

Of the Subcontract: An Interview with Nick Thurston

Nick Thurston is the author of *Reading the Remove of Literature* (2006), *Historia Abscondita (An Index of Joy)* (2007), *The Die Is Cast* (with Caroline Bergvall, 2009), and *Do or DIY* (with Craig Dworkin and Simon Morris, 2012). His artworks have been exhibited around the world and are held in public and private collections. His commissioned interviews, reviews, anthologized poetry, and journal articles can be found in print and online. Since 2006 he has served as co-editor of the writers' collective information as material (iam), an independent imprint publishing work by contemporary artists, and he presently holds a position at the University of Leeds.

Thurston's new book, *Of the Subcontract, Or Principles of Poetic Right* (2013), consists entirely of poems written by the underpaid, precarious workforce on Amazon.com's crowdsourcing platform, Amazon Mechanical Turk. (Even McKenzie Wark's foreword to the book was subcontracted to a ghostwriter in Lahore, Pakistan, for seventy-five dollars via Freelancer.com.) The collection is ordered according to cost of production, while Amazon's own worker expediency ratings serve as embellishments around the poems. Thurston and I corresponded over e-mail during September and October 2013.

Stephen Voyce: How did you first become involved with the writers' collective and independent publisher, information as material [hereafter iam]. Would you describe this organization for *The Iowa Review's* readers? What is its purpose?

Nick Thurston: Sometime around 2003 I wrote a really weird ten-page Xerox sheet poem, which was stapled like a handout in the top left corner, the "main body" of which was constituted entirely by typeset marginalia. A few years before that, I'd met an English artist called Simon Morris who was already writing even weirder books—a telephone directory-sized bibliography of his favorite thinkers' favorite books, volumes of "academic blind dates" in which he asked theorists to reimagine one another's essays with only the ghost of the footnotes to go on—and, as a friend and happily unprofessional publisher, he

supported me to build that Xerox project into a book called *Reading the Remove of Literature*. During the two-and-a-half-year process of doing so, I became a co-editor of Simon's imprint, iam (which he began by accident in the late 1990s but formalized as something properly improper in 2002) and met Craig Dworkin, who has since become the third (though definitely smartest) editor in the collective.

What we make and do together might appear formally erratic but is cohered by the way that we *approach* some shared concerns with cultures of administration, the imposition of scientific and aesthetic hierarchies upon language, the possibilities of heterological and heteroglossic collaboration, the ever-accelerating floods of textual overproduction in an always-already digital age, the site and performance of writing, the subjectivation of readers, and kinds of writing that can happen on the outside of literature (and other disciplines of knowledge) from inside contemporary art. The imprint works to unfold some of the historical and ethical lessons of DIY culture in the practice of publishing, such that Simon, Craig, and I have worked collaboratively toward an understanding of what I call "publishing as praxis." Rather than worrying about categories or registers, iam has taken what the English literary historian Rachel Malik calls "the horizons of the publishable" as a direction for its concerns, and in doing so it has contributed to the ecology of the culture of publishing that has bonded and inspired all three of us: small-press publishing.

SV: You frequently work with and exhibit alongside the likes of Simon Morris, Kenny Goldsmith, Caroline Bergvall, Christian Bök, Darren Wershler, Craig Dworkin, and others associated with conceptualist writing. Do you readily adopt this term to describe your work and the work of those with whom you collaborate?

NT: This depends on a difference between what a proper name like Conceptual Writing may and may not represent as a cultural category with presupposed horizons, and what a common name like conceptualist writing may and may not represent as a wilder (as Canadian poet Darren Wershler might put it) approach to writing. I grew up in a postmodern world before I learned what Modernism was, and my cultural interests were formed in philosophical debates about the afterlives of strongly Conceptual Art in and beyond the numbing post-conceptuality of so-called "contemporary art." From that confused and confusing mix, with all of its specters and seductions, I've followed English philosopher Peter Osborne's thought that all

