jug is presented by a master to two monks who are told ““You may not call this a water jug. What

¹ The last word is “move” which if treated as an abstract noun simply provides an anomaly. Yet if treated as a verb transforms all that has come before into potential verbs, some of them neologistic. “move” is of course out of alphabetic order, perhaps being a joke meaning ‘no move’ as in there are ‘no moves to be played with the awkward triplet x, y, z and the missing exotic letters q and v’. There are of course lots of other readings.

will you call it?” The first monk says, “It cannot be a wooden sandal.” The second monk “kicked over the water jug and left” (189) and is victorious in his not naming. Although this reference is completely elusive to the reader of *stack* the line “jug¹” and its note is in direct contrast to texts that require specialist knowledge in order to comprehend them, Pound’s *Cantos* for example. As such “jug¹” and its note are koanistic, meditative in outlook rather than conceptual, working in a similar way as other art which uses extremely limited ranges of referents such as Cage’s 4’33’’ (1952) and Paik’s *Zen for Film* (1962). 4’33’’ is famously a piece of music in which no instruments are played for precisely four minutes thirty three seconds and *Zen for Film* is a film of variable durations which as Dworkin notes “consists of a strip of clear 16mm leader” (135). For Dworkin works such as these create “durational frames within which a variety of unspecified events might take place” (135). The meditative quality created by the cross referentiality of “jug¹” and its empty note can become further augmented when considered against other lines in *stack* such as the blank line with indicator and its blank note on page 25 emulating Cage’s aphorism “I have tried in my work to free myself from my own head. I would hope that other people would take the opportunity to do likewise” (qtd in Kostelanetz 69) and also Andre’s motto “My work doesn’t mean a damn thing” (qtd in Belcove par. 3).

In his novel *Mezzanine* (1988) Nicholson Baker uses footnotes on the vast majority of pages, always using the indicator “¹”, as *stack* does. This use of the same indicator number alerts the reader to the text’s antithetical structure *viz* the conventional use of footnotes. In *Mezzanine* all notes are significantly longer than the sentences in the main body of text to which they refer: many come to dominate the page. Baker’s footnotes, which are humorous asides, take to the limit Dworkin’s assertion that to note is “to observe closely” (60). The result of this is that, as Baker points out in an interview with *The Write Stuff* (1994), “people read every imaginable way you could do it. Skipping the text. Reading the footnotes first. I wanted it to be optional” (par. 56). Whilst I want people to opt in to the way the footnotes are used I don’t want them to be ignored completely. By applying minimalist footnotes the distance between the text and its note ensures greater proximity and makes the relationship between the main body of text and the note become more concentrated. If you obey Baker’s indicators you leave the story for so long that the main body of text and the notes are no longer closely amalgamated. Nabokov’s *Pale Fire* (1962) is one of the extremes of these experiments, with its commentary coming to dominate or consume the text. The book plays out the conceit of a heavily annotated poem written by a dead poet and edited by his editor (the poem is 29 pages long and

the commentary 187 pages long, including the index). Although conceptually interesting these sorts of texts are problematic for me in that they automatically start from a position of possible ennui. Texts in the tradition of Baker and Nabokov suggest that the story is to be found elsewhere or alternatively that there is more interest to be found in the footnote. Whatever the weight between the main body of text and notes it is important to me that all the text is of equal interest. This can, and perhaps should, also hold true of academic texts; as Kyle Schlesinger reminds us in his endorsement to Dworkin's *No Medium* "no one writes a more inspiring endnote—don't skip 'em!"

Cross referential patterns of discourse and hypertextuality are also created by full and near repetition of lines, and near duplication within the footnoting system in *stack*. For example the line "i asked a friend if i could push him for a plum" is repeated on a further two pages. Variations occur on another three. Other references to plums also occur three times. Although there is no logic to this repetition I assume that the reader is inclined to search for a pattern and that these patterns will necessarily be ludic as a consequence of the structure. This patterning is similar to the way repetition works in P. Inman's *oeuvre*. In his introduction to Inman's *Written 1976-2013* (2014) Craig Dworkin notes a whole host of complete and near repetitions: "'could be prose' repeats in 'kahlo' and 'could be the prose' echoes in 'think of one.'" (xxvi) and so on. In his online essay *Movement Beyond the Image: Pattern & Refusal in the Poetry of P. Inman* (2007) Mark Wallace notes that in Inman's work "The pattern isn't headed anywhere, *per se*; the changes don't accumulate in the direction of some goal" and that "It's the movement that matters, the swoops, twists, barriers, jolts." (par. 8).

