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Modular Form as a Curatorial Practice

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Modular form as a curatorial practice

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Abstract

This article discusses a curatorial approach to authorship as a model for thinking about what I describe as an iterative modular poem, a poetic text composed of appropriated segments. As a response to contemporary proliferation of literary and artistic works created by iterative means, i.e. through acts of appropriation, remixing and remediation, the article is an attempt at putting forward 'the curatorial' as an emerging paradigm of writing for the twenty-first century. The article approaches established paradigms of authorship, creativity and originality as inadequate with respect to contemporary experimental poetic practices to suggest a shift from creating to collecting and curating as a possible alternative model for thinking about instances of iterative creative writing. The argument focuses on Robert Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* (2011) as an example of an iterative modular poem and a text emblematic of such curatorial approach to authorship.

Robert Fitterman

Vilém Flusser

Modular thinking: An introduction

There are different types of exhibitions. Today, as Paul O'Neill points out, 'many have moved beyond the predominantly illustrative, single authored narrative' (2005: 7). From monographic to group shows, from site-specific one-off events to new media-based displays as software or data flow, the typography of exhibitions today encompasses, as one possible configuration, what Sarah Cook (2008) calls a modular model. The modular approach to exhibiting relies on a flexible structure of a platform: 'with the modular model, it is possible to scale back or drop discrete elements without drastically affecting its overall coherence' (Graham and Cook 2010: 155). The module is one of the key, recurring structural features of exhibition practice; it forms part of an architectural space of an exhibition as well as characteristic exhibition aesthetics. Companies such as Nimlok or Modul, for example, offer 'custom modular exhibition stands' (Nimlok modular exhibition stands 2014), while duties of a Junior Exhibition Preparator at Canadian Museum of Civilisation (2013), a post advertised early last year, involve 'maintenance of exhibition modules'. Manifestations of this approach to exhibition management in aesthetic terms include, among others, a 2014 Richard Hamilton exhibit at The Institute of Contemporary Arts, London, organized, as the show's description reads, 'around a modular handing system' (Richard Hamilton at the ICA 2014), or 'FLUXUS – Art for Everyone!' at Museum Ostwall, Dortmund, held in 2012. The latter displayed works and objects associated with Fluxus in a complex, architectural structure comprising modular

plywood elements, or 'Fluxus Modules', as their creators, modulorbeat, describe them (Furulo 2012).

But, as articles in this issue prove, the modular model that Cook (2008) devised as a means of thinking about a contemporary exhibition space can also be considered a feature of writing, or, as this article will suggest, building on the visual arts analogy, curating literature. A similar attitude towards organizing content can be observed in curatorial and contemporary experimental literary practices. In a development echoing the divergence from an illustrative, single authored narrative of an exhibition that O'Neill (2005) points to, in poetry a propensity to move away from familiar forms of authorship can also be observed. Literary strategies engaging in radical experimentation with form are in the foreground of contemporary poetry. But the tendencies and attitudes that dominate the twenty-first century experimental poetry landscape are such that parallels can be drawn between practices of curating in the context of contemporary exhibition and creative writing. In its literary manifestations, modular form emerges when the familiar approach to writing a continuous text is abandoned in favour of writing in units, structural modules used as means of organizing text, modules that, in the process of writing, are arranged or, as I suggest, curated to create literature. While thinking about writing as curating can offer a framework for theorizing a modular literary form broadly conceived, this article will focus on one possible way of approaching modularity, on what I will refer to here as an iterative modular form; i.e. works in which discrete units of text are composed by means of appropriation, repeating and repurposing fragments of other texts, collated and organized in and as modules, to form poetry. What I am interested in is the dynamics of the authorial practice that governs such iterative modular writing process, where

authoring texts is a result of conflated possibilities of creative exploration and information management. Such thinking about creative writing emerges at the backdrop of a very specific cultural condition. In an attempt at contextualizing the creative attitudes discussed here, the first half of the article develops an extensive theoretical framework in which to ground the contemporary iterative modular form as a curatorial practice, followed by a discussion of Rob Fitterman's *Holocaust Museum* (2011) as an illustrative example.