art after Conceptual Art is both conceptual and aesthetical with the half-thought that this is especially true (and exciting) for language arts. The most interesting way that I've found to draw out the consequences of that pair of thoughts (or that thought and a half, really) is by exploring a strongly conceptualist approach to writing that appropriates the way that Conceptual Art privileged the conceptual over the morphological while reflexively figuring out (through a new kind of compositional literacy—the literary equivalent of distinguishing “this not that,” as American artist John Baldessari might say, from among the merely anything or everything) how to make public (to publish) the otherwise unimaginable syntactical, grammatical, semantic, and material densities and intensities that the nominated process produces, as a kind of “writing through writing” in derek beaulieu and Lori Emerson's sense. (Un)critical caricatures misread this approach as some kind of indiscriminate processuality, but the compositional logic of all strong conceptualisms has always been based on sensitivity and specificity (a notion of specificity contra singularity, it's important to add). For me, the objectivity often associated with the conceptualist approach is a way of nuancing subjectivity, not negating it per se. I think that conceptualist writers, as a community of practice, can co-work toward that nuancing most interestingly when they don't try to institutionalize themselves around a proper name but instead make use of their collective critical faculties to remain (im)properly trans-disciplinary (in the academic and more generally sociological senses). There's no recipe for managing that, but I think it demands two things at least: Firstly, that the community has to critically understand its long and many cross-cultural prehistories (which requires a new historiology based on a new literacy, not just a new history). And secondly, that the community has to find newly reflexive ways (and plural ways at that) to establish its constitutive tension(s) with the cultural category of “literature.” If those tensions do end up formalizing the community as something “proper” then it should only be *properly* of this weird new contemporaneity that it speaks of, to, and in. In becoming so, its formation would likely be unrecognizable. And as Craig, Simon, and I said in the epigraph to our last pocketbook, *Do or DIY*, “institutions cannot prevent what they cannot imagine.”

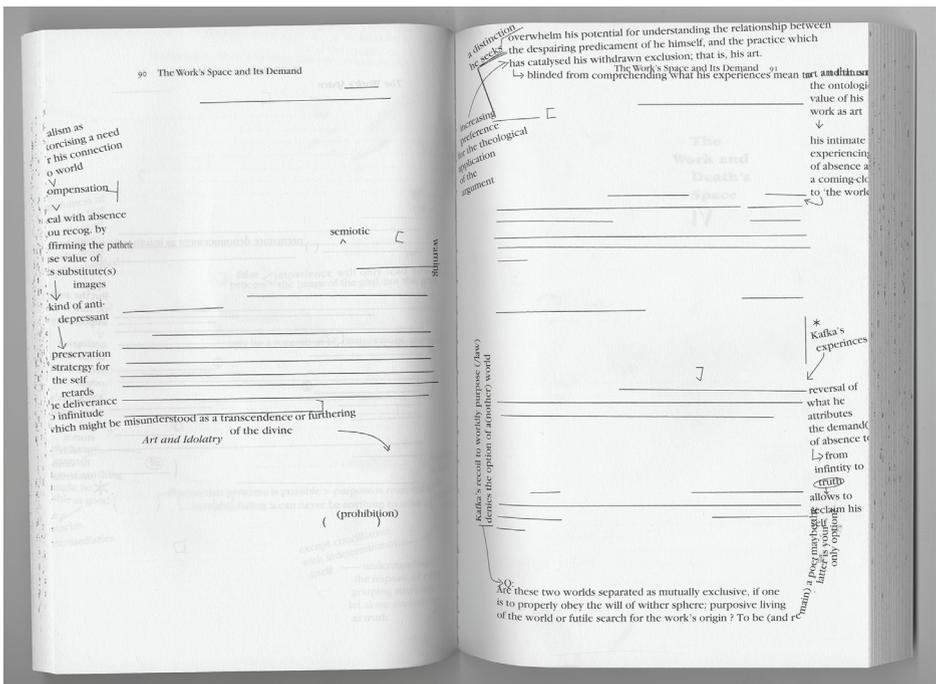
SV: What do you make of the rather speedy efforts to define and codify the group's work?

