Collaborating with Gertrude Stein
Media ecologies, reception, poetics

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ABSTRACT

The reception of the American avant-garde poet, playwright, art collector and salon hostess Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) has to a wide extent taken place in an aesthetic context prior to her work’s academic and hermeneutic canonization. This thesis is in part a mapping of this transmedia reception as it is played out in a North American context in the period from her death and until today, and in part an account of Stein’s particular collaborative poetics, through which her work invites such a reception. Furthermore, the thesis maintains that we in a contemporary context are experiencing a still increasing receptivity towards Stein’s oeuvre, that seems more relevant today than ever before.

These circumstances, the thesis illuminates and discusses via a media theoretical framework, where Stein’s own work, as well as its aesthetic reception is considered as embedded in a complex media ecology. Media ecology is here conceived as a decentralized, networked approach to aesthetic phenomena, which is able to contain many types of agents and materialities. The media ecology of an artwork is thus potentially made up by the entire network of processes, agents and materials that are relevant to its production, distribution and consumption and influences the subject positions available to the individual agents.

Through Stein’s aesthetic reception it is possible to catch sight of important components that are active in the media ecology but often neglected or considered subordinated to text-internal features. These include the material interface of the medium in question, the aestheticized persona of the artist and infrastructures such as the salon, which affect how and to whom the work and its meanings are distributed. The thesis also traces a number of parallels between the media situation of Stein in the beginning of the 20th century and the digital media situation at the verge of the 21st that suggest both explanations for and implications of her increasing contemporary relevance.

Keywords: American poetry, Gertrude Stein, media ecologies, reception, poetics, collaborative poetics, media poetics, ambient poetics
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LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

Abbreviations of works by Gertrude Stein


BAB  To Do. A Book of Alphabets and Birthday. With illustrations by Giselle Potter and an introduction by Timothy Young, New Haven: Yale University Press in association with Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.


EA  Everybody’s Autobiography, Cambridge: Exact Change, 1993


WIS   *Wars I Have Seen*, London: B. T. Batsford, 1945


Other abbreviations


INTRODUCTION

“And now to begin as if to begin. Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we are here. This is some time ago for us naturally. There is something to be added afterwards.”

Gertrude Stein, Composition as Explanation (1926)

“Let’s do a Gertrude Stein on it”

In a talk from 1996, held at the first Symposium of Performance Writing, the French-Norwegian-British performance poet Caroline Bergvall sets out to define the phenomenon of “performance writing” – one of several hybrids between poetry, music, sound art, visual art, electronic literature and performance art that emerged around the closing of the last millennium. After demonstrating the difficulty of pinning down her tricky subject, Bergvall assumes a surprising strategy: “So, let’s do a Gertrude Stein on it,” she suggests, “and talk about it for what it is not” (Bergvall 1996: 1). From here, she goes on to imitate the playful characteristic use of negations and concrete approach to language of the American avant-garde writer, in order to investigate the concept of performance writing backwards, approaching the slippery object of her talk negatively, from some of the adjoining fields that it bleeds into.

This thesis is motivated by an interest in the continued role of literature in the complex media ecology of our present day, where strictly text-centred definitions seem increasingly insufficient. In this media environment, the book is but one platform among many others upon which we encounter literature. And not just inventive hybrids like Bergvall’s performance writing, but in fact most literary works, including those appearing to be solidly book-bound, extend way beyond the pages they are printed on to reach out towards their audience through a host of other material strategies. We can access readings, both live and online; we find parts or extensions of the works on authors’ blogs and encounter them on social media, as well as in the mass media. Thus, such multimodal strategies through which a printed work also communicates include both the mediatized projection and transmission of the bodies and voices of their authors and an invitation towards their audience to participate, recycle, alter, and share. In this situation, it is be-
coming less and less satisfactory to define literature as a corpus of texts, and more and more pertinent to consider it in performative terms, studying its impact in an open media landscape, instead of focusing all attention on the internal textual structure.

Surely, it is far from coincidental that Bergvall – when confronted with the challenge of defining a new form of literary practice born out of these “postliterary” times – picks the avant-garde poet, playwright, art collector, salon hostess, as well as feminist and lesbian icon Gertrude Stein (1874-1946) and no one else, to transform her from an iconic writer and historical figure into something more like an operation. In the present study, I will follow Bergvall’s example, and “do a Gertrude Stein on it.” That is, I will approach the current media ecology of literature through the lens of the aesthetic reception of Gertrude Stein as it has played out over a range of artistic media. This decision is motivated by the many ways in which this reception anticipates the participatory, multi-sensorial, multi-modal and multi-media situation that contemporary literature is facing in the age of digital media. By zooming in on the manifestations of Stein’s work in the practices of later artists confronting it, I am – in a literal manner – shifting my attention from the close reading of a written body of work towards another reading practice that traces this work as a productive force or functionality, a Gertrude Stein machine if you like, that is activated in other artistic practices in the media ecology. I consider all writing a situated process evolving in time and space and am thus resisting a division between language and action that would be needed to maintain a text-centered definition of literature. In this approach, literature is only real when it is being realized – through writing and reading, or when it is being thought about or talked about, or rewritten, recycled and collaborated with.

The conceptual framework of media ecologies will be unpacked in the second part of this introduction, but when speaking of a media ecology I am referring to the entire media environment of a certain practice and period and how it relates to other human and non-human agents of this period. Hence, in the media ecology of literature in Stein’s day the book, or the codex, was an important material component. But what becomes central for the ecological approach is tracing the various connections and relations that exist between this platform and a host of other platforms (such as other print media, radio, theater and film), social and professional spaces (for instance salon, book store and archive) and a whole range of agents (writers, readers, publishers, friends and enemies). All these elements will affect and be affected by the media ecology. In order to work with an ecological approach, it is crucial to accept the fact that the outer limits of such an ecology is a question that cannot be determined in principle but only in practice. Aspects, relations and components are relevant to the ecology if they pose interesting questions and expose important functionalities.

In the following, I will not attempt to uphold strict boundaries between different modes of writing, whether labelled as poetry, performance writing, micropoetries, conceptual writing, prose, literature, advertising, or just mere communication as one cannot, in a certain sense, claim a privileged position for a particular type of literature canon-
ized as high art in such an ecology. Nevertheless, I am departing from Gertrude Stein’s oeuvre, notorious as a highly experimental and challenging corpus of literature, bulging with avant-garde capital. This point of departure is important for strategic purposes, not because I contend that Stein’s writing is of an intrinsically different kind than writing in general. Yet, as we shall see, Stein’s work is applying various media poetic strategies that make it particularly proficient in rendering the circumstances around its production, distribution and consumption palpable and hence, open for collaborative engagement. Even though much of the writing in the media ecology of Stein’s day may be engorged in circumstances comparable to those surrounding Stein’s, I find that hers is particularly suited for exposing these circumstances for scrutiny and particularly open towards participation. As such, I consider Stein’s oeuvre a qualified entrance towards the specific functionalities of the larger media ecology of literature I am addressing.

In the course of her career, Gertrude Stein moved from the most manual conditions of production and distribution of her writing to the verge of modern mass celebrity culture. Interestingly, in neither of these situations was her practice primarily dependent upon the printed book; this all dominant base of literature in modernity, often pronounced to be the technological foundation for modernity per se (McLuhan 1962, Ong 1982, Kittler 1990). In the first years of the 20th century, when beginning her writing career, Stein was living in voluntary exile in Paris and hosting a salon for the avant-garde. She collected paintings by the cubist painters, who were salon guests along with other artists of almost any kind. Here, among paintings and collages by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, her work was being disseminated mainly via conversation and correspondence, and in typescripts passing from hand to hand. At the other end of her career, by the mid-1930s, when Stein revisited her native America for the first time in 30 years, her work was being discussed on street corners and appropriated by department stores and newspapers.

In recent years, the media situation of literature has been altered at a speed quite comparable to that experienced by Stein, and I hold this up as the most important reason why her media ecology is so illuminating in a time where we are being forced to rethink the relationship between the processes of production, circulation and consumption of literature.

As this study unfolds, over the past sixty years the processing of Gertrude Stein’s work has been bifurcating into incessantly new fields, from literature, theater, film, and visual arts to dance, music, advertising, and digital culture. I suggest that in our swiftly changing digital – or even, as Florian Cramer has called it, “post-digital,” – culture, the time is becoming ripe for tracing and comprehending this history in its complexity (Cramer 2013). In turn, Gertrude Stein’s work, and especially the way it is processed, transformed and redistributed by its collaborating readers across different media, can suggest

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1 Apart from Bergvall’s performance writing, I will return to all of these types of writing in the course of this study. I have picked up the term “micropoetries”, along with the label “postliterary” used above, from Maria Damon’s essay collection Postliterary America: From Bagelshop Jazz to Micropoetries (2011) that I will revisit in chapter four.
new paths when we want to grasp the specific media situation of literature today.

I.”I AM ALWAYS WANTING TO COLLABORATE WITH SOME ONE”

“I am always wanting to collaborate with some one” (EA 278), wrote Gertrude Stein in *Everybody’s Autobiography* (1936), before listing a whole series of planned collaborations that never really happened. The great generation of modernist writers in the English language whose production peaked in the first half of the 20th century famously includes names like James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, T. S. Eliot and Ezra Pound, and by now, claiming Stein as a member of this crowd has become fairly uncontroversial. Also, if you turn to art history, you will find her solidly canonized for her contributions to the establishment of the (American) history of painterly modernism in Europe, as she, along with her brother Leo, was the first person to hang side by side paintings by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, featured as the foundational modernist fathers in this history. If you consult accounts of international tendencies in post-dramatic theater, or histories of American theater and performance art, you will find accounts of Stein as an instigator of such traditions. But to claim Gertrude Stein as – above all – a great collaborator, will most likely be met with more surprise. Yet, this is the claim I want to make, as I argue that it is in the collaborative elements of Stein’s poetics, that we find the most convincing explanations as to why her relevance seems to be steadily increasing today.

Social collaborator or solitary genius?

The seeming strangeness of collaboration as a crucial concept in relation to Gertrude Stein’s practice is foremost due to her notorious self-proclaimed status as a literary genius, claiming for herself an unequalled position as the leading figure in the literature of her time, particularly in late works like *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932), in which she praises her own genius, using the voice of her lover Alice B. Toklas in order to surpass the false modesty so persistently inscribed in the autobiographical genre. In her insistent invocation of the category of the autonomous literary genius, Stein is certainly not framing herself as a collaborative artist.

On the contrary, a strong mythology exists around Stein concerning her many failed collaborations and friendships that terminated in dispute. She is known for abolishing friendships over shipwrecked collaborations. Most famously, when her undertaking of the translation of French poet Georges Hugnet’s poem *Enfances* ended in a falling between the two over the design of the planned bilingual publication’s title page. Stein finally published her free poetic translation alone under the telling title *Before the Flow-
ers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded (1931) reducing Hugnet’s relevance for the text to the ambiguous statement, in small types: “Written on a poem by Georges Hugnet.” But it is also true that many cooperative endeavors did come about for Stein. A number of works emerged from her collaborations with painters and illustrators, such as A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story (1926) illustrated by Juan Gris, and it was the ballet A Wedding Bouquet (1937) directed and choreographed by Gerard (Lord) Berners that really made her name in Britain.

Gertrude Stein and Virgil Thomson ca. 1929 in collaboration on the score for Four Saints in Three Acts (Photo: Therese Bonney. Courtesy of YCAL, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library); Stage shot of the opera cast in Florine Stettheimer’s costumes and set design 1934 (Courtesy: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art).
Her most spectacular, fulfilled collaborations were with the American composer Virgil Thomson on their joint operas. Firstly, the Broadway hit *Four Saints in Three Acts* (libretto completed 1927, first performance 1933), which intrigued and amused a broad audience in America, and secondly, *The Mother of Us All*, which Stein completed in 1946, but did not live to see premiere the year after. However, these cases would appear to be exceptions in the total oeuvre, and I should stress that I am approaching the idea of artistic collaboration in a somewhat broader sense than a traditional definition would suggest when I claim that Stein in fact had a strong collaborative ideal for her practice, and I uphold this quality as key to comprehending her contemporary relevance.

With this wider conception of collaboration, it becomes relevant how Stein’s earliest poetics took shape when she became friends with Pablo Picasso in her first years of living in Paris and they started exchanging ideas about composition when she sat for his famous portrait of her, while working on her first book *Three Lives* (1905–6). Also relevant is how she collaborated closely with her friend, the author and music critic Carl Van Vechten, in numerous matters regarding her writing and its framing, distribution and publishing. And crucially, how she had a life-long collaboration of reading and writing – or of “composition,” which in Stein’s understanding is a concept that covers both activities infiltrated – with her partner Toklas who read, typed and responded to everything she wrote and in this way was deeply engaged in her compositional process.

Several academic readers have addressed how establishing a dialogic moment in her writing was crucial to Stein (Will 2000, Spahr 2001, Mix 2008). From her early portraits where she sought to portray not her subject but the relationship or exchange between her subject and herself, to her late autobiographies where she appropriated the voice and perspective, first of Toklas, in *The Autobiography of Alice B Toklas*, and then of “everybody” in the sequel, *Everybody’s Autobiography*. In her lecture “Portraits and Repetition,” Stein frames this dialogic quality as the essential component in her understanding of genius:

> One may really indeed say that that is the essence of genius, of being most intensely alive, that is being one who is at the same time talking and listening. It is really that that makes one a genius (LIA 290).

Thus, in Stein’s conception there is no immediate contradiction between the concept of genius and the integration of a social or dialogic instance into art. Yet, to take Stein’s claim about her collaborative aspirations seriously, I would suggest, is to take it more literally than this dialogic quality that in some sense remains metaphorical. It is to see, as Tirza True Latimer has phrased it, that Stein in her work “left the door open for artists to continue working with her; indeed, she invited them to do so” (Corn and Latimer 2011: 291).

Accordingly, Gertrude Stein may have framed herself as a genius, but certainly not as a solitary one. As Sarah Posman and Laura Schultz have suggested, she was most
extensively “one who was networking” (Schultz and Posman 2015: 1). As an experimental poet, playwright, salon hostess, art collector, lecturer and literary celebrity she produced networks and alliances all through her adult life, and she produced them across countries and disciplines. And if her attempts at collaborations with contemporary writers all seemed to shipwreck before they left shore, as it happened with Georges Hugnet, Sherwood Anderson, Louis Bromfield, and, Richard Wright, her collaborate aspirations in all media have had a huge significance for her continued reception.