Iterative thinking

Acts of moving, collating and managing information adopted as a creative writing technique, this appropriation poetics, exemplify a wider tendency in writing today and are a manifestation of sensibilities so characteristic of what has been described as conceptual writing. This preference for borrowed material echoes very clearly in a range of experimental works published within the last decade or so, with the most familiar examples including Kenneth Goldsmith retyping private conversations, newspapers as well as radio and television news verbatim, as poetry in *Soliloquy* (1997), *Day* (2000), or, more recently, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013); Vanessa Place repurposing her own legal briefs, as literature, or tweeting the entirety of Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936); Simon Morris retyping Jack Kerouac's *On The Road* (1957), subsequently published as *Getting Inside Jack Kerouac's Head* (2009); or Rob Fitterman appropriating sources from a museum collection in his *Holocaust Museum* (2011), among many others. Rather than a manifestation of authorship traditionally understood, these texts demonstrate a chain of selection of choices governed by the logic of inclusion and exclusion of content adopted as a creative technique. The form of authorship that emerges

here relies, to paraphrase Fitterman (n.d.: 6), not on invention but on the inventory. But such an approach to writing stands in opposition to familiar assumptions of creative individualism. The Romantic notion of the author still so dominant in discourses on authorship today, in a creative ecology of radical appropriation and conceptual strategies, proves an antagonism. This article is an attempt at forging an alternative creative paradigm for authoring iterative modular form. It puts forward a concept of writing developed from the exhibition practices briefly introduced above. Authorship conceptualized as a manifestation of a curatorial project is presented here as one potential approach towards devising a new set of categories for thinking about the emergent writing paradigms that familiar notions of authorship, creativity and originality fail to describe and respond to adequately.

Fitterman's description of the contemporary creative impulse located in a move away from the paradigms of creation of content in favour of its organization is key to understanding the aesthetics of iterative modular form as a curatorial project that also manifests its specific cultural moment. This approach to writing that is inherently uncreative, reliant on copying and moving content, self-consciously evokes what Nicolas Bourriaud (2002) describes as the contemporary postproduction condition. Affinities can be drawn between Fitterman's thinking and Bourriaud's aesthetic project. For Bourriaud, postproduction epitomizes the contemporary, defined by the environment of excess and manifested through excessive information production in the current digital media ecology - a trigger for iterative writing practices. A precondition of contemporary cultural production resides in the dynamics of 'copy-paste' that immediately assumes self-conscious acts of appropriation, copying and repetition as a dominant creative mode that

readily translate into contemporary attitudes to writing in a broader cultural context, also outside of the confines of the web. 'It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of raw material', Bourriaud (2002: 7) writes, 'but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market […] objects already informed by other objects', objects approached as an inventory, to be acquired, collected and archived. This is a creative framework of 're'-gestures, as Kenneth Goldsmith (2010: xix) put it - retweeting, reblogging, where searching for materials, organizing and managing information in itself turns into a creative act, subverting the familiar creative paradigms. As Vilém Flusser (2011: 7) put it, 'a changing technology changes conscience'. Within the framework, the boundaries between producer and consumer of content are blurred, as is the distinction between creation and copy, readymade and original work. The aesthetic question for the contemporary conceptual writing is, to borrow from Bourriaud (2002: 17), no longer 'what we can make that is new', but, instead, 'how can we make do with what we have'.

Evoking this dynamic, Goldsmith (2011), for example, calls himself a collector of language, assembling personal conversations, news, and fragments of information. As Goldsmith (2011) put it, '[w]hat we are experiencing is an inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to engage in a more profound way with acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring […] our primary impulse, then, has moved from creators to collectors and archivists', or, to repeat after Fitterman again, from invention to the inventory. Every act of collecting, be it of objects or information, immediately inheres acts of collecting, organizing, managing and archiving. The collector inevitably acts as a curator of content accumulated. To think about creative writing within such a context

requires a rejection of the traditional notion of the author as an inspired, Romantic genius creating in vacuum to instead focus on the mode of selecting and organizing – or collating and subsequently curating source material to produce new work. The act of collating here emerges as a creative act, one that, to borrow from Derrida (1995: 17), 'produces as much as it records'.

The curatorial thinking

Writing in 2009 Boris Groys suggested that contemporary art can be understood primarily as an exhibition practice and that 'it is becoming increasingly difficult today to differentiate between […] the artist and the curator' (Groys 2009). Echoes of Bourriaud's postproduction thinking reverberate in Groy's allusion to what has been described as a curatorial turn, and a related rise of curator as creator and meta-artist. Groys (2009) argues that today, 'there is no longer any "ontological" difference between making art and displaying art. In the context of contemporary art, to make is to show things as art'. As a result of changing relations between creating, experiencing and organizing content, it is the act of collating, or producing by means of recording and organizing, that assumes creative qualities. While the practice of curating still resides in an ability to move, manage and arrange objects, as well as information about them, or, in the digital context, data or information itself, curatorship today should be thought of, in Paul O'Neill's (2012: 1) words, as 'a distinct practice of mediation'. The perception of the figure of the curator today has changed, 'from being a caretaker of collections […] to an independently motivated practitioner' (O'Neill 2012: 2), a source of critical discourse and ideas about aesthetics. Channelling such contemporary curatorial activity, a conceptual author as a curator today emerges as a mediator, 'a provocative agent in communication

chain' (O'Neill 2012: 25). Artistic and literary production viewed as such relies on models of creativity that reside in acts of organizing information critically. What I am trying to describe here as curatorial model of writing exemplifies an analogous dynamic. Today, the writer as a curator assumes the role of the curator as the critical, creative producer of meaning and discourse, the curator after the curatorial turn.