NT: I'm not really involved in a day-to-day sense with the ways that Conceptual Writing is being codified as if it were a singular/singularizing genre category, but judging on what I get sent, that process of miscoding seems to have become increasingly and mistakenly misunderstood by writers (those new to writing and those who are just new to a poetics beyond the classically expressionistic) as a weakly formulaic formalism all too often wrapped in a fascination with the theatrics of twentieth-century avant-gardism. That's not what *any* of my friends do; nor what our predecessors, whose work deserves re-reading, did. At their best, conceptualist writers have created, and are creating, communities of production and reception, as performative readers, in ways that allow one another to productively dispute what it might mean for writing to take a conceptualist turn. It's just that now more than ever the technical, political, and cultural conditions of globalized life are inclining a critical mass to unconceal a shared interest in some new kind of new literary realism (closer to documentary film than the hyperrealism of visual art, in my opinion) that is proving apt and able to say and write things with more intensity and precision than any other approach of the moment. In the few conversations that I'm committed to, we proactively enable disputes over the concept of conceptuality that we're putting at stake because we're all sensible enough to know that you can hold together a problematic even if you hold it in dispute, and that more often than not it's more interesting when you do so. After all, we all want to read the most interesting things possible.

SV: Forms of appropriation—reframing, repurposing, translating, redacting, erasing, mining—feature extensively in conceptualist writing in general and your practice in particular. Would you talk about appropriation in regard to your first two published books: *Reading the Remove of Literature* and *Historia Abscondita*?

NT: Sure. I used to live in Glasgow, and in one of the city's libraries I stumbled upon an English edition of Maurice Blanchot's *L'Espace littéraire* (1955), brilliantly translated by Anne Smock for University of Nebraska Press in 1989. That book hailed me (in Louis Althusser's sense, in that reading the book made me (mis)recognize myself through its ideologies) into what I would later understand to be an "infinite conversation" with Blanchot's thinking. At the time, his mode of work excited all of my interests in a kind of committed (which then I blurred with a Sartrean vision too), high modern-

ist, quasi-philological, and distinctly Francophone understanding of what writing could be. I couldn't finish the book, but I couldn't put it down either, so I photocopied the whole thing, pressed as double-page spreads on the platen glass, which gave me the whole book in A4 spreads of the bound page order plus lots of empty space to make notes. On those sheets I did what I always do, which is to obsessively annotate my thoughts based on close and revised readings. There's a chapter in Blanchot's book entitled "Communication and the Work" in which he speculates that the relationship between readers and writers is not one of contest over a "correct" interpretation of a literary text (as if it were the kind of text that is passive and fixed, like a com-



municative text, which for him in the '50s is literature's antinomy), but that they are instead part of a triangulated relationship with the literary text (the meaning of which is always more than either reader or writer can "understand"). I happily misread that as an invitation: the opportunity, then, whether you start as a writer or reader, is to fail better at allowing the polysemy of literary language to come to presence by performing an experience of the written. His "space" of literature is really a positive remove, made present by the word in the

world that simultaneously absents the “truth” of language (Blanchot upheld a two-world thesis by which language was of its own world), which is the constant movement of literary language epitomized by poetry. I might have quickly lost interest in his essentialism—in his truth-constructs and his later-life notion of a literary communism—but Blanchot thinks in and through paradoxes, and that was how I wanted to act on the conceptual invitation in his work: I wanted to simultaneously write the remove and write in the remove; I wanted to make present the absencing dynamic that he essayed about (in a beautiful but structurally conventional way) to see what happened when I failed.

I don’t want to explain away *Reading the Remove* but put simply, the main body is a facsimile remake of the Nebraska edition of *The Space of Literature* with all of Blanchot’s main body text removed and all of my annotations (originally handwritten on the photocopies) encircling the should-be space of print, reset in formal typography.

SV: And this process of erasure/removal also extends to the material book?