As stated above, Stein does indeed belong to the generation of modernists, which would seem most perfectly to confirm to American art historian Clement Greenberg’s claim about the intensifying medium specificity of modernism (Greenberg 1960), as they all dedicated themselves to a concentrated effort to renew poetic language. As Greenberg suggested with regard to the medium of painting, these writers cultivated the inherent qualities specific to their particular medium, literature, creating works that were more and more about displaying these particular conditions. Accordingly, Stein insisted that her sole medium was writing, and famously held that “the egotism of a painter is an entirely different egotism than the egotism of a writer” (EA 19) when offended by her friend Picasso’s poor attempts, in her evaluation, at writing poetry. Like her modernist peers, Stein was obsessively committed to her literary medium, and did not excel in experimentation across the borders of the artistic media as we know it from explicitly collective and collaborative avant-garde movements like dada, surrealism and futurism that coexisted with the mentioned modernists in time, and in which artists were engaging in extensive mixing of the means of visual, verbal, musical and performative arts via practices like collage, assemblage, and cabaret.

However, though Stein’s own production is strictly speaking exclusively textual, as she never engaged in painting, photography, composing music, directing or acting, she works with language in ways that are opening it up for engagement with other media. As this study will demonstrate, this can be witnessed generously in her reception that is strikingly transmedia. But it is already evident in the writing itself. Her unusual genre choices frame it beautifully: beside traditional literary genres such as novels and poetry, Stein excelled in still lifes, portraits, plays, landscapes, operas, and films – in Lucy Church Amiably (1927), in the words of her own subtitle, she even wrote “A novel of romantic beauty and nature and which looks like an engraving.” If all her works are made from words, then so many of her genres and titles in the first instance suggest media other than writing, and all of them, in one way or another, are dependent upon the participation or presence of one or more other agents for their realization. As this indicates, inherent in Stein’s understanding of composition is a simultaneously cross-disciplinary and col-

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2 I use the word transmedia in a general sense as referring to the fact that Stein’s aesthetic reception is played out across a range of different artistic media from visual arts and poetry to film and cartoons. In chapter five I will also be applying Henry Jenkin’s more specific concept of transmedia storytelling which he uses to frame cultural phenomena like film franchises where one specific story or world is played out across a range of different media platforms (Jenkins 2006). When the word is used in Jenkin’s sense, it will be apparent from the context.
laborative dimension and her increased interest in making her poetic writing drip into dramatic genres, not just plays but also opera, ballet, puppet plays and film, was one way of installing this claim to collaboration on a concrete level.

The three-fold poetics of Gertrude Stein

I will approach the aesthetic reception of Gertrude Stein as instituted by three aspects of her poetics that I identify as her

- Media poetics
- Ambient poetics
- Collaborative poetics

The segregation of these three aspects is, to a certain extent, conceptual and artificial. I see them as mutually connected processes that constantly stimulate each other. They are thus to be thought of as interdependent, but they do not necessarily stand in a perfectly symmetrical relationship to one another. With the term media poetics, I am referring to Stein’s practice of making the interface of her medium tangible. Her close engagement with the visual arts and with the connections as well as the differences between the medium of painting and the medium of writing is a crucial aspect of her media poetics. With this proceeding, Stein is pushing literature towards the medial boundaries in effect in the early 20th century, making the relationship between her oeuvre and the stable media platform of literature, the codex, a crucial matter of concern. By exposing the technological characteristics of the medium, Stein is inviting her readers to participate in the signification process on a concrete level.

With the term ambient poetics, I am addressing how the practice of media poetics in Stein’s work always also reaches out into a wider environment. In her practice as well as her theory Stein is working consciously with adjusting the context surrounding the book as an artifact, affecting the relation between the flat space of the page and the surrounding three-dimensional space. This is something that has kept the door in her work open to interventions from artists working in other media that hold different spatial and temporal characteristics than literature, such as dance, performance and music.

In effect, both in the case of media poetics and in the case of ambient poetics, a space of interaction is generated, and this is the quality I wish to address with the last aspect, the collaborative poetics. In a sense, the collaborative poetics can be regarded as a fuel for the other processes. I claim, that when interaction with Stein’s oeuvre takes place, whether through reading, writing, performing or otherwise appropriating an aspect of her work, something like an ephemeral space of appearance is generated. This can be thought of in terms of a space of shared agency that is distributed in both time and space, yet is
pervaded by affective (here and now) relations.

The terms as presented here are my own constructions based on the theoretical and aesthetic material that will be unfolded in the course of this study. Previous Stein scholarship has touched upon aspects related to these. For instance, Marjorie Perloff’s studies of Stein’s writing and its relationship to the visual arts touch upon many of the aspects I want to frame with the idea of media poetics (Perloff 2002), Bonnie Marranca has developed ideas about Stein’s “ecology of theater” that in some instances overlap with my ambient poetics (Marranca 1996), and Juliana Spahr’s idea about a “connective writing” that she founds in Stein’s practice has influenced my thinking about the collaborative (Spahr 2001). But neither of these qualities in Stein’s poetics have been central themes to the academic reception of Stein which has had a strong preoccupation with questions of representation, meaning and temporality. However, I have found these aspects to be thoroughly unpacked in the extensive artistic reception of Stein’s work. The diverse poetic, visual and performative recycling of Stein’s work as it has taken shape in a North American context from the end of Stein’s life and up until the present day constitutes my primary research material.

Delimiting the material and structuring the study

If the academic reception of Stein’s work has been somewhat delayed in comparison to that of her modernist peers, the artistic reception has been, and still is, extremely rich and flourishing. In fact, if influence is measured by the number and variety of revisits paid to her work by poets and artists of all media over the last sixty years, one could posit her among the most influential figures in American letters in the 20th century (Marranca 1996: 18). Even today, it seems that collaborations with Stein are only increasing, as artists from a large range of fields are taking her open poetics as an invitation to collaborate. In these collaborations, readings and recyclings of Stein’s work, across space and time, the collaborative potential of Stein’s poetics is continuously being realized. The ways in which these artworks from various media work with Stein are extremely varied – from merely portraying or paying tribute, to quotation, appropriating, mocking, remediating, sampling and rewriting or restaging works or parts of works, sentences, and even rhythms. Surveying this corpus, it is striking how extensively Stein’s work appears to be a work that has become realized and distributed through other works of art and cultural products more than through readings or textual analysis as traditionally conducted by academia and other literary institutions.

This study is, therefore, an attempt to map crucial parts of the non-academic reception of Gertrude Stein from the end of her life and until the present day. As stated, a qualified selection of these works will constitute my principal material. Stein lived her entire productive life in Europe, and her work has received a vivid reception in many European
countries. Yet, for reasons of limitation, I have chosen to place my focus on her American reception, although I have sometimes been prompted by the significance of a particular material and encouraged by the complex transatlantic interconnections cultivated by Stein herself, to deviate from this course and consider works that are produced neither on American soil nor by American artists.

Even with such a (pragmatic) delimitation of my field of interest, the corpus of potential material to consider is huge and continuously growing: new poetry and fiction, performance, theatre, opera, visual and digital artworks and commercial products working with or paying tribute to Stein continue to appear in a steady stream. As I obviously cannot consider everything, I have focused my attention upon five streams that I consider particularly important in order to understand and uncover the legacy of Stein and its particular relevance to a contemporary media situation, dedicating a chapter to each stream. Some of the streams cover specific historical periods dominated by specific artistic communities, while others are determined by specific medial, affective and political approaches to the collaborative situation. Some degree of chronological organization will be seen behind the structure, and in individual chapters there will be a general chronological flow. Temporality, however, is a highly complex question in this study, continuously fluctuating between different instances spread out over roughly a century from Stein’s time until the present day. All of these “nows” become interconnected in the media ecology and hence affect and fertilize each other in complicated ways, an issue that I will address shortly. The five streams are:

1. The ecology of intermedia: Gertrude Stein and New York in the 1960s
2. Consolidating a radical poet: Gertrude Stein and language poetry in the 1970s
3. The complex politics of collaboration: Stein, appropriation and disidentification in the 1990s
4. The infrastructures of reading: Stein and ambient poetics on and off the page
5. The ecology of device, interface, infrastructure: Iconic Stein in a new millennium.

At each end of the study, chapters one and five will survey a wide multimodal field of collaborative practices engaging with Stein to establish a structural framework of what I already referred to as the Gertrude Stein machine, as it looks at the outset and the close of the temporal interval in question. Chapters two, three and four conduct their interrogations of the selected material in greater detail and engage with concrete examples of collaborations with Stein that are dominantly linguistic in nature and in different ways interrogate the relationship between Stein’s work, the medium of the book and the media ecology of literature. Together these parts are to sketch and explicate both the transmedia reception history of Stein and the explanatory value of this reception to literature in

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3 For a diverse overview of the European Stein reception, see Schultz and Posman (eds.) 2015.
a contemporary media situation. Finally, in a brief afterword I will sum up my findings and suggest some perspectives they propose for our continued navigation in the media ecology of contemporary literature.

Perspectives

I am approaching my material, the artistic and poetic practices engaging with Stein, in terms of dispersed collaborations taking place, not just between Gertrude Stein and the artists in question, but also involving other human agents and other material components including locations and devices. The collaborations are dispersed in both space and time, and this dispersal draws attention to the specific qualities of the relevant medium and how these negotiate time and space. But as I will unfold in the theoretical introduction, I will keep a dynamic rather than an object-oriented approach to media, introducing the connective perspective of media ecology, continuously tying the media technologies and processes to larger infrastructures of media as well as to contextual and affective aspects that are active in the shaping of possible subject positions of the agents in the collaboration.

The suggested increase in material proposing itself for consideration for this study suggests that a recent rise in receptiveness towards Stein’s work has taken place. This poses the fundamental question of why such a situation has emerged. As I will develop in further detail in the second part of this introduction, I seek explanations for this increase in the correlations between the quickly transforming media ecology that Stein was working in in the first half of the 20th century and the quickly transforming media ecology characterizing our present moment in the first half of the 21st. I am thus trying to approach the changing contemporary media ecology of literature through the lens of the cross-disciplinary and transmedia reception of Gertrude Stein.

Today, both the authorship and the material constitution of many language-based artworks are distributed across several agents and media, in ways that appear to collide with the conceptions of authorial and medial autonomy that have had a dominant (if not pervasive) influence in all branches of the aesthetic disciplines in the 20th century. Hence, I am building upon the foundation of the broad spectrum of theoretical critique of concepts of literary autonomy and classical hermeneutics that was formulated in the latter part of the 20th century. This tendency could be tentatively framed by Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht’s afterword “A Farewell to Interpretation” to the English version of the originally German anthology *The Materialities of Communication* (Gumbrecht and Pfeiffer [1988]; English 1994), in which he addresses a stubborn idealism and fixation upon meaning in the humanities and insists on a material perspective concerned with the base of literature and art as producing physical presence rather than meaning. The volume also includes numerous contributions to fields such as archeology, poststructuralist theory, new philology, art history, the history of books, reader-response theory, the sociology of literature,
and media history which all contribute to and exemplify the material turn mapped out by Gumbrecht.

After Gertrude Stein’s brief rise to fame 1933-1946, a gap occurred in her reception, and by the 1950s her body of work was in relative danger of falling into, if not oblivion, then at least the absolute margins of literary history. This situation began to change when her writings started haunting the collaborative and intermedia art scene of the 1960s. Via this artistic reception, it travelled into the poetic avant-gardes of the 1970s from where it began to enter the institutions of canonized literature. Today, I would claim that it is haunting us again. And, if indeed the “media determine our situation” as German media historian Friedrich Kittler famously claimed (Kittler [1986] 1999: xxxix), we would need to look for explanations for this haunting in our contemporary media situation. A new technological framework dominated by digital networked media and new digital infrastructures have made cultural production and consumption converge more and more, according to American media and communication scholar Henry Jenkins (Jenkins 2006), which consequently is making the inscribed collaborative impulse of Stein’s œuvre more immediately realizable.

On a general level, I recognize Kittler’s statement above as a premise for this study. But rather than installing a principal impact on the part of technology, as some critics accusing Kittler of technological determinism has claimed it to do, I take it to imply that media technologies are functioning in continuous feedback loops with what the French psychoanalyst, activist and philosopher Félix Guattari has called the “three ecological registers” (Guattari [1989] 2014: 19). Guattari’s three ecologies regulate all life, and are the environment, social relations, and human subjectivity. On that account, I would suggest adapting Mark Hansen and W.J.T. Mitchell’s correction to Kittler’s catchphrase, that the media, rather determining our situation, are in fact our situation, meaning that they constitute not just the infrastructural organization that determines our existence, but rather permeate the environment in which we live (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: xxii). The present study will carry out a media archeological project in the sense that I am assuming there are precursors to our current media situation that can help us conceive it in ways that go beyond the paradigms of authorial as well as medial autonomy. I am using

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1 My position is hardly in direct conflict with Kittler’s conception of the discourse networks as “tying arts, sciences and technology into a co-constitutive interaction” (Parikka 2012: 69). As John Durham Peters stresses, the accusation of “technological determinism” has become an academic figure of demonization designating a fictive position that no one would deliberately admit to occupy. In Peters’s reading Kittler’s position is primarily to be understood as critical towards the bourgeois version of the liberal subject, and in his words “he was not a technological determinist if this means that only technology matters. His histories are populated with doctors, generals, philosophers, poets, inventors, soldiers, and women (who rarely overlap with any of those other categories), and are propelled by discourses, industries, algorithms, wars, love affairs, states, and machines. There is plenty of contingency though not a lot of resistance in his narrative of media development” (Peters 2017:22). The accusation of technological determinism against Kittler and other media theorists working in this vein is a complex and theoretically important discussion, but not one that I will engage in beyond these brief remarks (for elaboration on the matter, see Mitchell and Hansen 2010; Parikka 2012; Krämer 2015; Peters 2017).
Stein and her reception as collaboration as a lens to look at the complex media ecology of contemporary art and literature. And vice versa, I am consciously looking at Stein through my contemporary spectacles.

The field of media archeology as it has evolved, primarily in a context of German and American media historical studies, following along the lines suggested by Kittler’s *Aufschreibesysteme 1800/1900* [1985] (English: *Discourse Networks 1800/1900* (1990)), has been persistently preoccupied with disturbing narratives of causal chronology that have previously dominated media history, and developing a more complex, materialist sense of temporality inspired by the way archeologists approach the past as layers inscribed in objects that are situated in the present, which will often contradict the assumptions we had about the past.