As Maria Lind (2010) suggests, the change in attitudes to curating means that any attempt at engaging with the present, at writing or exhibiting today, instead of representing, involves presenting, performing, 'something in the here and now instead of merely mapping it from there and then' (Lind 2010: 65). Lind describes such activity as a manifestation of 'the curatorial' as distinguished from an act of curating. For Lind, the curatorial is a more inventive and more critical alternative. The distinction that Lind makes stems from an association of curating with a practice of putting together an exhibition, while 'the curatorial' implies a methodology. The curatorial, unlike the practice of curating, is not bound to the context of a specific exhibition space. Instead, as Lind (2011) suggests,

> 'the curatorial' […] takes art as its starting point […] in order to challenge
> the status quo. […] The curatorial can be employed, or performed, by
> people in a number of different capacities […] There is a qualitative
> difference between curating and the curatorial. The latter […] carries
> potential for change. (Lind 2011)

The curatorial is an intellectual framework that lends itself to thinking beyond the visual arts context. Both, an act of curating in visual arts and curating as a mode of writing a conceptual poem, are exercises in the curatorial. And it is the curatorial as defined by Lind that I posit as a framework for thinking about writing iterative modular form, and conceptual literature more broadly.

Similar thinking, similar preoccupations pervade the curatorial and the postproduction projects. Juxtaposed, the discourses of conceptualism and contemporary curatorship create a discursive network of creative attitudes today, as they emerge at the backdrop of postproduction culture. As such, the contemporary postproduction condition can be seen as a natural context for the emergence of what might be described as an incredibly pervasive curatorial moment. As Beatrice von Bismarck et al. (2012) point out, in recent years concepts of curating have entered discourses of disciplines other than visual arts, reverberating in approaches to thinking about dance, theatre, film, design and architecture, as well as related academic research in sociology, anthropology and philosophy. For Von Bismarck et al. (2012: 12), 'the curatorial opens perspectives onto cultural practices that insist on […] changing subject and object relations, and dynamic hierarchies'. Within such a framework, the traditional tasks of artists, curators or writers start to shift, 'from one actor to another, from artist to curator to critic, and from an educational setting to an exhibiting or publishing institutions' (Von Bismarck et al. 2012: 12), from a writer to writer-curator engaging in curatorial thinking. But this attitude finds its diverse manifestation not just in the arts and scholarly environments but also in widespread popular culture. Ten years ago DJ-ing manifested the now; today everyone is a curator. It is possible to curate a pop-up shop, or a selection of organic food at Whole

Foods; a reading is now curated rather than organized; it is possible, in William Powida's words, 'to curate hype' (cf. Miranda 2011: 89). A DJ is now a curator, and Mark Ronson curating a music show for Channel 4 in February 2011 is only one of many examples. 'The title of curator', Terry Smith (2012: 17) explains, 'is assumed by anyone who has a […] role in bringing about a situation in which something creative might be done, who manages the possibility of invention'.

Rob Fitterman's iterative modular form

This attitude is also explicitly manifested in Fitterman's creative practice and pervasive in a number of his poetic, conceptual works. While curatorship can be seen as a model of authorship applicable to literary conceptualism in a variety of its manifestations, including instances of modular texts, the approach, I suggest, is evoked particularly explicitly and self-consciously in Fittermans's *Holocaust Museum* (2011).[1] The conceptual framework of an exhibition and curatorial practice is not only evoked here in the title but also in the source text Fitterman appropriates. It should be considered, I suggest, a manifestation of Fitterman's broader take on creative writing.