NT: Yeah, all of my poetical writings are composed by finding some one or many underdeveloped proposition(s) in an existing cultural product and sensitively drawing it or them out, like a piece of thread, as a performative act of conceptual hyper-extension that unravels the seeming fixity of the source and also forms something else altogether. After Simon spurred me on, I knew *Reading the Remove* would end up as a book—I knew that it would *only* be experienced as a mass-reproduced multiple—and so I had to implicate all of the affects of reproduction in my compositional decision-making or process of production. The thresholds of the whole Nebraska edition, every aspect of its object-status, were subjected to the same kind of attentive reworking. From the cover image to the paper type, *Reading the Remove* as a whole *yet* multiple object is the textual field, and that’s why it’s a bookwork. You can literally see this in the difference between the trim edge of every copy in the edition, all of which have totally different specklings of black ink bleed. When my annotations were transposed into mechanical type, the letters changed size, plus they’d come off an A4 sheet and onto a 155 by 230 millimeter page. My annotations were too big. They wander into the bleed area and beyond. When any industrial printer cuts an imposition sheet, there is always up to three millimeters of tolerance or variance (hence a bleed area), so many of the

annotations are cut off in different ways in every copy. We're talking about slight differences, but three millimeters can be the difference between an "is" and an "isn't" or conjunction and disjunction.

Recently I've been suggesting that what I and some others *do* is compose technically mediated reading performances that (re)produce interventionist public language acts. I started to call this kind of writing method a "conceptualist reading performance." It's a kind of productive over-reading that begins with some conceptual possibility that is latent in a specific source material—the underdeveloped proposition constructively misread as an invitation—but to become interesting to me, to end up as a new work, it has to get beyond a dependency on the source material and become self-sufficient (without pretending to be an autonomous object). It's not parasitic—it overcomes the source without negating it—it's more like an echo chamber, as Craig Dworkin says, whose amazing essay "Cenography" replaces the original Nebraska introduction at the front of *Reading the Remove*. Conceptualist reading performances find conceptually sensitive ways to extend subjective readings through processes of reproduction-as-production, in the style of a Nietzschean kind of dance, which almost gets us to *Historia Abscondita*.

The last bit of paratext I had to care about in the Nebraska edition of Blanchot was the index. His main body had gone, therefore the index no longer referred to anything that would be printed in my edition, so I decided to erase the reference locators but keep the terms as some kind of liberated constellation of names and ideas. When I was first asked to do a poetry reading from *Reading the Remove*, the only snippet of the bookwork that I thought I could "speak off the page" was the index, as a little list poem of alphabetical coincidence that was specter-enough of the compositional gesture that had (per)formed the main body of my book for the snippet alone to be able to somehow represent the whole project.

SV: You became particularly interested in taxonomic and indexical forms. Why?

NT: At the same time I was in a Nietzschean reading group (that was appropriately wine-soaked and Dionysian) for which I bought the cheapest reliable translation of Friedrich Nietzsche's *Die fröhliche Wissenschaft* (1882), which was the beautifully ugly Vintage edition of Walter Kaufmann's translation *The Gay Science*. One aphorism from its central section has the Latinate title "*historia abscondita*," which is

explained in a footnote as “a concealed or unknown history” and closes: “Perhaps the past is still essentially undiscovered! So many retroactive forces are still needed!” Kaufmann was famously pedantic and consequently the Vintage edition indexes both Nietzsche’s main body and Kaufmann’s countless footnotes: its index is a condensed constellation of terms that refer outward to both things that Nietzsche spoke of or was influenced by, *plus* things that he went on to influence or prefigured without knowing, all arranged according to a rigid (the alphabet) taxonomy that ignores any difference between the past and future. That aphorism and this index reopened one another because, if read as a list poem of terms without the reference locators, the index demanded that one think backward and forward at the same time. *Historia Abscondita* is just the Vintage index remade in a facsimile “undesigned” chapbook with the reference locators removed and the “user note” at the top of the index replaced by Nietzsche’s aforementioned aphorism. The reopening, as a retroactive force, allowed out a gay or joyous new historiology or poetical science, in the form of *An Index of Joy*, hence the subtitle.

To undermine the rigidity of the alphabet, I left the folded leaves unbound, so the stack could be reordered any old way in a softly Fluxus fashion. That brought the folded papers into play as imposition spreads, not just pages, and so I split a second Nietzschean aphorism into two phrasal parts either side of the fold across one imposition spread. In a folded stack “What good is a book” and “that does not take us beyond all books?” are separate inquisitions that float alone on pages two and twenty-three respectively. But when the stack is pulled apart, they rejoin to restate a question that, at the time, I’d taken on board as a kind of maxim for writing bookworks. The method of splitting quotes into phrasal parts across the imposition spread is exactly what I took up with Caroline Bergvall in my next book, a samizdat-style pocketbook called *The Die Is Cast*. All of my work rolls on and out like that.