Some media archeologists have had a recurring interest in so-called “dead media” (Sterling 1995) or, to use Jussi Parikka’s term, “zombie media” (Parikka 2012: 147). That is, technological devices and media practices that have become obsolete or surpassed by other technologies, and to various degrees have been written out of the dominant media historical accounts. Media archeology has studied such forgotten practices, as a part of its enterprise to uncover alternative pasts and futures that challenge dominant teleological narratives of media history. If the collaborative poetics of Gertrude Stein can hardly be called a media technology as such, there are important implications of its history that actualize the perspective of media archeology and dead media. As already suggested, Stein’s collaborative poetics was to a certain extent unsuccessful, or only partially fulfilled, in its own time. But just as the apparently obsolete media practices studied by media archeology can find “an afterlife in new contexts, new hands, new screens and machines” (Parikka 2012: 3), Stein’s collaborative poetics is now being reinvented as new media ecologies leave us much better equipped to appreciate and realize it.

The composition of temporality

In her first public lecture, the 1926 *Composition as Explanation*, Gertrude Stein speaks about composition and time:

The only thing that is different from one time to another is what is seen and what is seen depends upon how everybody is doing everything. This makes the thing we are looking at very different and this makes what those who describe it make of it, it makes a composition, it confuses, it shows, it is, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen. Nothing changes from generation to generation except the thing seen and that makes a composition (CAE 497).

Composition is a crucial concept in Stein’s poetics, as it addresses not just the previously
mentioned entangled processes of writing and reading, but also, essentially, living and creating in the same movement. This composition is not reducible to the changed customs or material artifacts of a certain period, but is somehow inscribed in the sum of all these elements, their “time-sense” and the way they relate to each other: “Each period of living differs from any other period of living not in the way life is but in the way life is conducted and that authentically speaking is composition” (CAE 498). It seems that what Stein is approaching with her idea of composition is comparable to what cultural critics like Henri Lefebvre and Raymond Williams are sketching with their respective ideas of “the rhythm of everyday life” and the “structures of feeling” of a certain sociohistorical context or period (Williams 1977; Lefebvre 2004). That is, the characteristic touch of the daily life of a certain epoch that is experienced in everything from style of dress and figures of speech to artworks and technology, and which cannot be reduced to being the product of the material conditions and economic structures of this period, but colors the feelings, the velocities, the repetitions, and the distribution between time and space performed by the relationships between people living in a particular historical environment.

The concept of Stein, just like the ones of Lefebvre and Williams, describes the difference between one time and another as permeating both the life lived and the art produced in this particular time. Further, Stein’s extremely dense account is attentive to all instances of the production, distribution and reception of the artworks in question, including the decisive effects they produce: “it confuses, it shows, it looks, it likes it as it is, and this makes what is seen as it is seen” (CAE 497). Thus, the composition of art both reflects and creates the composition of its time. The composition can be conceived as the particular rhythmic constitution of a period, and essentially, most people do not see it as they are living in it, but it becomes strikingly characteristic when contemplated in retrospect, from the point of view of a new composition. Accordingly, inscribed in the idea of composition there is a necessary entanglement of different temporal moments, past, present and future, as suggested in the quote used as an epigraph of the present introduction:

> And now to begin as if to begin. Composition is not there, it is going to be there and we are here. This is some time ago for us naturally. There is something to be added afterwards (CAE 498).

With this construction, Stein catches the delicate entanglement of different temporal moments that characterizes this study. As previously suggested, with reference to the non-progressive but backward and forward leaping and ruptured conception of temporality applied by media archeology, this is a study that engages in different temporal moments and asks how their compositions connect to each other in the media ecology of Stein’s aesthetic reception. Like any other study of any kind, mine is inescapably situated in its own time and place – the composition in which I live and which I am only in part able to recognize. This is the point from where I read, question and engage in artistic practices conceived at other situated historical-geographical moments in the shape in which they
are available to me today. Moreover, these practices are themselves engaging with other practices – Stein’s – rooted in different historical moments, as they were available to them at the moment when they took up their collaboration.

In my own questioning, I will naturally attempt to recreate past instances in whatever form they assume when consulted from the space and time in which I am writing. As the study unfolds, it will be evident that the different streams in the reception of Stein not only collaborate with Stein but also interact with each other, as different layers in the profoundly striated media ecology are made possible by the connections and disentanglements that other generations of Stein collaborators performed. Each realization of Stein’s composition, of the rhythm in her collaborative poetics, adds something new to the composition that changes this composition.

There are three historical compositions I would like to bring forth here as being crucial for the aesthetic reception of Gertrude Stein and for this study. As we shall see, all of them represent radical shifts in the media infrastructure. The first one is the beginning of the 20th century when Stein started writing. This coincides roughly with the discourse network Kittler designates as “1900” and which paved the way for modernist literature. The romantic imaginary and the written word as an extension of the inner life of an individual was challenged by the invention of new fragmentary media technologies such as film, typewriter, and phonograph, which separate the data streams of image, word and sound. This, according to Kittler, transfigured the written text towards the technological preconditions of literature. Further, it was a time when early mass media such as newspapers, popular photo-journalism magazines and radio were gaining wide dissemination, a matter that proved highly important for the spreading of Stein’s name, especially in the latter years of her career. The second composition is that of the 1960s when Stein’s writing first started to haunt the intermedia art scene and the aesthetic reception that is the object of this study took off. This decade is also often connected with the dawning of the information age, or as Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan called it at the time, the electric age (McLuhan 1965). Moreover, in the 1960s, television became the most pervasive mass medium, and mainframe computers were coming into use. Finally, the third composition to make note of is the present one, which, as already stated, appears to be invaded anew by Stein’s ghost. The early 21st century is the composition which is most difficult for us to see because we are part of it, but it evidently constitutes a notable shift in the media infrastructure as it is the point where digital media and networked technologies have become ubiquitous, and also where the different media that constitute our situation appear more abundant, diverse and compound than ever before.

It is crucial to recognize is that each epoch has its historical specificities, as everyone by “living the living they are doing […] are composing the composition that at the time they are living is the composition of the time in which they are living” (CAE 497). Hence, each composition needs to be recognized and respected in this specificity. However, it is also inevitable that the composition is always already changed in and by the future.
moment from when we realize it to be a composition that we engage with in retrospect. Consequently, as the media ecology of Stein’s aesthetic reception is constituted through jumps between different historical moments – quintessentially between the 1910s, the 1960s and the 2010s – this study struggles with entangled temporalities that will pose practical challenges along the way. As there is no position outside the ecology, there is no point from which to sort out and organize this temporal complexity. I can only approach it by humbly recognizing that I will be forced to, provisionally, “begin as if to begin”, as Stein said, and there will doubtless be “something to be added afterwards.”

Talking to a dead poet

I am well aware that an initial leap of faith is involved when applying the idea of collaboration to a mediated situation not determined by the temporal and spatial co-presence of two or more human agents as this concept would entail in everyday speech. As I will elaborate in the second part of this introduction, what I am suggesting builds on – yet, is in several ways more extensive than – the emphasis on the reader as an active producer of meaning as it has been phrased since the 1960s, for instance by poststructuralist thinkers like the French critic Roland Barthes as well as the theoretical strain known as reader-response criticism associated with names like Umberto Eco and Wolfgang Iser. Confronted with the challenging writing of modernism and postmodernism, these theories focused on the reader as a crucial co-constructor in the textual production of meaning, challenging both the “intentional fallacy” of classical hermeneutics and the construction of textual autonomy upheld by formalist schools like New Criticism that were vastly influential in literary scholarship at this point.

In the following, however, I want to go beyond the reading situation that underlies these critical schools. This is a situation that isolates the text and the silent reader in an ideal, non-situated space, whereas I will be looking at the material production that takes place when the implicit silence of both reader and author is broken. The collaborative reception takes place when the ideal reader becomes embodied and situated in a material context. Here the silent reader breaks her silence, and not only co-produces the meaning of the text but also starts talking back to what is read. Moreover, the figure of the author, who in reader-response criticism is more or less pushed aside as unavailable and therefore irrelevant, is drawn back into the feedback loop. Obviously, I am not suggesting that the original author, in this case Gertrude Stein, rises from the dead to participate in the collaboration. But as I will develop, her figure is produced and reproduced through multiple occurrences in the media ecology that include, but are not exhausted by, her writings. As we shall see, this reproduced Stein generates dialogic and affective responses from readers and collaborators that come to resemble interpersonal relations and become an important element in her collaborative poetics.
Some of this is staged in the 1989 composition “Gertrude Stein” by the French sound poet Bernard Heidsieck. Heidsieck has constructed a situation that is a literal – although media technologically manipulated – version of the virtual conversations that I claim are taking place between Stein and the artists collaborating with her in all the different works I will be approaching in this study. In “Gertrude Stein,” there actually is a spectral element of raising the dead, as Heidsieck is talking to “Gertrude” for two minutes and twenty-three seconds, interrupted only by the heavy breathing of Stein herself. In this way, Heidsieck is having a conversation with Stein, but one in which she responds without words. Furthermore, Heidsieck’s piece humorously reverses the collaborative situation of the reader of modernist poetry (vis-à-vis a dead author) as imagined by reader-response theories.

The poem is a part of Heidsieck’s series *Respirations et brèves rencontres* (1999), which comprises sixty titles, each naming a deceased poet. Here, Heidsieck takes a number of producers of presumed autonomous modern poetry, and strikes up conversations with them about their practice of writing and, particularly, of reading their own work. As he writes in the introduction:

> Having decided in 1955 to take the poem off the page and read it aloud I was interested in the way other poets read their texts. Over the course of the years and my travels, I thus systematically assembled a collection of recordings of writer’s voices (Heidsieck 1999: 8; my translation).

These recordings are then used as raw material for the compositions, as Heidsieck cuts out the pauses in the recordings in which you hear the sound of the poet’s breath and inserts them into his own pieces. In a sense, Heidsieck is giving the dead authors back their bodies, embodying their words through the sound of breathing, but then removing the words. Implying an outreach towards three-dimensional space, this becomes a gesture of ambient poetics, leaving only the sound of the body as the space in which the missing words would resonate.

“Gertrude Stein” is not a sound poem in the sense that it borders on nonsense verse or music and abstains from creating immediately meaningful words and sentences. On the contrary, the performance is kept in conversational style, rich in pronouns, direct addresses, and conversational phrases (“Allez”, “Je parle, je parle”, “milles pardons”, “À très bientôt”), and thus its language is not more, but rather less strange than the language of the average book-bound lyric poem. From a sonic point of view, when reading such a ‘normal’ poem, one finds oneself alone with the words of someone else and the sound of one’s own breath, even if this bodily anchoring of the reading situation is not something we normally pay attention to. It is this situation that Heidsieck has reversed, as he has taken the breath of Gertrude Stein – the deceased poet – and sampled and replayed it in the pauses between his own words.

Crucially, the media poetics of Heidsieck’s poem is applied to aspects of the writ-
ten poem other than its language, foremost to the smooth, but fictive poetry reading situation that silences both author and reader and remains an unpronounced premise in much literary scholarship. The “reader” of reader-response criticism has been criticized for being an abstracted or idealized reader with no bodily characteristics, but in a media poetic gesture Heidsieck is calling our attention to a respiring and hence embodied reader. At the same time, by reversing the situation, he is reviving the author whose death was pronounced in connection with the birth of this idealized, silent reader.

As Florine Leplâtre writes in her discussion of four French portraits of Gertrude Stein: “We can read this performance as a modern version of the antic genre of prosopopeia, when a character speaks to the dead or when a dead person speaks. Here the poet Heidsieck is literally speaking to Stein” (Leplâtre 2015: 262). Leplâtre in this way connects Heidsieck’s gesture to a premodern literary tradition, meant to evoke the giants of the past, and not particularly concerned with the question of textual autonomy.

The context for Stein and Heidsieck’s brief encounter is Stein having given a public reading that Heidsieck is thanking her heartily for. First, he praises the beauty and authority of her reading, but he quickly turns his attention to her repetitions, and her mechanical precision, comparing her performance to that of a teleprinter: “Vous savez / J’ai le sentiment d’être en face / d’un telescripteur” (Heidsieck 1999: 17). Here, Heidsieck is noting Stein’s media poetics, her careful emphasis on the materiality of the channel as it comes out, not in her written texts, but in her distinct practice of reading aloud as documented in the widely known recordings from 1935. By comparing her performance to the teleprinter, an advanced piece of technology, and one that is uncannily able transmit the writing of someone who is not present, Heidsieck is stressing the strong technological component in Stein’s media poetics even when it is removed from the printed page. In the poem, after initially suggesting that this mechanical procedure may be veiling the poet’s boredom with the situation, Heidsieck corrects himself and proposes instead that the virtuosity of her reading is disguising a fragility of emotional intensity which comes from her deep desire to understand and to convince. With this gesture, Heidsieck is connecting Stein’s technologically conscious media poetics directly to an affective intensity or relational force, which, apparently, he fears she would not like him to call attention to, as the final passage reveals: “Ne m’en veuillez pas… /Gertrude! /À très bientôt! // AU REVOIR, ALICE!” (Heidsieck 1999: 18).

On the recording, Heidsieck raises his voice at the end, as if to reach the ears of Alice Toklas who was residing further inside the room. As Leplâtre suggests: “The fact that he mentions her name at the very last has a humorous effect: it breaks with the aesthetic commentary, and recalls, very prosaically, that Gertrude does not exist without Alice, even though the guests pay little attention to her” (Leplâtre 2015: 257). With this

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5 Stein’s reading of a number of her works was recorded at Columbia University by Professor of English and Comparative Literature George W. Hibbit for The Contemporary Poets Series used for educational purposes. It was issued on vinyl LP in 1956 under the title Gertrude Stein Reads from Her Works and is now widely available on the internet, available, for example, on Penn Sound’s Gertrude Stein page.
exclamation, Heidsieck connects the already respiring and wordless Stein even closer to the historical, embodied existence that she shared with Alice. Moreover, I would add that evoking Alice at this point suggests a hope that she might be able to mitigate Stein’s assumed anger, making it probable that there could be another encounter with her, a next time.

Heidsieck’s piece illustrates the incessant sliding between media poetics, ambient poetics, and collaborative poetics. It calls attention to both the materiality of its medium – the human voice – and the ambient conditions around this medium that allow it to resonate. At the same time, it dramatizes the dialogic approaches between Stein and her reader (or listener), who is invited to respond, not just by paying tribute to Stein’s practice but also by challenging it, even at the risk of upsetting her posthumously, in this way establishing a collaborative situation that is highly reciprocal. In this piece, as in *Respirations et brèves rencontres* as a whole, Heidsieck is engaging in conversation with Stein and other predecessors, and this action generates new possible subject positions for both Heidsieck and his interlocutor. In listening to, and interrogating, the voiced reading practice of his predecessors, Heidsieck is exploring and shaping the ways in which he himself can be a reading, speaking and breathing poet, and in appreciating, challenging and evaluating Stein’s performance, he is also retroactively shaping her position as a speaking and embodied poet.