Holocaust Museum (2011) is an example of an iterative modular text, composed by means of appropriation and arranged in distinct, structured, regular units. It comprises a set of photograph captions, all appropriated from the collection of The United States Holocaust Memorial Museum in Washington, DC, repeated verbatim and reframed as a conceptual long poem. In Fitterman's book only captions and their catalogue numbers are reproduced; images that the text accompanies in its original context are not. No other text is included. There are over 28,000 images in the collection that Fitterman uses as his source text, some on display as part of a permanent exhibition. *Holocaust Museum* (2011)

incorporates captions of 300 items, some repeated to form over 700 textual units, organized according to 17 categories, some evoking the historical focus of the Museum explicitly - e.g. 'propaganda', 'concentration camps', 'mass graves', 'liberation', some foregrounding the more mundane everyday of a concentration camp life, such as 'shoes', 'jewellery', or 'family photographs'. Although the text comprising *Holocaust Museum* (2011) is lifted directly from the museum's collection in its entirety, the categories in which the material is organized are not. These are devised by Fitterman and do not comply with the organization of the collection in the museum, be it in the online catalogue or as represented in the form of the permanent exhibit, the latter arranged chronologically.

The nature of the source Fitterman appropriates, as well as the approach assumed in the process of this appropriation, invites an immediate association with acts of curating traditionally understood. In *Holocaust Museum* (2011) Fitterman's authorial agency manifests itself as an act of curatorship but one constructed in a characteristically iterative fashion. His authorship relies on curating the already curated content. An interesting dynamics emerges as a result. To think about a museum context itself, every museum collection comprises a set of objects that represent a history, an event, or a genealogy of events. Every collection is an attempt at representing the events that happened elsewhere; it is an attempt to repeat them by means of exhibition, collection, installation – through an impossible act of their repetition. As such, a museum is always a space not of a particular historical event in itself - here the event of Holocaust - not of what Derrida (2003) would describe as the thing of the event, but rather a locus of the decontextualized impression of that event, always inevitably subjective, altering the thing

in a curatorial gesture. An act of curating, then, can be described as an act of repetition of an event by means of its decontextualization, one that is always marked by an impossibility of it being again. Fitterman's *Museum* (2011) iterates the logic of such curatorial repetition, while at the same time repeating the act of curating itself. It decontextualizes the already decontextualized event to create a volume of experimental poetry as an impression of an impression, a repetition of a repetition. Fitterman's act of authorship is an act of selection and subjective interpretation not so much of the event of Holocaust but of any attempt at speaking and objectifying the event and its impossibility.

Vilèm Flusser: Rob Fitterman, a repetition

Holocaust Museum (2011) is a book of images recording a moment in history in which no images are reproduced; the process of its production is informed by acts of repetition and erasure at the same time. While a lot could be said about the aesthetics and poetics of Holocaust in the context of Fitterman's text, my interests here go beyond the problem of representation 'after Auschwitz' to focus on the formal qualities of the project, on *Holocaust Museum* (2011) as representative of writing as a curatorial practice. However, this choice of the subject matter and the status of Holocaust in the common cultural conscience can be approached as a conceptual framework, as an idea that informs Fitterman's project that, in turn, has impact on the form it assumes. As if evoking the overfamiliar mantra of incomprehensibility and inability to represent the event of Holocaust, Fitterman, in his act of removal of the photograph - of the medium most readily associated with mimetic possibilities of representation - engages in an exercise in subversion of the relationship between text and image, the image and history, and the possibilities as well as limits of their representation and reproduction.

As Vilèm Flusser (2000) writes, today, we are inhabitants of a photographic universe:

> We have become accustomed to photographs: They have grown familiar
>
> to us. We no longer take notice of most photographs, concealed as they are
>
> by habit; in the same way we ignore everything familiar in our
>
> environment and only notice what has changed. (2000: 65)

When read in line with Flusser's argument, a paradox of thinking about representations of Holocaust comes to the fore; a photograph of an event as pervasive as Holocaust, through its ubiquitous cultural presence, acquires a status of an overfamiliar image. It is only through a radical act of its erasure that the photograph comes to the fore. Its novelty seems to reside in its redundancy. In their original context of the Washington Museum the captions assume a role of a supplement. While their function as text is subordinate to the image (Flusser 2000: 61–62), the act of removal of the photograph reverses the relationship between text and image. Instead of 'decoding the image' (Flusser 2000: 8) in a process of assignation of meaning and signification in a traditional museum context, in Fitterman's *Museum* the project of meaning-making is detached from an object it is meant to decode. In *Holocaust Museum* (2011), coping also involves erasure; the iteration of the sources from The Holocaust Museum inheres an act of repetition and removal at the same time. It is this model of repetition that also involves alterity that determines the form of Fitterman's poetics, where its modularity only becomes apparent as a manifestation of a curatorial gesture that transforms the museum archive into a modular poem, through a process of appropriation and change. We 'only notice what has

changed', 'change is informative' (Flusser 2000: 65). With its propensity for change, Flusser's approach and, by analogy, Fitterman's project echo Lind's (2011) trajectory to emerge as manifestations of 'the curatorial'. Writing as appropriation, as change, writing as curating, as a result of practices such as radical acts of erasure and appropriation, allows for alternative orders of signification to emerge. As an example of the curatorial it is inherently oriented towards challenging the status quo. Seen as such, Fitterman's work can be read as a project interested in exploration of the process of writing by alternative means, thinking about authorship as curatorship and foregrounding what Flusser describes as 'the struggle of writing against the image [that] runs through history' (Flusser 2000: 11).