Appropriation can contest the ideal, intrinsic to Romantic mythologies about art-making, that artists create things *sui generis*, which is nonsense if you make objects and even more nonsensical if you’re making things in and of languages, which are necessarily socially constructed systems. There’s also a material and conceptual sense of ecology at heart of reusing things; and an understanding, or transposition, of the idea of “site specificity” that Performance Writing had better introduced to the language arts than any poetry other than concretism before so-called Conceptual Writing. Unfortunately,

appropriation is all too often used as an indiscriminate or insensitive formula—something that only feigns at being specific—like a design trick for contemporary art, so I keep my distance from most conversations about it as a method. Yve-Alain Bois says that American artist Mel Bochner makes art by asking “what if?” of materials, and I write in a similar way. I make poems by acting on (by writing through writing) the question “what if?” Then, as Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers said, you have to accept the real risk that is inherent to making art, which I take to mean that you have to take responsibility for whatever stems from your action. Formulas negate risk; that’s why graphic design is graphic design whereas art is art, or journalism is journalism and Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Day* is poetry.

To all of that I’d just like to add that I never overwrite something ontologically—my kind of appropriation never takes the source material out of circulation—and that I’m most interested in how a whole set of moral concepts orbit etymologically around the Latin word and idea of the *proprius*. That, as best as I can figure it, is the key to my praxis so far.

SV: Your newest book, *Of the Subcontract, Or Principles of Poetic Right*, struggles with the notion of *proprius* in yet a different sense. How did you first conceive of this project?

NT: Although I use terms like “appropriation” as a shorthand, so that I can access certain conversations and acknowledge certain authorial presuppositions in the cultural industries that I’ve chosen to work within, I’m really interested in depropriation. (That’s part of the reason why I like your work on digital poetics, the cultural commons, and the insufficiency of identities like “pirate.”) With that in mind, I’ve long been curious about the mythologization of an illusory sense of the common ownership of digital or digitized material (i.e., data), a sense that was co-opted from Internet utopianism by computational capitalism. In contrast to that illusion, it seems that digital spaces and their contents are being established more like frontiers than commons, such that pockets of common ownership have to defend themselves negatively as exclusionary zones. One of the newer mythologies spawned in turn by that misunderstanding (or maybe, one of its shadows) is the virtual subject-position of the wholly self-determining worker, or rather the illusion of being able to take up the subject-position of a worker who only works for themselves via virtual networks—who can do anything, any time, for and from anywhere

via a networked computer. It's a new crescendo in (or shadow of) the long fantasy of the freelance worker. But now it comes with even fewer of the worries about actual-world responsibility because it has been restructured on a peer-to-peer marketplace model that perfectly suits the web. Online, any worker can take up that illusion or fantasy through an avatar identity by registering with any number of the new online-only labor pool schemes. The project that became *Of the Subcontract* began because I wanted to explore the strange new modes of expropriation that have been honed for, or have been founded as native to, these frightening new factories, which are *deceptively* new and overtly position themselves as a symptom of (in the guise of a solution to) broader changes in the flows of global capital.

SV: Would you briefly explain how Amazon's Mechanical Turk (AMT) works? When did you first become aware of this production scheme?

NT: AMT is at the forefront of this burgeoning new industry. It puts together a database of Requesters and a database of Workers and top-slices various administration charges on transactions between the two. The service is intended to facilitate maximally efficient subcontracting by companies who offer up specific tasks to registered freelancers who opt to do these tasks—tasks that are called “Human Intelligence Tasks.” These HITs are things that only involve digital data but, for whatever reason, cannot yet be done by a computer or algorithm alone. Everything is calculated by both parties in terms of labor power needed and labor value deserved and documented automatically in profit/loss sheets for every job. From its name to its valuation structure, AMT benchmarks Workers and their work against the perfection of computers. On the one hand, I wondered what could be written if the work of literary writing was reduced (or elevated, depending on your point of view) to a HIT and Workers were underpaid to express themselves poetically as copywriters, as what English art theorist Claire Bishop might call “delegated performances.” On the other hand, I was so tired with the formulas of appropriationist literature we discussed before that I wondered what would happen, or what could be unconcealed, if I hyperextended the labor model itself (if I appropriated the system of production, not its products) and extracted poems from Workers like outsourced semantic objects. *Of the Subcontract's* central section is a collection of one hundred poems arranged according to cost of production rather than theme, all of which were sold to me as commissions, by choice, by ghostwriters for