When Heidsieck broke with the written page as the indispensable material base for poetry and decided that his poems, like much of the sound poetry that began to gain international momentum during the 1960s, was to be read out loud instead of meeting their audience via the static, printed page, he shifted the emphasis to the phonetic materiality of language rather than its written structure. This emphasis on language materiality is a media poetic aspect, although not in the first instance tied to the medium of the codex. Further, there is an ambient poetic gesture attached to the sonic element, as it actualizes a spatial environment beyond the two-dimensional page of written poetry. But both these gestures imply partly the negation of and partly the rendering palpable of the reading situation implicitly suggested in much literary theory: that of the silent reader contemplating the printed text exclusively through her eyes. Neither the idea of a silent reader, nor the reduction of the author to an abstract function rather than an embodied figure makes much sense in sound poetry as conceived by Heidsieck.

However, in the collaborative poetry of “Gertrude Stein”, this implicit critique is turned into a productive gesture generating a new artwork that performs its own media poetics on the collaborative situation of the silent reader, by embodying it (through the breath) and reversing it. Heidsieck is calling our attention to the affective connection towards the author, a connection that in his piece exists independently of this author’s words. Rather, it is materialized in physical surroundings around the author and reader or listener, the ambience of the room, which in turn is generated via the physical medium of the voice, the sounds and tones of voice, and above all the breathing that supports this
voice and anchors it to a body. Consequently, Heidsieck’s piece illustrates the productive drift in the aesthetic reception of Stein, as it will be traced in this study, from a technologically distinct media poetics towards an ambient poetics entailing affective bindings that evoke a collaborative gesture which in turn results in a new piece that applies a media poetics of its own.

**Gertrude Stein and the codex**

As mentioned, Gertrude Stein’s writing was produced during the first half of the 20th century and, like other avant-garde artists and poets, she is generally responding to what Kittler called the “discourse network of 1900” where the dominance of the printed word is challenged by the invention of new media (Kittler 1990). If it generally testifies to the radical rupture characterizing the discourse network identified by Kittler, the huge body of work Stein produced over the course of fifty years is also highly diverse. Stein began writing as an aspiring scholar in experimental psychology when she studied at Radcliffe, a women’s college at Harvard, under the supervision of William James and Hugo Münsterberg at the end of the 19th century. Some of the first fictional writing she produced testifies to the scientific approach of her psychological studies, where she studied the repetitions of her subjects as they were to produce “automatic writing.”

But her style evolved swiftly over the course of a few years, leaving hers as one of the most diverse textual corpuses in modernist writing. It thus includes such completely disparate classics as the monstrous family chronicle *The Making of Americans* (1906-11), the lively poetry of the domestic sphere *Tender Buttons* (1910-12), the pleasant and plotless landscape opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1927), the quirky, charming memoir *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (1932) and the abstract, lyrical meditation *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932). For this reason, among others, Stein’s oeuvre is one that many readers have found difficult to grasp in its entirety. The one consistent linguistic strategy that seems to hold together Stein’s stylistically diverse body of work is *repetition*. Although applied in entirely different manners across the body of work – from the meticulous repetitive records of the scientific experiments via her early elaborate prose style where each sentence is a repetition with only the slightest variation of the previous one, and to her semantically most challenging work from the 1910s where variations of sonic repetition and the repetitive accumulation of the most semantically open words of the English language are prevalent – repetition is a strategy that ties Stein’s writerly practice together. For this reason, it has been a point of departure for much scholarship on Stein. As a structural concept, repetition addresses the replication of both content and form in writing, but it does not address the transgression of the textual plane that takes place repeatedly in the material I will be covering and that I am particularly interested in undertaking. Nor does it implicate the shared agency that is crucial to the idea of collaboration that I am developing.
As a consequence, I have chosen to apply another perspective, and to take as
my starting point the media situation that Stein’s diverse body of work is inscribed into.
In this context, Stein’s specific publication history demands attention. Her experimental
work was widely rejected by publishing houses all over Europe and America, and she
was therefore forced to seek other sources for distribution. Initially, she had her Paris
salon, where avant-garde artists – painters, sculptors, dancers, poets, novelists, actors,
and composers – came and made up a live audience as they listened to readings, looked
at artworks, and discussed and exchanged typed copies of her manuscripts. As already
stated, this created for Stein, in a medially diverse context, a small but attentive audience
independent of traditional publishing. Hence, Stein’s literary achievements were initially
not closely dependent upon the printed book, even if this medium still dominated the
infrastructure of literature in her time.

During these years, when her works were published it happened in the network
established by the salon. All printings of her works in the 1910s and 1920s were made
possible by friends, or friends of friends, who acted as agents, editors, promotors and
publishers. Accordingly, Sherwood Anderson, Marcel Duchamp, Mabel Dodge, Laura
Riding, Robert McAlmon, Ernest Hemingway, Edith Sitwell, Virgil Thomson, George
Hugnet, George Maratier, Margaret Anderson, Jane Heap, Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler,
Henry McBride, Eugene Jolas and Carl Van Vechten were all friends of Stein’s who at
some point got involved in the printing and publishing of her writing. In spite of the ob-
vvious parallels with the flourishing conditions of do-it-yourself publishing today, it is im-
portant to stress that Stein’s situation was also very different. To her, printing really was
a big deal, and certainly not something one could do oneself at home, and she was highly
interested in the wide readership that a major publishing house could offer.

Yet, Stein’s intense struggle with publication was not just a symptom of a conservative
publishing business. In the years that passed between her two famous novels The Making
of Americans, completed in 1912, and The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, finished in 1932, what Stein wrote was becoming less and less “bookish.” Apart from Three Lives, printed by Grafton Press at Stein’s own expense in 1909, Tender Buttons, which was published independently but by the friend of a friend, and The Making of Americans, which was finally published by Robert McAlmon’s Contact editions thirteen years after its completion (1925), she created almost no book length or book format works for close to twenty of her most productive years. Almost everything she wrote broke with such formats, consisting of shorter or hybrid texts or in-between formats. She also appropriated and recycled her own material, rewriting it by hand in new notebooks and in new contexts so that sentences and paragraphs jump between works and genres. Through this practice she broke with the concept of the literary work as a book, and diminished the distance between the moment of composition and the moment of reading as it is institutionalized by the commercial printed book.

To a certain extent, Stein was forced into this mode by the reluctant publishing industry. However, as will be developed in the following chapters, even when she decided to start publishing herself in order to spread the large volumes of unpublished manuscripts that had accumulated in the cabinet in her salon to a wider audience, she worked to minimize the distance between writing and reading through the very design of her books. The design of Lucy Church Amiably (1927, published 1930), the first book issued via The Plain Edition, as Stein and Toklas’ called their publishing venture, was modeled on the cover of Stein’s notebooks (Stone 2013), demonstrating how Stein openly resisted the fetishism of books that she felt other small presses increased via the exclusivity and the luxuriousness of the small print runs they promoted. By going into self-publishing, Stein was targeting readers, not collectors. Her insistent disturbance of what, using American media archeologist Lori Emerson’s concept, I will be calling the reading-writing interface (Emerson 2014) has been decisive for the recycling of her work. It invites us to interact with her writings, as it resists the book as a fetishized and finished object.

Moreover, there is something about the distribution of Stein’s experimental writing in the American cultural landscape that appears almost irrational. For almost fifteen years, the only book by Stein published and sold in America was Tender Buttons. It came out via a very marginal, newly established press that had a limited distribution network, and only one thousand copies were printed. Yet, in the years following its publication, practically every American with some cultural interest knew about this work. As Karen Leick has showed, people from very wide circles could quote from it. The ability to quote Stein’s sentences came about not through the books themselves but through the growing literary public sphere, the columns, radio talk shows and literary supplements that were on the rise in these years and craved content (Leick 2009).

As this simple case indicates, the media ecology of literature was a complex, multimodal and open system when Stein started writing, and her work adapted to and partially shaped these conditions. This is certainly no less the case when we turn to our
contemporary situation. One might assert that this could be established for practically every period in the history of literature, if the right perspective is applied. And in a sense, the decontextualized literary autonomy claimed by theoretical schools such as New Criticism – via readings of poetry from romanticism to modernism – is an historical exception, if not simply a theoretical fiction. Therefore, looking both at and beyond the medium of the book is crucial when addressing the media ecologies of literature, at any point in time.

Stein and other media

When in 1933, at the age of 59, she published her only best seller, The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Gertrude Stein suddenly entered the scene of the rising modern celebrity cult. In the mid-1930s she toured the US, lecturing, speaking on the radio and talking to newspapers, magazines and people all over the country. At this point, she was becoming a literary star, renowned for her character, appearance and cultural performance, and – it would seem – less for her writing. Yet the experimental writing remains an essential quality of Stein’s public persona. This was established through her popular writings in interaction with her more experimental ones. The “incomprehensible” stuff that had been notorious already twenty years previously was a central hook in the interest generated by the quirky, charming Stein as she entered the mass media spotlight. The proximity between her popular fame and her experimental writing was also stressed by the surprise hit of her highly experimental opera Four Saints in Three Acts, which drew full houses on Broadway in 1934. Accordingly, all her lectures, meditations, autobiographies, newspaper writings, interviews and radio appearances from this time appropriate, contextualize and restage her earlier “difficult” works. They evolve around them, provide new and old contexts for them, and invite readers to revisit them. The open, more approachable works that she herself has referred to as her “audience writing” (N 52–53) therefore reframe and remediate her earlier writing, but they are also careful to make the initial limited circumstances of distribution of this writing – quintessentially represented by the Paris salon – a crucial part of its mythology.

Stein’s work had always required an investment: from Toklas reading, appreciating and typing it, from the salon friend-turned-publisher, from the director producing her plays, or from the collaborating reader. This investment was now being constructed and distributed through the modern mass media. The American tour, meeting with readers and becoming a public person was a new way in which Stein interfered with the reading interface of her work and shaped readers’ access and approach to it. In this way, Stein travelled from obscure avant-garde artist with a personal one-to-one-distribution to the mass media situation of the 1930s almost in one leap, and as she became a literary star, her persona became an increasingly integral component of her work. As Michael Davidson has emphasized, in her writing Stein treated words as things, and in turn her body and
persona became commodified, and like other female modernists, she ran the risk of being mistaken for her work (Davidson 1996).

Since her death, the popular Stein cult has grown exponentially. In mainstream culture the Stein figure has reappeared in novels, films, musicals, comic books, and decorative arts. Also, the memorabilia, kitsch, and tributes produced in feminist, LGBT and gender-experimental communities have been extensive. But, as we shall see, avant-garde art and poetry communities have also had strong investments in Stein as an iconic figure. In academia, the appropriation of Stein’s persona in broad cultural practices has often been seen as a popularization that disturbs and destroys the attention paid to her serious work, and thus as an unnecessary appendix to her name that has come at a high cost to her literary reputation, because it appears to be based upon her popularized and commodified persona, rather than on her work (Perloff 1988). However, in my reading of Stein’s aesthetic reception, it is impossible to separate these two dimensions of her oeuvre, and, furthermore, it is undesirable to attempt to do so, as the way her public persona works is an important component in her general poetics.

As I shall return to in further detail, the persona also helps to create an emotional attachment between Stein and some of her readers. This attachment can be highly productive as it often fuels the collaborative poetics and in this way generates new artistic practices that are collaborating with Stein. But, as we shall see, it can also entail a surrogate version of the relationality of her early writings that was realized with and through friends, which has in some cases contributed to derailing critical discussions around Stein’s life and writings.

In the last few years, heated debates have arisen, and I will pay a good deal of attention to these, especially in the three middle chapters of this study. Here, I am referring in particular to the controversies about Stein’s work, life and beliefs during World War II and her relationship to her Jewish ethnicity. Examining these discussions is illuminating for my purposes since – not least because of their level of intensity and agitation – they demonstrate in a very tangible manner some of the characteristic dynamics at play in Stein’s reception that I want to observe. The emotional attachment generated by Stein’s writing and persona plays a crucial part in these debates, which is not in itself a problem, but it can become one when it is not acknowledged how decisive it is. Most scholars and readers will instinctively deny the relevance of Stein’s persona to their own readings, but still treat controversial issues – such as the explicit right-wing sympathies that Stein expressed late in her life – in biased ways, as if they were defending an old friend. Correspondingly, many of the fiercest critics persist with an agitation resembling that of a hurt or disappointed friend turned enemy, or with anger and irritation that borders on the verge of personal antagonism.

I want to suggest that many of the fiery disputes within the fields of literary and cultural studies in recent years, such as the debates in American poetry surrounding conceptual poetry and identity politics that peaked in 2015 with the controversies involving
works by Vanessa Place and Kenneth Goldsmith addressing racial issues, are at least partially caused by difficulties in operating in the changed media ecologies of literature that resemble those experienced in the Stein reception. This is particularly the case concerning the performative aspects of the author as a cultural product that is always in the making through various channels. In today’s media ecologies of literature, the body of the author is pictured, talked about and integrated into the work in new ways, not so much as the source of the work, the intentional subjectivity behind it, but more as a part of the composition, as an agent contributing to the specific situation of the work as a network: a figure standing in front of it instead of behind of it, and far from always in control of her own image. This media ecology no longer follows the patterns suggested by formalism and the proponents of literary autonomy, and I claim that part of the agitation in these debates comes from the fact that the hierarchies in this media landscape – what is important and what is not – are far from obvious to us today. It seems particularly critical to address the strongly gendered and racialized biases at work in them. A subject that, in spite of an increased attention to matters of identity and discrimination, has received little focused attention.

What is sufficiently clear at this point, however, is that it is not helpful to attempt to isolate literature as an autonomous source of information and sensual experience. As I will discuss in my final chapter, I hold that many fallacies and derailed discussions in recent years have come from the illusions of poets, literary critics and other actors that this is something one can and should do. Isolating the text is a gesture that makes less and less sense in a presumably post-digital period, where we encounter literature or the art of writing on so many other platforms than the well-known book interface. Platforms, that mix sound and moving images with the written word, and where the literary work is distributed into a network that goes beyond the control of the book and its author.