In Ron Silliman's "Ketjak", a long prose poem from his book *The Age of Huts* (1978), sentences are repeated systematically emulating the structure of the music of the Balinese "Ketjak" chant, as recorded by David Lewiston², and seminal minimalist composers such as Steve Reich, to give, as Silliman notes in *The New Sentence* (1977) "an overall impression of unity" (92). "Ketjak" is comprised of twelve stanzas. The sentences in each stanza double from one to two, from two to four, all the way up to 2048. Each new stanza consists of half of the sentences from the previous stanza (sometimes with variations) and of half which are new. The structure of "Ketjak" is interesting when considered in connection with The Rice and the Chessboard fable. The fable involves a peasant bargaining with an emperor. The peasant asks that in return

² Available at <http://www.ubu.com/ethno/soundings/ketjack.html#>

for his teaching him the rules of chess he receives a single grain of rice on the first square of a chessboard, which is then doubled on the second and so on. The emperor, counting only a few squares up, is so astonished by the miniscule payments demanded by the peasant that he agrees. Little has he worked out that the multiplication by the 64th square is astronomical. “Ketjak” only makes it twelve squares into the sixty four squares of the chessboard yet is still epic. The proximity of the first stanza’s sole sentence “Revolving Doors” to its repetition in stanza two and three clearly makes the repetition prominent:

Revolving door.

Revolving door. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

Revolving door. Fountains of the financial district. Houseboats beached at the point of low tide, only to float again when the sunset is reflected in the water. A sequence of objects which to him appears to be a caravan of fellaheen, a circus, camels pulling wagons of bear cages, tamed ostriches in toy hats, begins a slow migration to the right vanishing point on the horizon line.

However when we get to the final three stanzas — 516, 1024 and 2048 sentences long — the amount of time it takes to read them means that the likelihood of remembering repetitions has decreased. At this stage the repetition becomes subliminal and hypnotic like the Balinese chant, leading to a sense of déjà vu. In thinking about *stack* I spread repetitions far apart *without* system, such as the line “white green blue” which appears on pages 2, 3, 15, 57. This line also has its variations such as “green white blue” (2, 3, 58) and so on. Lines such as these are adaptations of Silliman’s hilarious sentence “Soap.” (6, 13, 19, 31, 58) appearing from stanza eight onwards and which is therefore repeated five times (without variation in the case of this sentence). In the final two stanzas the sentence “Soap dish.” appears (33, 56): two repetitions. And in the final stanza, and for the first and last time, you find the sentence “Soap root.” (79). Upon first reading I took “Soap dish.” and “Soap root.” to be variations on “Soap.” The disruption caused by such sentences forces the reader to search back and to acknowledge the multiplicity of the text with all its difficulties and to take enjoyment in navigating through its maze.

Robert Grenier’s *Sentences* (1978) comes in both print and electronic versions and is also useful to understanding *stack* in terms of hypertextuality. The print version of *Sentences* is published as 500 unbound index cards housed in a box, most of them with a sentence or two per card. It comes in a sort of order as

Perelman points out in *The Marginalization of Poetry*: “In its original order the box contained one blank card (frontpiece); a title card: “*SENTENCES ROBERT GRENIER*”; a copyright card; then 500 poems. At the end (that is, on the bottom) was a blank card with colophon information” (46). Clearly the use of a title page and end page suggests an order which many readers will be fearful of breaking. As Michael Waltuch publisher of *Sentences* notes, in an email exchange with Jessica Lowenthal reprinted on *Silliman’s Blog* “most people were careful in their handling of the cards” and “this surprised me”. Yet for Waltuch “There’s no prescribed way to read the “boxed version.”” (par. 5). Waltuch is right in his assertion since *Sentences*’ lack of binding and absence of page numbers also suggests a reading which lacks a specific linearity. Yet even in its attempt to decenter, to shift from an established focus, readers are keen to forge patterns. In *The New Sentence* Ron Silliman notes cross referential connections between the poems in *Sentences* and takes a taxonomical approach and by “Simply piling the cards into what seems to be the fewest intelligible groupings” he arrives “at 16 types” (169). Silliman’s list, here paraphrased, is composed of three sets. Compositional modes: one word pieces, words running together, two-word pieces, three-word pieces, studies of balance. Investigation modes: individual quotations, discussions, pieces setting off the discursive function, I-pieces, multiple statements. And Mixed modes: titles which oppose texts, studies of imbalance, completed statements, errata, the graphemic. Because many of the categories in Silliman’s taxonomy are arrived at easily when reading *Sentences* the text suggests that there may be more, in fact this discovery is part of the joy of reading it. In *stack* taxonomical classifications are also easy for the reader to initiate being seen instantly. We can begin to classify *stack* by formality: one word, I-pieces, footnoted words, appropriated text, repeated sentences, sentences with elision, the graphemic. And by theme: the domestic and the everyday, sculptures, walking, other types of performance, quantitative statements, colours.

The web-based version of *Sentences* on the Whale Cloth Press website is something quite different from the print version on a structural level because it solely offers a shuffle reading. The poem is presented as virtual index cards. Each time a visitor enters the poem, after the initial title page, the 500 cards are randomised and therefore it is impossible to do a taxonomical reading without pen or paper, or printing out. Even printing out proves tricky as the 500 cards must be done one at a time. Charles Bernstein re-iterates this problem “you can’t flip through a data base the way you can flip through pages or index cards” (qtd in Golding 262). The randomising of the text forces the first time reader to read *Sentences* in one sitting as the

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webpages cannot be bookmarked. Although the online version of *Sentences* exists as a fantastic resource and experiment I would still advocate that the most pleasurable way to read texts with cross referential and hypertextual structures is through a print based medium, not just because of the sometimes clunkier processes of reading using digital platforms but because of the physical pleasure of the act.

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