whom the only ghost they had to mimic was their understanding of poetry itself.

In material and symbolic ways, the book itself functions like a black box. And Amazon identifies their scheme in a tradition of similarly mystified innovation. Five or six years ago I became interested in a hugely accomplished Austro-Hungarian engineer called Wolfgang von Kempellen because he invented the first-ever voice synthesizer in the late eighteenth century. Like all pre-computer artificial intelligence designs, his speaking machine tried to replicate a human function by replicating the bodily mechanisms that contemporary science thought were involved in the production of that function—in an analog age engineers replicated the method of production; in a computational age engineers replicate the output—this is as true of digital photography as it is of sound engineering. In different versions of the machine, he used a set of bellows like lungs; a set of leather straps like vocal chords; a reed to create resonance; tubes like a nasal cavity; and a trumpet-like mouth of natural rubber to channel the sound. At the time I was curious about if and how geneticists might be able to make a voice synthesizer the analogical way by growing only the necessary organs in petri dishes. Instead, what I accidentally found out was that von Kempellen is really infamous for an invention colloquially known (and there's an Orientalist taint to this) as the Mechanical Turk, which was presented as an automaton that could play match-winning games of chess. It toured and was scrutinized much more than von Kempellen ever intended, and after decades of debate it was finally proved that all of the elaborate machinery was only really there to distract from a tray in the base of the case in which sat a human dwarf who used a set of levers to move the chess pieces on top of the case. It was a fake automaton, and that's the ideal that Amazon.com was calling forth when they named their labor pool after it. I chanced upon their service when I was looking online for some obscure diagrams of von Kempellen's machine and was completely shocked that AMT uses the strapline "artificial artificial intelligence" to describe the subject-status of their Workers.

SV: Karl Gottlieb von Windisch's copper engravings of *The Turk* (1783) serve as the volume's bookends, as it were, appearing on its first and last pages. Equally provocative is the book cover, which features IKEA-like figures peeking out of a cloud. Can you talk about these images?

NT: The images on the book cover, decorating the four section divisions among the poems, embellishing the essay titles and elsewhere,

are all digitally redrawn copies of icons used by Amazon.com. They are born-digital web graphics that mix the symbolism of desktop computing that is now (for want of a better term) “common parlance” with select caricatures of non-digital life into a tenuous metaphoric rendered as pictographic signposts in pleasant colors. Like “artificial intelligence” and the other straplines that I use as section titles, these images are typical of what I’ve called the emerging iconography of cloud living, which is one of the other new shadows or myths recast by computational capitalism. Those semi-figurative abstractions on the front cover are the AMT icon for Turks, some one of whom will be available 24/7 to perform normalizing and standardizing tasks to improve datasets, as a so-called “elastic staffing pool” to whom the employer has no obligation beyond the agreed payment. Collectively those three figures (that look a lot like chess pawns) are a portrait of *the Worker* as a multiplied (multi-person, multi-tasking, multi-multi, etc.) pictogram. The mirrorboard stock of the book cover makes it look like an external hard drive and evokes the same kind of flat feeling you get when you buy something from IKEA, but its reflectiveness visually insists that you can’t help but see yourself in the image of the cloud when you pick up the book, hence the sparse typography. Throughout the bookwork, metadata is rendered as paratext and so implicated each time as a threshold to the poems. For example, below each poem the time between accepting and submitting the job, the effective hourly rate, and the number of poems that Worker has in the book are all listed. On the back cover, the topics or themes of the poems are categorized following the book trade convention, which happened to perfectly reflect the topics and themes of the top ten nonfiction sellers in Britain for the week that I was laying out the cover: autobiography, celebrity, romance, self-help, weight loss.