Accordingly, the principal claim that I wish to make is that in recent years, the situation of poetry has become more and more like Stein’s. The speed with which Stein moved from the most analogue conditions of distribution to conditions on the verge of modern mass celebrity culture appears unique, yet studying Stein’s dynamic media ecology can be highly illuminating for the way we now think the relationship between text and work, literature and the medium of the book, public persona and literary voice, and art and social reality. Therefore, her work, and especially the way it is processed and transformed by contemporary artists, can help us when we want to grasp the specific media situation of literature today.
The bibliographic obstacle

Before embarking on a study of Stein’s work, even one primarily concerned with its secondary products, it is inevitable to touch upon the question of bibliography and primary philological research. As already suggested, Stein’s contemporary publication history was a mess. Only a fraction of the works she produced were printed and published within a reasonable time of her writing them, and for this reason the vast majority of her writings were not available in reliable editions at the time of her death. For this reason, it is customary when referring to works by Stein in an academic context that they are dated with their estimated year of composition rather than their year of publication as is normal bibliographic practice. Thus, all scholarship on Stein rests on the shoulders of the bibliographic scholarship that has developed a cartography of Stein’s work that it was not, so to speak, born with.

The first stage in this enterprise is Donald Gallup and Robert Bartlett Haas’ organization of Stein’s papers that she had donated to the Yale Collection of American Literature, and the archival work behind The Yale Edition of The Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein that came out in eight volumes during the 1950s. The next major stage is the meticulous philological work performed by Edward Burns and Ulla Dydo, most of it during the 1980s and 1990s. This resulted in the first reliable editions of a number of works, both previously unpublished and some that Stein had published in journals and pamphlets as well as books and collections unobtainable for decades, most prominently in Dydo’s A Stein Reader (1993). Further, it provided access to much of Stein’s important correspondence in critical editions by Burns and Dydo (Toklas 1973, Stein and Van Vechten 1986, Stein and Wilder 1996). It is crucial to recognize this line of work as a precondition for all later scholarship concerned with reading and contextualizing her work. Yet in spite of these and other commendable efforts, if compared to the situation of many of her modernist peers, the general conditions for working with Stein’s writings have been fairly difficult up until recently, as the task of publishing her collected writings in a version based on consistent principles of philological scholarship has not yet been undertaken.

Recently, however, the availability of Stein’s body of work changed dramatically, as the general copyright of her writings expired and it entered the public domain. In 2017, the multimodal internet portal for avant-garde art and literature, Monoskop, published Stein’s (more or less) complete collected writings – amounting to 602 individual titles – in html and EPUB formats. This online publication, edited by the anonymous online signature ‘pynch’, has the title There is no no. 411, referring to a fault in the original cataloguing of Stein’s writings that was undertaken by Yale curators Gallup and Haas as

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6 I follow this general practice, and hence the years specified in parenthesis after a title of a work by Stein will refer to the estimated composition date of the work in question, as based on the latest philological scholarship, unless the context indicates that I am discussing a specific publication of the particular work.
they mistakenly omitted the number 411 in their chronological numbering of all Stein’s finished compositions on the basis of the massive archive material that they were cataloguing.

With this step, everything Stein ever wrote is suddenly available and searchable online and for download in a neutral e-book format, including updated information on the estimated year of composition as well as data on the first printing of each piece. This resource makes the future life of the Stein scholar, not to mention the Stein collaborator, a lot easier as it literally integrates Stein’s writings into a digital framework. But sidelifing all of Stein’s writings in the same format, whatever their publication history, may also pose new risks. For instance, it could provide a distorted image of the bibliographic conditions as well as the diverse media ecologies of Stein’s work in its contemporary context, which, unless considered carefully, could lead to major misunderstandings in regard to the work’s significance. Thus, ideally, the digitalization of *There is no no. 411* would need to be accompanied by a digitalization in facsimile form of massive amounts of archive material held at Beinecke Library and other institutions, as such a resource would help in displaying the composite nature of the media ecology that Stein’s writings are a part of.7

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**State of the art**

As suggested above, the academic reception of Stein has been somewhat delayed. In her own day, she was well known as a salon-hostess and patron of visual arts, while her literary efforts were often ridiculed. For years her name was rarely mentioned in the context of literary modernism, and when it came up, it was usually followed by reservations about her extreme eccentricity or obscurity, such as when David Lodge in his *The Modes of Modern Writing* deemed Stein to be the only person in literary history to suffer from both of Roman Jakobson’s two types of aphasia (Lodge 1977). With the exception of a few monographs (Sutherland 1951; Hoffmann 1965; Stewart 1967; Bridgman 1970; Steiner 1979), hardly any serious scholarly treatment of Stein’s work appeared before the early 1980s when it was rediscovered by critics schooled in post-structuralism and feminism as well as various strains of formalist scholarship.

As I will establish in detail in chapters one and two, beside the primary work on bibliography that was slowly progressing, it was the aesthetic reception that picked up pace in the late 1950s that essentially begun making Stein’s work available for these new strains of research. After influential avant-garde figures like John Cage, Richard Foreman and John Ashbery had started to read and use Stein’s work, and after the systematic efforts of experimental poetry communities of the 1970s to canonize her as a literary ancestor, 7 Fortunately, this work has already started. Currently 324 items in the Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection have been scanned and are part of the Beinecke Digital Collections. See also account of digitalization plans by archive curator Nancy Kuhl (Kuhl 2014: 278).
Stein’s writings began appearing in literary scholarship and on college curricula. From this point on, academic Stein scholarship can be divided roughly into a formalist and a more contextual approach. This division, however, is far from clean-cut, as two of the most influential scholars, the editorial philologist Ulla E. Dydo and avant-garde poetry scholar Marjorie Perloff, both combine the two approaches. Dydo’s meticulous work with Stein’s notebooks and manuscripts resulted in *A Stein Reader* and culminated in her monograph *The Language That Rises* (2003), covering an impressive number of Stein’s writings from 1923 to 1934, enlightened by biographical and textual context concerning the process of composition and Stein’s daily life at the time, but never seeking to decode the works in the light of autobiography (Dydo 2003). Although my direct discussions of this will be limited to chapter two, I will be drawing continuously on the work of both Perloff and Dydo, simply because it constitutes an indispensable base for beginning to engage with Stein’s writing in detail.

Interdisciplinarity has been an issue in the reception of Stein’s work all along. It has mainly been undertaken from the perspectives of art history and theatre and performance studies. A number of studies have explored cubism and the art of Cézanne as contexts for Stein’s work, as she herself has frequently suggested affinities between her own work and that of the painters she knew and whose work she collected (Steiner 1979; Dubnick 1984). The theatrical history reception of Stein’s plays has been even more late than the literary reception, generally considering her plays as closet drama rather than serious writing intended and fit for the stage (Palatini Bowers 1992). However, more recent studies have considered Stein’s plays in the context of the contemporary avant-garde performance and film (Marranca 1996; Bay-Cheng 2007; Schultz 2015).

In the past two decades, research on Stein has exploded. A whole new body of research, drawing on feminism, queer theory and minority studies, places her work in a context of identity politics. Another strain has further explored Stein’s connections to science and philosophy, primarily through her Radcliffe psychology professor and early mentor William James, and her later acquaintance and discussion partner, the British philosopher of science Alfred North Whitehead (Meyer 2001). Also, historical and biographical discussion has been revitalized in the heated scholarly debate about Stein’s conservative political sympathies, which I will return to shortly (Will 2011).

When it comes to the specific perspective of this study, I should make of note of a number of studies that have established Stein as the herald of certain trends in contemporary poetry. This is a line of investigation that follows rather straightly from the Stein reception of the so-called language poets, often working with an amalgamation of poetic and critical practice, since these poets, as will be discussed in detail in chapter two, specifically used Stein in establishing a genealogy for their own practice. Thus, the first to investigate this line of thought were scholars with an affiliation with language poetry (Perloff 1981, 2002; Quartermain 1992; Davidson 1996). For example, Peter Quartermain draws a line from Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky up through the century to
Susan Howe and the language poetry of the 1970s and the 1980s. Further, in recalling the multilingual conditions of Stein’s childhood – she had lived in three different countries (and babbled in English, German, and French) before the age of five – Quartermain suggests that Stein’s work incarnates how the non-native English-speaking immigrants of the early 20th century brought multiculturalism into the core of the American language. This development includes an arbitrariness and openness in the process of writing, and a stressing of the materiality and ambiguity of the writing.

In *Everybody’s Autonomy*, probably one of the studies that has shaped my own approach to Stein’s reception the most, Juliana Spahr takes up Quartermain’s observation about the multilingual components in Stein’s language in the development of her concept of “connective writing” (Spahr 2001). On the grounds of a Steinian poetics of openness and reader inclusion, Spahr establishes a tradition of experimental writing that is specifically inclusive towards readers with minority backgrounds. Drawing out the multilingual, pidgin, base of Stein’s language Spahr shows how Stein is using the same techniques as postcolonial literatures use. She follows the tradition up to Harryette Mulllen and Theresa Hak-Kyung Cha, also addressing aspects of appropriation, collage and sampling as well as linguistic and generic transgressions. As already suggested, the idea of a “connective” quality in Stein’s writing that Spahr proposes has several overlaps with my own understanding of Stein’s collaborative poetics. Spahr has a consistent focus on poetry and written language as a crucial component in the establishment of subjectivity and linguistic identity, and traces the establishment of poetic communities that are able to transgress both time and space. The difference between her tradition of connective writing and my idea of a collaborative reception is not tied to my retreat from the situation of reading towards an actual rewriting practice, as this move is also a part of Spahr’s point, but rather derives from my media ecological perspective that makes me interested in the connections that Stein’s writing establishes, not just between human subjects, and between the individual and the collective, but also between different media technologies and other practices in the media ecology.

Elisabeth Frost (Frost 2003) has developed a more strictly feminist lineage of avant-garde poetry that she founds in Gertrude Stein and Mina Loy, also including Harryette Mullen, whereas Deborah Mix has tried to isolate Stein as a key figure in women’s experimental writing, also covering questions of influence (Mix 2007). Like Spahr’s study, the feminist approaches of Frost and Mix are convincing and I will be drawing on many of the insights they provide. It is the invaluable contribution of such studies of canon revision that bring attention to underappreciated work by women and minority poets which, because of the centuries-old gender and racial biases in art and academia alike, continues to fall out of general studies and surveys of literary history. Without these studies, deliberately applying gestures of segregation to counter structural biases, many of the artists I am working with would most likely have no reception at all. Certainly, part of the credit for the increased inclusion of Stein into the history of American poetry can be as-
cribed to the feminist canon revision work that began in the 1970s and is still taking place today. Yet, I do not follow a directly feminist path in my own study, as the specific gender and identity of the collaborating artists has not been decisive for the aesthetic reception of Stein that I intend to map. Although matters of identity politics are relevant and will play a central part in all the following chapters, it is equally crucial for me to be able go beyond such matters. Frequently, my discussion will transgress the printed page of conventional poetry into an expanded media ecology, where I feel that Stein’s strong interdisciplinary reception places it, and this movement cannot be tied specifically to a feminist tradition.

Two recent Scandinavian studies on Stein have suggested positioning her as a radical founder of a poetics going beyond classical modernism, and as a possible godmother of contemporary post-dramatic theatre (Schultz 2008) and poetry in the expanded field (Olsson 2010). Both these configurations of Stein are similar to the one I am suggesting. None of them, however, continue this insight into actual readings of contemporary poetry. I will be building on their important analysis of Stein’s poetics, but keeping my focus on later poetry and art rather than the post-dramatic theatre covered by Schultz and the general theoretical discussion of aesthetics of interdisciplinarity versus literary exclusiveness taken up by Olsson. Therefore, even though I hardly ever touch upon the same specific material as either Schultz or Olsson, both of these studies have shaped my general view of Stein’s oeuvre and its reception much more than the sparse number of references to them in my text will indicate.

Other than the abovementioned, I will be drawing on numerous contributions to Stein scholarship in many different traditions as I go along and it seems futile to try to map them at this point. I will, however, need to account for the contribution of Barbara Will who has also had a defining influence on my general approach to Stein. In her first monograph, *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of “Genius”*, Will suggests that genius is an equivocal concept for Stein, who both asserts it to describe her own practice and further turns and queers it. In addition, Will is among the first to consistently argue, as I also do, that Stein’s publicized author performance needs to be read in close connection with her general poetics (Will 2000).

Although it is a publication that more or less tore apart the Stein research community when it appeared, Will’s highly controversial second monograph on Stein, *Unlikely Collaboration* (Will 2011), has also become important to the present study for several reasons. One is suggested by its title. Essentially, my own study could have had the very same one. What I am undertaking is an examination of collaborative situations that all seem more or less unlikely. On the face of it, this unlikeliness is of an entirely different character to that suggested by Will. Will’s book deals with the friendship between Stein and the French right-wing intellectual, Vichy official and convicted war criminal Bernard Faÿ, who helped secure her survival through World War II in the French countryside. The unlikeliness of the collaboration between the two friends is therefore essentially a political one. In Will’s book, the word collaboration also refers to the collaboration of
the Vichy regime with Nazi Germany, unlikely in itself in the verdict of history, and even more unlikely for the hardly Aryan, physically disabled and explicitly queer Faÿ, not to mention the American, Jewish, lesbian and aesthetically radical Stein.

In my own study, I am claiming that collaborations are taking place although the one party, Stein, is dead and gone. Accordingly, the unlikeliness of these collaborations is foremost a product of their temporal and spatial dispersal. But the parallelism between Will’s title and the account that I am undertaking is not just a curiosity of words. In her book, Will takes Stein’s friendship with Faÿ seriously by looking at it in terms of a collaboration. This gesture is exactly in accordance with my own suggestions of how to read Stein’s media ecology as essentially relational. In this ecology, there is a constant renegotiating of the relationship between text and context, with the concrete consequence that Stein’s friendships and her writing become entangled on many levels. As I have uncovered in my earlier work on Stein, this can be observed in the practice of portrait writing that Stein engaged in continuously over most of her career. Her portraits work like a type of occasional poetry in establishing relations and making social bonds that in turn become infrastructural in regard to the distribution of her writing (Daugaard 2012, 2013).

As already suggested above, an exchange, investment or collaboration has to take place in order for Stein’s poetics to be activated. This can take many different shapes, including that of personal exchanges and friendships, and from this follows that her personal exchanges and collaborations have to be taken very seriously in relation to her work, which Will is one of very few scholars to actually do. As a consequence, there is no justification for picking and choosing among Stein’s friends, claiming the importance of art history superstars like Picasso or Duchamp or political progressives like Élisabeth de Gramont or Ellen La Motte, but admitting no significance to Faÿ, to her rural conservative French neighbors in Belley, or to her close friend in later years, the French painter Francis Picabia, who also has his accounts with the Vichy regime as well as with quasi-fascist aesthetics.