There are affinities between Flusser's thinking about creative process and Fitterman's approach to appropriating and arranging content. An interest in paradigms of information dissemination, their tools as exemplified by the status of a photograph, runs through Flusser's philosophy. What is of relevance to my discussion of Fitteman's work, and iterative modular form more broadly, is Flusser's specific understanding of the possibilities of repetition that also connote creation, a trajectory fundamental to the dynamics of photographic image production, but also a model that, for Flusser himself, is not limited to the visual medium. In *Does Writing Have a Future* (2011) Flusser points to a similar tendency to create by means of repetition in writing that is so pervasive in Fitterman's *oeuvre*. According to Flusser (2011), today

> the new poet [...] no longer identifies himself as author but rather as
>
> remixer. Even the language he manipulates no longer seems like raw

material stacked up inside him but rather like a complex system pressing

in around him to be remixed. His attitude to a poem is no longer that of the

inspired and intuitive poet but that of an information designer. (2011: 74–

75)

His attitude is of the order of an inventory rather than invention. This reading of

Holocaust Museum (2011) via Flusser is not coincidental. While thinking about Fitterman

in reference to Flusser serves as a useful approach to discussing the *poiesis* of *Holocaust*

Museum (2011), the approach is also an attempt at referencing a broader theoretical

context in which Fitterman himself posits his work. *Holocaust Museum* (2011), I suggest,

could in fact be considered a response to, or, perhaps, itself a repetition and appropriation

of Flusser's broader philosophical project, and his *Toward a Philosophy of Photography*

(2000) most explicitly. Fitterman's commitment to an iterative modular form can be

ascribed to this particular approach to thinking about writing through Flusser.

The association of Fitterman's creative writing with Flusser's ideas is not my own, but a

framework implied by Fitterman himself in his creative practice. This is pointed to most

explicitly in Fitterman's 'Replacing Reference to Photography with references to the web

in Vilèm Flusser's "Towards a Philosophy of Photography" (1983)' (2011), a project in

which Fitteman manipulates an excerpt of Flusser's text to create a short essay of his

own, to generate information. This is information as understood by Flusser, approached

as that which informs objects. Flusser is interested in what he describes as an informative

photograph, one that offers new models of experience. He writes, '[w]hat would be

informative, exceptional, exciting for us would be a standstill: to find the same

newspaper on our breakfast tables every day or to see the same posters on the wall for

months on end. This would surprise and shock us' (Flusser 2000: 65). To read the same text, repeated, and reproduced, would shock us, would draw our attention to it. It is only in the repetition of the image or the text that the event, and information about it, comes to the fore. As an appropriation of Flusser's, Fitterman's approach adopts the characteristics of photography as a reproductive medium for writing executed in the postproduction moment, assuming the experiment undertaken in his 'Replacing' as broader creative attitude. Read as such, poetry composed by means of remixing, arranging or curating content is informative; it is poetry, in Flusser's words, 'in the sense of construction of experiential models' (Flusser 2011: 74). The process of repurposing the source material understood in line with this trajectory turns into a way to 're-evaluate the categories of our cultural critique', as Fitterman (2011b: 162) appropriating Flusser (2000: 25) puts it.[2] One way of doing that, Fitterman seems to be suggesting, is by drawing attention to the established paradigms of cultural criticism by means of formal experimentation.

This is, I suggest, a conceptual framework behind *Holocaust Museum* (2011). Flusser's *Philosophy* explicitly informs this text as well, an approach indicated in the first of three epigraphs included in the volume. An excerpt from Flusser's *Philosophy* is printed alongside quotations from Charles Reznikoff's *Holocaust* (1975) and Heimrad Bäker's *Transcript* (1986), both in direct correspondence to Fitterman's aesthetics as manifestations of writing about Holocaust by means of appropriation. While readings such as Charles Bernstein's (2012), for example, acknowledge the latter two as important points of reference, the connection to Flusser epigraph has not been explored in relation to *Holocaust Museum* (2011).[3] However, I would like to suggest that, while Rezinkoff and Bäker are important in placing Fitterman's work in a broader context of a very

particular type of Holocaust poetics, it is the reference to Flusser that is particularly telling and key to understanding Fitterman's creative practice. The epigraph reads:

> This space and time peculiar to the image is none other than the world of magic, a world in which everything is repeated and in which everything participates in a significant context. Such a world is structurally different from that of the linear history in which nothing is repeated and in which everything has causes and will have consequences. (Flusser 2000: 9; cf. Fitterman 2011a)

The world of history here is the space of the event, that which can never be repeated, as opposed to its representation, the photograph. Flusser echoes familiar debates about the ontology of the photographic image that dominated early twentieth century thinking about the possibilities of photographic reproducibility and related questions of originality and authenticity later appropriated by and pervasive in postmodern discourse. Fitterman's iterative project engages and subverts the trajectory in an interesting manner. His *Museum* evokes the space and peculiarity of the image that Flusser describes without reproducing the image, evoking the experiment in 'Replacing', and turning the photographic context into a space of writing, into a linear, or, perhaps more accurately, a modular space of history, of the event, in which 'no-thing' is reproduced, while 'everything is repeated' at the same time, where the repetition of the captions produces new singularity, a new event and an alternative order of signification.

This writing, as abstracted from 'surfaces' (Flusser 2000: 11), allows for conceptual thinking. The complex structure of repetition and reproduction that Fitterman engages in is evocative of Flusser's logic, and an attempt at shifting the focus away from the object to information about it, away from the photograph and the conditions of its reproducibility, to text and information as the primary object of dissemination and replication, in the process translating the debates about dynamics of reproduction from the early twentieth century concerns to the early twenty-first century context, evoked in the contemporary conceptual poetics. The focus on text alone, on information, translates the archival content of the Washington Museum into poetry in an inherently conceptual gesture that also evokes Flusser's understanding of the relationship between text and image in what he describes as a post-industrial context. This reference is particularly important here as a means of positioning Flusser's thinking, and my thinking about Fitterman via Flusser, in a particular cultural moment. 'This is what characterises the post-industrial: The information and not the thing is valuable' (Flusser 2000: 51). Fitterman's approach to collating *Museum* evokes Flusser's logic, and in its appropriation also foregrounds the twenty-first century categories of cultural critique. The shift from Flusser to Fitterman, from a photograph to information, is a manifestation of this cultural transition, from the modern to the postmodern to postproduction moment, and their respective tools and aesthetics, all grounded in the ubiquity of their contemporary reproduction technologies. With the transition from the analogue camera and the photocopier to the digital image and the web of information, the preoccupations with iterative practice remain at the core of the aesthetic debates historically and at present only characterized by different technology-specific iterative gestures. Fitterman's

removal of the image seems a literal manifestation of Flusser's understanding of the status of photographs as it transforms in the information society. In the contemporary context, Flusser (2000) argues, '[a]s objects, their value is negligible; their value lies in the information that they carry loose and open for reproduction on their surface', making '"the media" totally invisible for the receiver of the photograph' (Flusser 2000: 56), making the media of photographs from the Washington collection totally invisible, visible only as traces in the text that references them.

Which brings me back to the modular form. As briefly suggested earlier in this article, it is in the removal of images that the modularity of Fitterman's text resides. The process of erasure of the image, the change, to remain in the Flusserian frame, is informative here. It is the change in the form of the source text that foregrounds the modular form the appropriated text assumes; it is only through change that its modularity becomes noticeable. It informs the structure of the poem that is created by iterative means, imposing the modular form on the text. It is the act of erasure of the image, in the process of which the segments of text are retained on the page that elicits always already modular captions as formulaic, structured units of text. The form of *Holocaust Museum* (2011) emerges as a result of the reconfigured relations between the units of text. It relies on the self-sufficiency of each individual unit in order to do that, but it is only in the context of other modules that the project is realized and the information assumes a new aesthetic function. As such, in *Holocaust Museum* (2011), writing the modular form should not be seen as an independent creative decision, as a Romantic, inspired act of authorship. Rather, I suggest, it should be ascribed to a characteristic conceptual attitude to writing by means of appropriation that becomes a trigger for the modular form to emerge. To

evoke an inherently conceptual paradigm, here an attitude becomes form,[4] it enforces a particular model of writing as curating to produce a text that, in turn, can be rearranged, moved, composed in the curatorial process. For Fitterman, appropriation and erasure become writing tools, in Flusser's terms, tools that 'change the form of […] objects' (Flusser 2000: 23), here transforming the photograph into its trace, a supplement into an essence, a space of a photograph into a space of writing, authorship into curatorship. They can be seen to serve as a means of imprinting 'a new intentional form into them. They "inform" them' (Flusser 2000: 23; Fitterman 2011b: 161). *Holocaust Museum* (2011) imprints a new form into the source text. As a compilation of textual units determined only by Fitterman's choices and his set of categories, it turns the selection of artefacts from the actual Museum into a raw material to be curated anew, artefacts informed and altered to create new subjectivity – a text as a curated literary object.