The Windisch engravings are different. English media historian Tom Standage says the original drawings might have been made and circulated by von Kempellen himself, as decoys, because they’re one pair of examples from a wealth of literature produced while the “machine” was touring that wrongly guessed how it worked, hence, as bookends, their being back-to-front.

SV: Darren Wershler remarks in the afterword to the book that we face an ultimate deadlock: a poem may name the strategies of capital in an age of digital networks, but how do we move beyond the recognition of symptoms toward the production of solutions? So where do we go from here?

NT: The ideology of Modernism, or what German philosopher Cornelia Klinger would call the “modernity process,” found different ways of privileging the work done by artists and their produce over other kinds of work and products, taking its lead from pre-modern idealisms. We’re still living with the hangover of that privileging. But in the age of the third industrial revolution, of mass customization



and the total work of design, it's hard to *see* evidence of that difference; simultaneously, in an age of turbo-capitalist cultural industries, it's hard to *defend* any such differentiation based on any analysis of the product or labor processes—of what's made or how it's made. The changes that are reforming every kind of work all too quickly are happening under the surface of life, and they affect the way that poets work as much as they do bookselling, even if mainstream poetry still appears like proper poetry and mainstream books endlessly mimic the appearance of known bestsellers. *Of the Subcontract* foregrounds things that are meant to stay under the surface and mediates a set of otherwise silent voices through weird contractarian transactions that don't let them speak but rather pay them to say what they think I might want to read. On the surface, that foregrounding has led to a previously unimaginable poetry collection, which features exactly the same evangelical poem "Lord" three times, for example, because that's the work that one Worker submitted for thirty-seven cents, then thirty-eight cents, then thirty-nine cents. But below or behind or before the surface of the book, these poems make conceptually present what the Workers think poetry can and should be and what they think a poet would want to publicly buy and claim as his own expressions, with all of the paradoxes that double job entails. "I" am at the center of the experience of this book but am being turned and split in several ways at once. In fact, the full title of the book registers the project's first echo: Jean-Jacques Rousseau's *Of the Social Contract, Or Principles of Political Right*. As was for Rousseau, the problematic of my book is authority—specifically the legitimacy of authorial authority and the supposed authenticity of literary labor. The book as a black box presents the "here" you're referring to as a conjuncture. Whether we need to solve it or can move away from it is everyone's problem, not one that any "I" can answer, and right now, even if I tried, I'm still too close to the project to read its consequences any better.

SV: The volume makes present what "Workers think poetry can and should be and what they think a poet would want to publicly buy and claim as his own expressions, with all of the paradoxes that double job entails." No doubt. Yet preliminary research on AMT's workforce reveals that they are young (54% between 21 and 35 years old) and female (70%), with the U.S. supplying the largest share of its global labor pool (47%) on an annual household income of less than \$60,000. Does the collection not reveal a political subject recognizable today in advanced capitalist countries as the precariat class?

NT: It reveals—in fact, its textural and textual variety depends upon—the way in which actual-world class identities become amorphous in the cloud, in the network of labor relations that reduces every Worker to a database ID and a factor in a calculation about the efficiency of task-completion. Who and where these people are is made *not* to matter by the logic of the system, which idealizes that every Worker be equally objectified as perfectly functional relative to their processing power, which is rated according to the volume of HITs completed and Requester feedback on Worker performance. The dream of the precariat class on AMT is to become a Master Worker, and that should sound frighteningly familiar to labor historians. All Workers should become *the* Worker, differentiated only by their listed efficiency relative to the efficiency of the latest Master Workers, just as all computers are *the* computer, differentiated only by their inbuilt processing capacity relative to the capacity of the latest market-leading computers. In both cases, what a Worker or computer can work upon depends on what it is assigned to do. *Of the Subcontract* extrapolates what members of the precariat class say when their subjectivity—staged qua the classically expressive author of poetry—overflows the newly objectified worker-identity or subject-position that they've decided to squeeze their "self" into, and mediates those articulations as the voice of an inauthentic singular subject...if you can learn how to read it.