What is also crucial in Will’s examination of the collaboration and friendship between Stein and Faÿ is that it is sensitive towards the power relations and struggles of positioning and domination that are also part of a collaborative engagement. This adds an important nuance to the concept of dialogue that Will established in her first book as an essentially democratic element in Stein’s poetics. The idea of dialogue, and also in part the notion of collaboration, has immediately positive connotations, suggesting a power-free and frictionless exchange between equal parties. But in Unlikely Collaboration, Will deliberately switches her perspective from dialogue to collaboration and stresses the less rosy aspects of the latter term, pointing towards its specific connotations in connection with the setting of the world war, as implied by expressions like “enemy collaborator.” For my purposes, these latter connotations are less relevant as I do not intend to judge whether Stein or anyone else could be considered enemy collaborators at any point in time, but I do appreciate how Will’s position on collaboration involves de-
cissive issues of domination and what Sianne Ngai has called “ugly feelings” like hatred, irritation, envy, and disappointment, and in this way challenges the idealist connotations that the term might otherwise imply. I will therefore keep Will’s complex conception of collaboration in mind, as a potential correction to the ring of frictionless inclusiveness that my key concept of collaborative poetics could entail if not continuously challenged.

II. CONCEPTUALIZING POETIC COLLABORATION IN THE MEDIA ECOLOGIES OF LITERATURE

Intuitively, the first problem that comes up for any study that applies a media historical or media ecological perspective, is defining what a medium is. If the media actually are our situation (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: xxii), then knowing what a medium is would be critical. One needs, however only to scratch the surface of the field of media studies to realize, that stating some version of an immediate, common-sense definition of a medium as a technical device or platform upon or through which a message is conveyed, is only helpful to a very limited extent. In their Critical Terms for Media Studies, W.J.T. Mitchell and Mark Hansen fill an entire introduction with sorting out possible definitions and implications of medium, the collective singular form, media, as well as the process of mediation. What is at stake in their attempt to frame the object of media studies is something more than studying the sum of different technical devices, although this is also a crucial component. In regard to the collective singular, media, they conceive it as a “pervading or enveloping substance’ in which human organisms live” and which interferes with the human sensorium and the outside world through its “formal, technical procedures” but is also fundamentally affected by these factors in a relational, mediating, process that becomes the pivotal point for Mitchell and Hansen: “thus media studies can and should designate the study of our fundamental relationality, the irreducible role of mediation in the history of human being” (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: xii, my emphasis).

In his characterization of the current media situation on the far side of the utopian technology enthusiasm that thrived in the early internet age – and which now appears only “laughable” since the “media has developed into a heterogeneous, interdiscursive field” (Zielinski 2013: 14) – German media theorist Siegfried Zielinski writes:

Now the media exist in superabundance, there is certainly no lack. For the thoroughly media-conditioned individuals media cannot possibly be the stuff that obsessions are made of any longer. What has turned into a given at one’s disposal is now utilized and defended as property, but no longer a coveted object of desire. (Zielinski 2013: 18)

Even if the title of his book [...After the Media] might suggest otherwise, for Zielinski, this complex, all-pervading condition, where media is incroaching into pretty much every
aspect of reality, is not an incitement to give up on theorizing the concept of either “the media”, or “media” between which he agilely distinguishes. Where “the media” converges with Hansen and Mitchell’s account of the relational mediation processes of the collective singular form media, “media” in Zielinski’s definition is more like a plural form of medium: “a loosely connected and fundamentally unclear multiplicity of technologies and artifacts of communication” (Zielinski 2013: 23).

However productive they may be in an ontological questioning of media, for my own purposes, I have found that such meticulous word games give only small returns. I will initially not bind myself to a more specific definition of either medium or media, with or without an article, but progress with attention directed towards both the “fundamental relationality” and the “superabundance” of media suggested by Mitchell and Hanson and Zielinski respectively. As will become clearer in upcoming sections, I will consistently frame the study of media in terms of ecology in accordance with what American, object-oriented philosopher Levi Bryant suggests:

To study media is not simply to investigate technologies, tools, artifacts, and forms of communication, but rather the way in which machines are structurally coupled to one another and modify one another regardless of whether or not humans are involved. In this regard, the investigation of media is closer to ecology than to the investigation of what we ordinarily refer to as “mass media” (Bryant 2014: 35).

However, in later years, the ubiquitous field of media as described by Zielinski has led to the flourishing of discourses around “post-media,” “post-medium” and the like. Along such lines, in A Voyage on the North Sea (2000), Rosalind Krauss writes about art in the postmodern situation in terms of what she calls “the condition of post-medium.” Here Krauss is continuing her argument from her own earlier writings for art’s increased emancipation from the logic of medium specificity. The post-medium condition in Krauss’ reading “attempts to address how artists increasingly mobilize works in the interstices between but also on the very inside of media conventions in order to get a grip on idiosyncratic artistic positions which fall outside the spectrum of a positivist purifying approach to artistic media” (Stockburger 2012: 2). But, just as is the case is with Zielinski’s “after” in [...]After the Media], the “post” in “post-medium”, as Krauss’s coins it, is no more pronouncing the end of medium than the “post” in post-feminism is pronouncing the end of feminism, or the post-digital is addressing the end of the digital. It is more like an attempt to depart from the situation described by Zielinski, where the media is a ubiquitous and unavoidable condition and we are unable to access an “outside of the media” as such.

Hence, with her concept, Krauss is not suggesting that a condition has arrived for art, where the question of medium has ceased to be important. On the contrary, even

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8 As I will elaborate later on, the crucial concept of the “machine” in Bryant’s philosophy is derived from Deleuze and Guattari and therefore does not refer specifically to technical apparatuses, but must be understood in much broader terms.
if Krauss describes an eclectic situation where installation and mixed media artworks dominate on the global art market, she maintains, through analysis of the work of Belgian artist Marcel Broodthaers, that a heightened attention to the material processes of specific media is of crucial concern to the progressive art of our time. Hence, Krauss’ position on this could be said in principle to agree with Zielinski’s, even if it is more analytical, less articulated in terms of media theory, and – as Hansen and Mitchell point out in their discussion of it – hardly attentive towards the specific ways in which the media technologies of communication and distribution have changed in the period she addresses (Mitchell and Hansen 2010: xvi-xvii). Thus, even if I think of media as a condition or an environment that we are immersed in, I will also follow Krauss in insisting on the importance of the particularities of concrete media formations. In my tracing of the aesthetic reception of Gertrude Stein I will attend to each practice in its specificity, and not let generalized terms such as mass media, multimedia, intermedia or transmedia erase the particulars. I maintain that there is a point in tracing the individual occurrence through its different material components, even if it is embedded in the heterogeneous, interdiscursive field.

When in the 1980s Félix Guattari—independently of Krauss—began talking about a “post-media transition” (Guattari 2009: 291)⁹ he was not, like Krauss, speaking about the medium specificity of artistic media, but addressing the political and social factor in the situation of media ubiquity. Thus, symptomatically, Guattari’s term makes use of the collective singular form, media. In calling for a “post-mediatic revolution” (Guattari 2009: 300), he was formulating a utopian aspiration that the conscious abuse or misuse by minoritarian groups of new technological media could provide an effective line of flight from the total dominance of late capitalist mass media; not by claiming the existence of an “outside” of the media as emphatically rejected by Zielinski, but by claiming the possibility of an altering or disturbing of the relations between mental, social and technological ecologies via engagement with the materiality of media, Guattari is aspiring to encourage capitalist societies to make the transition from the mass-media era to a post-media age, in which media will be reappropriated by a multitude of subject-groups capable of directing its resingularization. Despite the seeming impossibility of such an eventuality, the currently unparalleled level of media-related alienation is in no way an inherent necessity (Guattari 2014: 41, italics in original).

Guattari suggests several factors that contradict the “media-fatism” he is opposing, including the “the technological evolution of the media and its possible use for non-capitalist goals, in particular through a reduction of costs and through miniaturization” (ibid.

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42), which would seem a fairly prophetic formulation from 1989 considering the massive dissemination and cost-reduction of advanced media technology in miniature formats that has followed since. But most importantly, Guattari’s aspirations towards a post-media condition are tied to his concept of subjectivation, which according to Michael Goddard’s reading of Guattari, which I will return to, is “crucial as it is the actual site where politics takes place, where new modes of sensibility and intelligence can be experimented with, mutate and transform themselves” (Goddard 2011: 9). I will return to Guattari’s thoughts on ecology, but for now note that I will follow him in insisting on the potential for local agency within the media ubiquitous or post-media condition.

Media poetics 1: Media archeology, the interface

As already mentioned I am conceiving Stein’s poetics through three interconnected aspects I have called her media poetics, her ambient poetics and her collaborative poetics. All these these concepts are in need of further theoretical elaboration. The first, media poetics, I use as it has been framed by American media scholar Lori Emerson. Emerson bases her conception of media archeology on both Kittler and Zielinski. She conceives media archeology as a practice trying to uncover the past and present of textual media as a field of heterogeneous connections, finding “the new in the old,” discovering and imagining other possible pasts, and hence, futures, as an alternative to a more linear, deterministic tradition of media history, seeking “to reveal the present as an inevitable consequence of the past” (Emerson 2014: xiii). As already suggested, on this very general level, there is a media archeological angle to this study. I have been curious about what reasons can be found for the contemporary increase in receptiveness towards Stein’s work and I am seeking explanations in the correlations between the quickly transforming media situation she was working in, and our quickly transforming media situation today. This is a media archeological project in the sense that I am using Stein and her reception as collaboration as a lens through which to look at the media sitiation of contemporary art and literature. And vice versa: I am consciously looking at Stein through contemporary glasses.

In her book Reading Writing Interfaces: From the digital to the bookbound, Emerson establishes the idea of a media poetics closely connected to her understanding of media archeology: “what I call media poetics – the literary exemplar of media archeology and a practice that extends deep from within the analog and well into the digital” (Emerson 2014: xiv). Thus, media poetics is to Emerson the writerly practice of exploring the limits of a given reading/writing technology and making it appear more tangible. To an extent, Emerson’s concept of media poetics has affinities with well-known concepts of poststructuralism like Roland Barthes’ idea, introduced in S/Z (1970), about the readerly and the writerly text. Barthes established the category of writerly text (texte scriptible) to account for modernist writing in which the reader becomes an active co-producer of
meaning. Like Barthes, Emerson – with her concept of media poetics – wants to approach work that somehow explodes conventional styles and genres. But where Barthes maintains a focus on the production of linguistic meaning that stems from reading the writerly text, Emerson, following Kittler, departs from the physical shape and technological construction of her media poetic works and how making this technology tangible is a way of enabling interaction from readers/audiences/users.

What Emerson is interested in is, as her title suggests, the *interfaces* that mediate between producer and consumer of text, between writing and reading. Interfaces that, like the case of the book in the “Gutenberg Galaxy” (McLuhan 1962), have exhibited a gradually increasing tendency to disappear before our very eyes. More and more as the history of the printed book progresses, its interface is, according to Emerson, conceptualized as seamless, invisible, immaterial, creating by the modern era a problematic fiction of reading as a natural, and essentially interface-free, process.¹⁰ Departing from a contemporary digital media situation, Emerson describes the interface as equal part user and machine, so that the extent to which the interface is designed to mask its underlying machine-based processes and appear seamless, invisible, for the sake of its users, is also the extent to which these same users become disempowered, as they are unable to understand – let alone actively create – while using the machine, whether digital or analog.

Media poetics is an artistic practice that pulls in the opposite direction of this seamlessness, and instead forces open the interface, experiments with it and takes it to its limits, making it tangible. Media poetics is a practice that takes very different shapes in the media situations of different epochs, but generally, it disturbs the invisibility of the interface – points to its being there, contradicting the claim of immateriality. In the suggested back-and-forth leaping fashion of media archeology, Emerson explores practices of media poetics from digital literature across typewriter concrete poetry to the fascicles of Emily Dickinson. All these practices show extreme, critical awareness of the “limits and the possibilities of the writing interfaces of [their] time” (Emerson 2014: 144). The writers Emerson engages with “work with and against interfaces across various digital and analog media to undermine not only normative reading/writing practices but, above all, the assumed transparency of conventional reading and writing interfaces” (Emerson 2014: xiii).

Furthermore, Emerson observes that in the media condition of the early 2000s with the dominance of digital computers and related devices, the interfaces on which we read and write are approaching each other in new ways after having been relatively separated during the reign of Gutenberg. Or, they are becoming increasingly interchangeable – the screen is often the base of our writing as well as of our reading and the two tend to

¹⁰ Scholarship within the history of print, reading and books will support this general claim of Emerson’s. See for example Steven Roger Fisher’s *A History of Reading* (2003) for a convincing account of the development of reading from ancient times, across the invention of silent reading in the middle ages and the way new portable formats, layout and print techniques developed during the 18th century, along with increased general literacy, made the physical act of reading easier and more invisible, in this way allowing the reader to immerse herself in the reading and experience it with greater intensity and emotion.
intermingle more and more through our connectedness to networks. She also ties this condition to media poetics:

Media poetics is fast becoming a practice not just of experimenting with the limits and possibilities of writing interfaces but rather of readingwriting: the practice of writing through the network, which as it tracks, indexes, and algorithmizes every click and every bit of text we enter into the network, is itself constantly reading our writing and writing our reading. [...] This strange blurring of, even feedback loop between, reading and writing signals a definitive shift in the nature and definition of literature (Emerson 2014: xiv).

In Emerson’s account, the potential for more empowered users that this implies is directly snatched up by the seductive rhetoric of seamlessness, by making the interface invisible. Yet media poetics is a counter strategy that opens it up again, and hence, it invites another type of interaction.

A similar type of shift, I suggest, can be detected in Stein’s work, which also calls for a new definition of literature, offering a new possible user intervention. As we shall see, Stein is empowering her readers by pointing to the self-evident common ground of the interfaces that appear in the codex, but that readers have become accustomed to not noticing. In much of her writings she singles out the machine-based processes and technologies that structure these interfaces, such as the book, the chapter, the act, the page, the scene, or the word.

**Media poetics 2: From interface to infrastructure**

In *The Marvelous Clouds: Towards a Philosophy of Media*, his 2015 theorization of what he calls “elemental media,” American media philosopher John Durham Peters draws extensively on both Kittler and McLuhan, but what is particular in his account and separates him from many working in the media archeological vein of this tradition is his point that the understanding of the concept of media as referring primarily to “message bearing institutions” is a fairly new fabrication. Peters traces back in history how elements such as fire, air and water were conceptualized as media. Thus, in Peters’ claim, the concept of media was nature long before it was technology. The point of this tracing is to substantiate

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11 Again, note the affinities with textes scriptibles in Barthes who also emphasizes networks in S/Z: “In this ideal text, the networks are many and interact, without any one of them being able to surpass the rest; this text is a galaxy of signifiers, not a structure of signifieds; it has no beginning; it is reversible; we gain access to it by several entrances, none of which can be authoritatively declared to be the main one” (Barthes 2002: 5). The literary condition post internet as conceptualized by Emerson could in some senses look like a more concrete realization of Barthes’ vision.
the idea that media theory is as much about environments and infrastructures as it is about messages and content. With this, Peters opens up media theory towards an environmental perspective that fundamentally deals with media as relations between humans, things and nature: “The crossroads of humans and things defines the domain of media studies” (Peters 2015: 51).