Curating the modular form

As Paul O'Neill (2007: 23) suggested, a curator works in fragments; 'the work of curator transforms the work of the artist into a useful "fragment" in his or her own work of exhibition', into a useful fragment, or, perhaps more accurately, a module. A fragment is a familiar concept in literature and the arts, central to German Romantic aesthetics that finds its manifestations in Nietzsche, Wittgenstein or Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, as well as in contemporary poetry, in the works of Charles Bernstein and Steve McCaffery, among others. As Schlegel (1971: F206) described it, 'a fragment, like a miniature work of art, has to be entirely isolated from the surrounding world and be complete in itself like a hedgehog'. While not limited in respect of length, style or structure, a Romantic fragment always exists in isolation; it must be independent and autonomous. Writing in

fragments is a form without form, 'the romantic genre par excellence' (Lacoue-Labarthe and Nancy 1988: 40) that is not a genre at all, a 'form that, being all forms – that is, at the limit, being none at all – does not realise the whole, but signifies it by suspending it, even breaking it' (Blanchot 1993: 353). Blanchot's understanding of a fragment that escapes any possibility of completeness, as that which deconstructs, is key to differentiating between the nature of fragments and modules and defining the modular form. Although both thinking in fragments and modules is driven by a shared commitment to experimentation and radical aesthetics, the two approaches exemplify drastically different attitudes to authorship and/as curatorship. I would like to suggest that it is the modular rather than fragmentary model that finds its manifestation in the curatorial project and works such as Fitterman's.

While individual units of *Holocaust Museum* (2011) are self-contained segments of text that, to return to Cook's typography, can be moved or dropped without drastically affecting the content, this structure, I suggest, does not imply fragmentation. Rather, it is an example of a modular form, with all of its formal characteristics. A fragment, as Peter Osborne (2013: 59) sees it, is an 'anti-system'; it assumes a 'purely negative relation to the absent whole'. A fragment implies disparity, assumes lack of cohesion and completeness, the absence always marked by the presence of the whole that once was. Fragments are characteristically disjointed, independent and chaotic. A fragmentary text is stylistically ambiguous and mutable, whereas a modular text is marked by a stylistic cohesion. A fragment deconstructs, while a module constructs a work. Module, then, is the opposite of the fragment; it is that which does not break the consistency and unity of the whole but rather, by means of organization and arrangement, creates a new totality: a

new totality of an exhibition or a literary work. A fragment is a complete work in its own right and an element of a whole after it is deconstructed; modules, on the other hand, are self-contained elements that constitute wholeness, wholeness and not a whole, perhaps a certain state that is, in Deleuzean terms, a multiple, an open structure, not a singular closed one, an assemblage, marked by its fluidity and mutability, where elements can be moved and dropped, but a structured system nevertheless. As an assemblage, a module participates in the possibilities of an infinite openness of a mutable but symmetrical, regular, formulaic system that, in its alterity, also enables a closure of an exhibition or a curated text.

As a system of organization, a module assumes a structural role as a building block. Modules imply a symmetrical, carefully organized system that relies on the possibility and ease of collating and arranging them as structural elements that in their regularity contribute to a new coherent formation or arrangement. Seen as such, the nature of the module, as opposed to the fragment, is architectural. The distinction between the two manifests itself most explicitly through this architectural analogy. Taking such architectural approach to the modular form of exhibition, the 2011 'Fluxus – Art for everyone!', mentioned earlier in this article, organized the display by employing an 'exhibition architecture', with its Fluxus modules designed by an architecture firm. Evoking this dynamics in his discussion of Jeff Derksen's modular poetics, Peter Jaeger (2009) points to a similar trajectory. For Jaeger and Derksen, '[t]he recurring, modular structure which organises the poem is not unlike an architectural "space frame"- i.e., a rigid structure constructed from interlocking struts, which is often used in modernist and contemporary architecture to hold up long spans with few supports' (Jaeger 2009: 32).

Evocative of Derksen's approach, Fitterman's poetic module emerges as a form of poetic architecture, a means of organizing, structuring and supporting a poem, in its potential for reorganization and change, as that which creates rather than fragments a work.