Like Mitchell and Hansen, Peters is interested in the relational nature of media: “Because media are in the middle, their definition is a matter of position, such that the status of something as a medium can fade once its position shifts” (Peters 2015: 29). In installing this relativity in the medium, that it is always a matter of position, Peters is constructing a concept of media not dependent upon an ontological hierarchy. In his phrasing, however, this “ontology is not flat; it is wrinkly, cloudy, and bunched” (ibid. 30). In Peters’ media theory, the concept of infrastructure becomes important: “Infrastructures can be defined as large, force-amplifying systems that connect people and institutions across large scales of space and time” (ibid. 31).

Like the interfaces of Emerson, the infrastructures in Peters’ account are designed to blend in, to arrange people and property but to divert attention from themselves (“For getting seems a key part of the way infrastructures work” ibid. 36), but it is important to note that infrastructures are larger and more materially complex structures than interfaces. An interface, however, is always part of a larger infrastructure that distributes the connections it mediates: “Though large in structure, infrastructures can be small in interface, appearing as water faucets, gas pumps, electrical outlets, computer terminals, cell phones, or airport security, all of them gates to bigger and submerged systems” (ibid. 31). In a sense, then, the interface of Lori Emerson described above is such a gate “to bigger and submerged systems” – networks that connect the media artifacts she tends to stay focused on with larger processes. I would claim that even if Peters’ examples of interfaces are all in a fairly obvious, concrete sense parts of a larger infrastructure, the same logic can be applied to the media ecology of literature. As we shall see in the following chapters, the infrastructures that regulate the production, distribution and consumption of literature are a crucial matter for understanding Stein’s practice. Initially, she had an experience of falling through literary infrastructures, such as that of publishing, but as we shall see in coming chapters, she also used her experimental writing to construct alternative infrastructures via friendships and collaborations. Therefore, in Stein’s case, it is often fruitful to trace how the interface of the writing functions as a gate to larger infrastructures.

In paying attention to infrastructures, Peters goes as far as to suggest a rather compelling theoretical paradigm shift:

After structuralism, with its ambition to explain the principles of thought, primitive or modern, by way of combinatorics of meaning, and post-structuralism, with its love of gaps, aporias, and impossibilities, its celebration of breakdown, yearning, and failure, its relish for preposte-
rous categories of all kinds of love of breathless syntax – perhaps it is
time for infrastructuralism. Its fascination is for the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes. It is a doctrine of environments and small differences, of straight gates and the needle’s eye, of things not understood that stand under our worlds (Peters 2015: 33).

Levi Bryant has also addressed the fundamentally different approach that an attention towards infrastructure entails. He describes how his own “discursivist” world view shaped by structuralist and poststructuralist thinkers like Žižek, Lacan and Derrida was fundamentally altered by playing the computer game SimCity. A simulation game in which the player designs and builds a city, which he then, as city mayor, tries to lead to growth and prosperity through construction, planning and maintenance of infrastructures such as electricity, roads, housing, street lights, sports arenas, tax collection and so on. Playing the game, according to Bryant, made him realize the very limited control the power to design something gives you over how things actually unfold in (simulated) reality.

What SimCity taught me is that the signifier, meaning, belief, and so on are not the sole agencies structuring social relations. Whether or not a commercial district grows as a function of the amount of energy available to that zone from the power plant is not a signifying or cultural difference. Whether or not people begin to die or move away as a result of pollution produced by garbage, coal-burning power plants, and industrial waste is not a signifying difference. Whether or not people vote you out of office because they’re angry about traffic congestion is not the result of a signifier. To be sure, there are social relations here insofar as it is people that produce all these things and people that are flocking to this city, moving away, or voting you out of office, but the point is that the form the city takes is not, in these instances, the result of a signifier, a text, a belief, or narrative alone. It is the result of the real properties of roads, power lines, pollution, and so on (Bryant 2014: 5).

In Bryant’s realization of the materiality – the non-discursive quality – of the infrastructure, the wide implications of Peters’ suggested paradigm shift are conveyed. For Bryant, this is the realization that leads him towards object-oriented ontology and its preoccupation with matter understood naïvely as “things,” or, the commonplace “stuff” that the world is composed of.

What I also deduct from Bryant’s example is the significance of how this stuff is connected, distributed and moved around; the importance of a functional infrastructure for there to be anything at all. If the media ecology, as I will address shortly, is to some degree a chaotic and necessarily open constellation, the infrastructure is the organization that is applied to the ecology and that will grasp some parts of it and connect them to other particular parts, while other elements will fall through or outside the infrastructure, and thus not be brought into attention and circulation. As such, the infrastructure
is like a string running through the ecology, connecting certain parts, and allowing them to resonate, in this way lighting up a particular pattern across the ecology. And as I will show in further detail, this is just as true for the infrastructures controlling art and literature, that also, as Peters has it, “stand under” our understanding of these practices. As I will develop, especially in the two final chapters of this study, an infrastructuralism that moves focus from the individualized artist and the fetishized artwork to dissolve itself in a depersonalized organizational structure that distributes matter and significance across temporal and spatial distances can indeed be determined in several recent manifestations of Stein’s aesthetic reception. In a sense, such an infrastructuralism is equivalent to the practice of media poetics on the level of the interface. Like media poetics draws attention to the interface that is being marketed as seamless, infrastructuralism zooms in on the infrastructure that is designed to divert attention from itself.

According to Durham Peters, the connectivity of “message bearing” media has become increasingly explicit since the pervasiveness of mass media became evident from the mid-20th century, which was also a pivotal time for this study:

In the twentieth century, media came to mean the mass media of radio and television, cinema, newspapers, magazines, and sometimes books, but the term never completely lost its environmental meaning; indeed, mass media were so pervasive and elemental that they could fit nicely into the long lineage of medium as ambiance, and some, such as McLuhan and his followers, sought a more expansive (and ancient) notion of media ecology (Peters 2015: 48).

Compelling for my purposes, Peters here addresses the “medium as ambiance” and further connects it directly to the theoretical notion of media ecology as framed by McLuhan, whose work I will return to in further detail shortly. It is important to make note of this ambient quality stressed by Peters, because it suggests the crucial addition to Lori Emerson’s concept of media poetics with its focus on the essentially flat interface that is supplied by Peters’ infrastructuralist attention. On the practices of media poetics that she examines in her book, Emerson notes:

What I have […] found is that when writers read or even record their writing interfaces, through writing, the result is necessarily a highly visual, tactile literary object that corresponds to traditional literary genres such as poetry and fiction only to the extent that the author names their work as such (Emerson 2014: xiv).

In the case of the artists engaging with the media poetics of Stein (especially those addressed in chapters one, four and five), the “highly visual, tactile” quality emphasized by Emerson is extended not only beyond traditional literary genres to the point where they touch upon the visual arts as is the case with Emerson’s material (i.e. writing becoming...
image, for instance in concrete poetry), but also well beyond the medium of literature altogether, into the realms of music, performance art, painting, collage, conceptual art and the “intermedia art” of movements like Fluxus, concretism and minimalism as I will unfold in chapter one. And therefore, informed by Guattari and Peters among others, I go beyond the perspective of media archeology as framed by Emerson, to the extent that this practice remains centered primarily on writing technologies and reading-writing media, and enter into a broader media ecology that also challenges the artifact focus that remains part of Emerson’s take on the media poetics of interfaces to also address the spatial and temporal infrastructures that these interfaces are a gate to.

**Ambient poetics**

When exporting the idea of a media poetics into a broader space, I have found it useful to think in terms of an *ambient poetics*. The word ambient is perhaps most prominently connected to music, as popularized by, among others, the British musician and composer Brian Eno in his *Ambient 1: Music for Airports* (1978), but the American poet Tan Lin, also a contemporary poet who has engaged with Stein’s work on several occasions, has used the compound ambient poetics to describe his ideal for a new literary practice:

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that didn’t have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of the poet reading (SCV 16).

Lin’s provocative attempt to take Duchamp’s (“Dew-champ”12) ideal about a non-retinal art into the world of literature, reveals his affinity with literary movements like conceptual poetry and “un-creative writing” (Perloff 2010, Goldsmith 2011a, Goldsmith and Dwor-kin 2011). But since postproductive strategies have often been used to define conceptual writing it is important to note that, although highly conceptual, Lin’s practice is not exclusively postproductive. If writing turns into image in Emerson’s media poetics, in Lin’s practice writing borders on not just painting, photography and film, but even more on architecture and landscape. With this idea of an ambient poetics, he has attempted to create poetry that is like wallpaper or shopping music, yet is also intellectually stimulating in

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12 Lin’s sonic translation of Duchamp into Dew-champ recalls Stein’s method of punning, often used in her portraits, most notably Guillaume Apollinaire becoming in her 1913 portrait of him “Give known or pin ware”, although the pun in Lin’s case may co-originate in computer-generated translations between text and voice in Lin’s flash video poem “Eleven Minute Painting” (2002), in which the passage also occurs.
unpredictable ways, and books that relativize our fixed ideas about literary genres and
the reading of literature by actively problematizing the different platforms, like the book
or the PDF file, which are carriers of these practices.

Lin’s book *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004 The Joy of Cooking*
(2010), which I will return to in chapter four, exists as a physical print object but also
dissolves itself both from the inside, by playing with elements of metadata that are nor-
mally only visible at earlier phases of a book’s becoming (when it still exists exclusively
as computer files that are edited and processed) and a highly irregular use of paratextual
elements. And from the outside, by the continued release of numerous new versions and
collective and algorithmic reworkings of the title on a whole range of platforms, making
the concept of a unified literary work as an entity identified by specified markers like
author, title, textual content, and publication date completely unavailable. What is inter-
esting to me is that Lin’s practice is oriented towards lifting poetry or literature off the
page, and examining the broader spaces and rooms it occupies:

Poetry should never be turned off. […] Like a thermostat, it should
regulate the room’s energies. This allows the piece to constantly erase
itself. As we all know, poetry and the novel should aspire not to the
condition of music but to the condition of relaxation and yoga. […]
poems, are most beautiful [and least egotistical] at the moment in which
they are forgotten, like disco and other Four on the Floor Productions
(SCV 22).

The reader familiar with Gertrude Stein’s lectures will recognize in Lin’s prose
something like her characteristic balance of exhibiting obstinate certainty when put-
ting forward the most surprising and unlikely claims and exhibiting complete doubt and
open curiosity when it comes to conventionally accepted truths. By imagining poetry
as a dispersed ambient textuality, Lin is resisting the book as fetishized object, which is
something that Stein, as I shall discuss in the coming chapters, also did in many ways.
Furthermore, his practice reveals how much of the reading of a book that is controlled
by neither author nor reader, but determined by paratext and other factors. As he claims
in an interview: “A lot of the book has already been read long before we got to it. Con-
text is more important than content” (Saunders 2010). In my understanding of Stein’s
ambient poetics, I am inspired by Lin’s (tongue-in-cheek) vision that “a poem should be
camouflaged into the feeling the room is having, like drapes, silverware, or candlesticks”
(SCV 26), because it includes a broader media ecology of literature and reading into its
understanding of literary practice and also because it connects to questions of affectivity,
which I will return to shortly. The ambient reading practice suggested by Lin can also be
understood as a sort of “reading without reading”, to just “skim the surface of [the] work,

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13 A selection of Lin’s ambient poetry works, sound and digital video media can be found on his Penn
Sound pages. See for instance *Dub Version*, a flash video ambient poem “paired asynchronously with a
looking for grammatical patterns, sonic flourishes, and marveling at the shape of sentences”, a procedure Joshua Schuster, among others, has propagated towards some of Stein’s writing (Schuster 2015: 47). In this sense, media poetics’ intensified attention towards the readingwriting interface can also be balanced by the more distracted attention towards the textual interface performed by an ambient reading practice.

Independently of Lin’s practice, eco-theorist Timothy Morton has also worked with the concept of ambient poetics, particularly in his book *Ecology Without Nature*. Morton’s concept is quite detailed, and has several subcategories, most of which will not be relevant to my work. He also takes great pains to connect it to his general topic of “ecomimesis”, or “nature-writing.” As his overall interest is “the phenomenon of environmentalism in culture” (Morton 2007: 8) he goes on to criticize the practice of ambient poetics in regard to its eco-political potential, something that is also not relevant to my purposes. Nevertheless, I believe the outlines of his concept as a descriptive, analytical tool can in fact be applied to my material.

Ambient poetics, in Morton’s phrasing is:

A materialist way of reading texts with a view to how they encode the literal space of their inscription – if there is such a thing – the spaces between the words, the margins of the page, the physical and social environment of the reader (Morton 2007: 3).

As he stresses, the word ambient derives from the Latin “ambo” – “on both sides” – hence it refers directly to spatiality and to the silences and spaces surrounding text, sound or artwork. In many ways, the work of John Cage – of composing music with arbitrary, unorganized sound, and particularly silence – which I will address in chapter one, is a perfect illustration of this idea. Morton thus emphasizes that ambient poetics can refer to music, sculpture or performance as well as to literature, and he highlights the aspects of multimedia and even synaesthesia as being central to the conception of ambient poetics, which gives the concept an advantage lacking in the concept of media poetics.

The subcategory in Morton’s detailed typology of ambient poetics that is most relevant to my purposes is what he terms “the medial.” This is also the aspect where Morton’s concept overlaps most obviously with Lin’s preoccupation with atmosphere or “the feeling the room is having.” Here, Morton departs from the linguist Roman Jakobson’s idea of phatic communication, that is the communication that underlines the materiality of the channel, like the air through which we transmit radio signals, the typeface, the paper it is printed on, and so on. Phatic statements “point out the atmosphere in which the message is transmitted” (Morton 2007: 37), foregrounding the contact. Morton’s conceptual overlaps can be confusing, but in the following quote, “ecomimesis” can be substituted with “ambient poetics”:
When ecomimesis points out the environment, it performs a medial function, either at the level of content or at the level of form. Contact becomes content. Ecomimesis interrupts the flow of an argument or a sequence of narrative events, thus making us aware of the atmosphere “around” the action or the environment in which or about which [the writer] is writing (Morton 2007: 37-38).