But considered as an architectural building block, always contributing to a new structure, a module is context dependent, a module is always contingent on other modules. The modularity of a unit only manifests itself in an attempt to build, to construct. The modularity of a module only becomes apparent in the context of other modules that form the same system, as a segment included in the architecture of the poem that constructs the work. The modularity of Fitterman's text is only apparent when the images from the Museum collection are erased and the snippets of text are juxtaposed with other matching units belonging to the same architectural, textual modular system, as a result of the Flusserian change, imprinting 'a new intentional form into them' (Flusser 2000: 23). Outside of the structure, as an individual textual entity, each appropriated caption, in its independent singularity, only manifests itself as a fragment.

What fragments and modules have in common is their contingency on the possibility of assemblage; they remain fluid, always open to a curatorial project, as Derrida (2008: 128) writes, each 'in a series can come before and after the other'. The act of curating, I suggest, systematizes the unsystematic incompleteness of the fragment as a process that transforms the fragment into a module. The act of curating imposes a system and structure, critical framework and discourse, inscribing the disparate fragments into a modular form to constrict the ambiguous myriad of their potential arrangements. By analogy, Fitterman's project is an exercise in transformation of the museum fragments into a modular long poem, in an attempt, to return to Fitterman (2011b: 162), to 're-

evaluate the categories of our cultural critique'. It is only in the process of their

appropriation, as a result of a curatorial gesture, that the disparate fragments of the

museum collection are reconstituted as modules. The emergence of the modular form of

writing develops as contingent on curatorial thinking.

Conclusion

As Robert Cook (2013) suggested, a curator is always 'between spaces, discourse and

modes of thinking and doing'. For Cook, 'a curator is […] always not a curator'. In a

similar manner, a conceptual writer is always, and at the same time is not, a writer,

always negotiating the discourses, modes and methods of their rearticulation. A curator,

and, like a curator, a conceptual writer, or perhaps writer as curator, can be seen as a

mediator, or, to borrow from Cook (2013), a conduit; 'being a curator-as-conduit is to be

utterly contingent and floating, always between forms and formations. A curator is

betweenness incarnate. Therefore, maybe, a curator is someone who is equally not a

curator'. Curatorship conceptualized as such emerges as a category of creative production

that operates in an ambiguous creative space of production of meaning that challenges the

familiar creative paradigm. Writing seen as a curatorial practice is a manifestation of an

open and fluid assemblage; it is, in Cook's (2013) words, writing as finding; it is 'a

practice about negotiation and betweenness. It isn't a thing necessarily. It is a set of

occasions […] the act of curating […] as a declaration of agency and desire'. To borrow

from Terry Smith (2012: 32), this is a framework for conceptualizing authorship that is

'emergent, imperfectly grasped, but nonetheless an interesting way of thinking about art',

and about contemporary modes of creativity more broadly. Even if such assumptions

about writing do not advance a complete model of authorship for the contemporary

moment, moving to the curatorial as a means of conceptualizing creative writing, and the modular form in particular, offers a space of exploration of the potentiality of thinking about writing by other means, again, a model of re-evaluating the familiar categories of cultural critique.

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Notes

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[1] Fitterman himself makes a reference to authorship as curatorship in his *Just Another Soft Machine* (2014).

[2] In Flusser's text this passage reads: 'The categories of cultural criticism must be rethought' (Flusser 2000: 25).

[3] In a short response paper Patrick Greaney (2012) discusses Fitterman's 'Replacing' in the context of Flusser's philosophy. Greaney makes a brief reference to *Holocaust Museum* (2011) but only in relation to a broader discussion of 'permutational poetry' (Greaney 2012: 228). He cites *Holocaust Museum* (2011), alongside 'Replacing' and 'Directory' (2009) (a poem in which Fitterman copies a mall directory's list of stores), simply as further example of Fitterman's appropriation poetics. The reference to Flusser is grounded here, specifically in Greaney's discussion of 'Replacing' as an appropriation of Flusser. No explicit connection is made between *Holocaust Museum* (2011) and Flusser's wider philosophical project.

[4] I am referring to a 1969 exhibition, 'When Attitudes Become Form', curated by Harald Szeeemann at the Kunsthalle Bern. The reference to this particular show is relevant here

both because of its focus – its preoccupation with conceptual thinking, the process rather than product, information rather than an aesthetic object – as well as its status in the history of curatorial practice. 'Attitudes' is considered foundational with respect to establishing the figure of the contemporary curator as an independent creator, a transition in attitudes to curating that, as I suggest, informs contemporary experimental poetics as well, translating into inherently curatorial forms of writing such as a modular long poem.