So, in ambient poetics, “contact becomes content,” as Morton persuasively phrases it. Conveniently for my purposes, Morton changes the name of this quality from phatic to medial in order to stress that this effect does not need to be exclusive to verbal expression. In his characterization of ambient poetics in its media aspect, he is describing something quite similar to the media poetics of Lori Emerson, as this is also a question of making the interface tangible, only in ambient poetics the connection goes beyond the two-dimensionality of an inscribed plane and into the three-dimensional room or atmosphere that it is a gate to. As Morton stresses, ambient poetics undermines the distinctions between the thought of media as environment and atmosphere and of the medium as a material, graspable thing, just like it undermines the distinction between foreground and background. Again, Morton refers to the practice of John Cage to illustrate his point:

Cage’s prepared piano makes us aware of the materiality of the piano, the fact that it is made of taut vibrating strings inside a hard wooden box. The sustain pedal, invented in the Romantic period as an addition to the piano forte, performs this function itself. Conversely, the sustained vibration of a note or drone make us aware of the space in which the vibration is occurring. Ambient music can render a picture of an environment using sound effects (birdsong, waves) or make us aware of the space in which we are sitting through drones, reverberation, and feedback (Morton 2007: 38-39).

According to American theater and performance scholar Bonnie Marranca, “a modern ecology of theater […] begins with the study of space” (Marranca 1996: 7) and on several points, Marranca’s ideas about an “ecology of theater,” which she bases on readings of the dramatic works of Chekhov, Maeterlinck and especially Gertrude Stein, resembles my concept of ambient poetics. In particular it has affinities with the ambient poetics in Morton’s phrasing because Marranca’s idea of a spatial ecology also hooks on to the natural world, as she takes Stein’s ideas of the play as a landscape quite literally, linking closely between “contemporary conceptions of landscape and performance space” (Marranca 1996: 7). In Stein’s landscape plays there is no story, as they are more interested in existence than in events. “Act so that there is no use in a center,” (TB 63) Stein wrote in the first lines of Tender Buttons’ last section “Rooms,” and Marranca lets this well-known quote characterize the decentered nature of the play in Stein’s conception as it, as Morton described in the ambient poetics, points outwards towards the environs of the room, making us “aware of the atmosphere ‘around’ the action” (Morton 2007: 37-38).
What Marranca also stresses is the close relationships that exist between this conception of the play and the ecological structure. An ecology is also decentered in this way; it has no use in a center. In the case of theater and performance, this has wide implications for the production as well as the perception of works. As Marranca puts it: “A landscape is made up of things and people to be viewed in relation to each other. It doesn’t have to come to you; you must discover for yourself what is there” (Marranca 1996: 7).

Accordingly, in Marranca’s concept, the theatrical practice as a collective or collaborative work process is also functional as an ecology, as the creative energy in a theatrical realization is necessarily spread out between different actors constituted by all the professionals (playwright, director, set designer, actors, composer, choreographer, and so on) involved, and objects (props, lights, mechanics, sets, room, dramatic text) all interacting in the landscape or ecology of the play. But equally important is how the spectator becomes a situated and crucial part of the play’s composition, as its completion depends on her collaboration. The collaborative process of theatrical art is illuminating as a structural model for the way I wish to think about collaboration in relation to Stein’s artistic reception here, because it is not focused on one particular relationship between two specific agents – such as the reader and the writer – but is spread out onto a multiplicity of agents, which may act in completely different materials and from different spatial and – due to the medium’s strong dependency on reenactment and recreation of textual scores that are sometimes several thousand years old – even different temporal positions, and yet be involved in the same entangled ecology.14

The theatrical analogy also draws attention to the similarities between the idea of the ambient poetics and various conceptions of the performative as it has been theorized widely in the so-called performative turn in the humanities, a discussion I will return to briefly in chapter one. The idea of “intermedia” that thrived in the art scene of the 1960s, addresses this performative or ambient space that is thought to arise when different art forms meet and interact. The ambient space is a concrete manifestation of the sometimes a little mysterious-sounding, notion of a “space between the media.” That is, a space in which the different media are all situated and therefore come into contact with each other, and where, as Morton noted “contact becomes content.”

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14 It is important to stress that this is merely a structural model, based on parts of the way the creative process is organized in an actual theater, while other parts are ignored. I do not mean to idealize in general the actual collaborative structure of the theatrical work process, as I am well aware that it is commonly a very hierarchically structured one, in which the chain of command between director and performers is indisputable. This, like Barbara Will’s previously mentioned concept of collaboration, reminds us that collaborations without active structures of power and dominance are non-existent, and to naïvely idealize the thought of collaboration as free from power/dominance would be a mistake.
Collaborative poetics

In order to conceptualize the poetics at play in Stein’s artistic reception, I have worked with a conceptual trinity of media poetics, ambient poetics and collaborative poetics, which, as noted, I think of as processes constantly interacting with and stimulating each other. The difference between media poetics and ambient poetics can be thought of, roughly, in terms of the relation between the spatiality of a flat surface and the spatiality of rooms. The difference between the media poetics of inscription technologies and the ambient poetics of the room is that the latter includes jumps across different spatial planes or different material media that become possible in the larger network. Such jumps will actualize a particular infrastructure and create new relations that point out into the wider ecology. The collaborative poetics comes in when we zoom in on these jumps and start to speculate about how the concrete relations are motivated and instigated and how agency is established to certain actors. As mentioned, I have been inspired by the “connective” qualities of Stein’s most open and experimental writing as conceived by Juliana Spahr. Referring to the close connection between literacy and subjectivity also implied in Friedrich Kittler’s description of the discourse network of 1800, Spahr posits the multivalence of Stein’s language in an “urban polyglot context” tying it to Stein’s own immigrant experience, and allowing it to function as an encouragement to “dynamic participation” towards her readers (Spahr 2001: 6). Also drawing on what Marjorie Perloff has called Stein’s “poetics of indeterminacy,” Spahr writes:

Her polylingual grammar allows readers to connect with multiple meanings and thus recognize multiple strategies of response. Stein’s works allow a decentralized self-governance and autonomy on the part of the reader by giving the reading act as much authority as the authoring act (Spahr 2001: 47).

This fundamental establishment of a collaborative situation in reading Stein, and its immediate coupling to the construction of possible subject positions, or, with Guattari, the production of subjectivity, is a crucial component in understanding Stein’s collaborative poetics.

Further, the ecology of interconnectivity in Stein’s collaborative poetics is held together by the ambient and affective relationships that are molded in each collaboration. There is an affective effect in the poetics of Stein that comes with “enduring,” as Stein scholar Astrid Lorange has put it. I will revisit Lorange’s description in chapters one and two, but to briefly sum up her argument, she holds that when we are reading Stein’s most opaque writing, the time that passes as we are in this space created by reading together with Stein’s words has the effect of creating affective connections between us as readers and Stein’s words. The crucial importance of this enduring co-presence of speaker and listener, or writer and reader, is also something Stein herself has approached again and
again, for example with her idea that the writer has to be “at the same time talking and listening” (LIA 290). Its effect is closely related to Morton’s claim of “contact” becoming “content,” and so a connection between affect and ambience is established.

As suggested in the brief reading of Bernard Heidsieck’s “Gertrude Stein,” a drift takes place from affect to ambience and back, and ambient poetics will in this manner work almost like a bridge between feelings and media concretism. When British philosopher Sara Ahmed speaks in her work on affect theory about the “stickiness” of affects and emotions, she is addressing the active dynamics behind this poetics. As Ahmed also develops, the temporality of these processes can be fairly complex, and “take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present” (Ahmed 2014: 44, italics in original).

In the upcoming section, I will conduct a brief discussion of various key positions in the corpus of affect theory that Ahmed builds on in relation to issues of affects, emotions and identification that will be actualized repeatedly in the following chapters. At present, it suffices to stress that in Ahmed’s definition it is crucial to comprehend emotions not as psychic entities that are internal to psychological subjects and demand expression, but as relational entities that are always already going on between agents, whether human or non-human. Hence, affectivity is ambient in the sense that it is going on in an open space between agents. From this relationality springs the crucial, often temporally complex effects of Ahmed’s emotions:

Psychoanalysis allows us to see that emotionality involves movements or associations whereby “feelings” take us across different levels of signification, not all of which can be admitted in the present. This is what I would call the rippling effect of emotions; they move sideways (through “sticky” associations between signs, figures, and objects) as well as backwards (repression always leaves its trace in the present—hence “what sticks” is also bound up with the “absent presence” of historicity) (Ahmed 2014: 44-45).

It is central to my purpose to get a precise account of the stickiness and its ability to work according to non-chronological patterns and deferred temporal order as is the case in the temporally dispersed reception of Gertrude Stein. Collaborative poetics thus describes the process where an affective relation and exchange is established between the reader and the implicit author that becomes a generative and productive force, for instance in the friendship bonds that Stein institutes through her writing of portraits, her use of insistence and obscurity creating a space of mutual “endurance” as described by Lorange, or the confidentiality she creates when repeating emphatic questions like “do you see what I mean” as has been claimed by the poet and literary scholar Bob Perelman, and which I will address in chapter two (Perelman 1994). As this collaborative poetics intermingles with various media technologies, new temporalities and spatialities become available for a practice that is always distributed via a wider infrastructure that opens up towards a
complex media ecology including media and world. It is important to keep in mind that the affective relation implies an ambient relation because it accounts for the role of ambient poetics in reinstalling the affectively fueled processes of collaborative poetics into the concrete physical space in which the media poetics reverberates, and further into the materiality of the medium or the channel.

In *The Human Condition* (1958), German philosopher Hannah Arendt speaks of what she calls a space of appearance. It is a space that emerges between participants in a conversation or action by virtue of this mutual action:

> It is the space of appearance in the widest sense of the word, namely, the space where I appear to others as others appear to me, where men exist not merely like other living or inanimate things but make their appearance explicitly (Arendt 1998: 198f).

This space of exchange and collective appearance is defined by the very fact that an exchange takes place, that more than one agent enacts and is recognized in this action (“I appear to others as others appear to me”). I would suggest applying a similar idea in understanding the collaborative poetics of Gertrude Stein, where the reader is always forced to partake in the action of the words in order to read them.

Arendt stresses that the essentially political, public space of appearance can emerge wherever “men are together in the manner of speech and action” and will dissolve “with the disappearance of the activities themselves” (Arendt 1998: 199). Crucially, Arendt’s original space of appearance does not include technology; neither writing and reading nor the electric media of storage and transmission that from the late 19th century began to enable communication across large distances in space and time. When such factors are introduced into the space of appearance, different connections and segregations between participants are made possible. Arendt’s original concept is directed at a political space of action and conditioned upon the temporal as well as spatial co-presence of more than one human agent, and thus, to her, any technically mediated encounter is simply another matter. What Arendt, for obvious reasons, did not consider is how the space of appearance could relate to the technological options of our present day, where not just the telephone and electronic message services but also various online real-time forms of communication that can include image, sound and a collaborative space of interaction can take place.15 With so many possibilities for mediated encounters and for doing things together in real time without standing face to face it seems increasingly arbitrary to limit the space of appearance to the actual physical co-presence of human agents.

Such challenges to a conception of a ‘natural’ situation of communication are also investigated in many media artworks of later years, such as the work of Laurie Anderson...

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15 I am thinking, for instance, of multimodal chat services like *Snapchat* experimenting with augmented reality, apps and games working with collaboration between players, both in online virtual space and in an augmented experience, but also simple, real-time collaborative text-editors like *Piratepad* or *Google Drive.*
that I will return to in chapter five. Hence, adjusting Arendt’s ideas to contemporary technological conditions is an interesting challenge. What I am suggesting here, however, is in a sense more directly contrary to Arendt’s original idea, since reading and writing was certainly part of Arendt’s media horizon and she specifically chose to exclude such situations from her space of appearance. Accordingly, my attempt to think of the collaborative poetics of reading as co-creating in terms of the space of appearance must be considered experimental. However, Arendt’s idea adds crucial components to my understanding of the collaborative poiesis implied in this situation. To Arendt what is central in the space of appearance is the action, the fact that something is not just talked about, but is also being done as “men are together in the manner of speech and action.” This immediately aligns with my objective to challenge an understanding of literature as merely a corpus of text, and moves towards a more performative focus, where the concern is foremost with the effects of such a corpus when it meets the world in various ways, also in terms of the agency it secures for the actors in the collaboration.

Furthermore, as I stressed above, in order to understand the collaborative connections at play it is crucial to take into account affective relations of mutual recognition that resemble those stressed in Arendt’s space although they are emanating from a different physical situation. In a 1998 essay the poet Lyn Hejinian, whose work I will return to in greater detail in chapter two, has also brought Arendt’s space of appearance into a discussion of Stein’s poetics, specifically her Stanzas in Meditation. Hejinian describes the meditative present of the unplotted commonplace that Stein is establishing in this work as a text which “doesn’t express meaning in the ordinary sense of the term, as an independent feature that can be attributed to things” (Hejinian 2000: 364). Instead, the “meditation is not simply the response to meaning; rather, it is the articulation of being in meaning” (ibid. 365), that is, it is where things and meanings are coming into appearance together.

Thus, Stein’s meditative writing is a creation of such a stream of meaning, but not necessarily a steady stream. As Hejinian suggests, “it can be turbulent, especially when one is encountering the meaning and meaningfulness of other persons” (Hejinian 2000: 365). This turbulence when it comes to interpersonal relationships recalls the irregular, temporally deferred, affective connections that I am associating with Stein’s collaborative poetics. According to Hejinian, Stanzas’ composition (in the full, Steinian, sense of this world) is entirely submerged in the everyday, the ordinary, or the commonplace, which in her reading becomes literally the common place, or “the place where we know each other and know we are together” (Hejinian 2000: 365), as a perfect equivalent to Arendt’s space of appearance.

16 I am grateful to the performance lecture Kollektive læseformer (in Danish, translates as: “Collective forms of reading”) by Danish writers and artists Amalie Smith and Ida Marie Hede that took place in Aarhus in 2012 for providing a beautiful example of how a reflection on Arendt’s concepts can be brought into play in a technologically informed artistic practice. The event is documented in the book Kollektive læseformer.
But, whereas Arendt’s construction builds on the ancient Greek idea of the *polis*, the political, public space that implies a freedom of the mind because it is placed outside of the private sphere devoted to the fulfilment of basic human needs (shelter, food, rest and so on), Stein – in Hejinian’s reading – quite contrary to Arendt, “was not a political writer” but rather “an advocate of the household sphere” (ibid. 366). Repeatedly, all through Stein’s writing, it is the private space of the home and not the traditional public sphere that appears like such a space independent of necessities in which a freedom of the mind can occur. And accordingly, the political public sphere of the Greek *polis* often becomes an unfree space dominated by battles of power and identity and the desire for recognition. To Hejinian, Stein’s open-ended writing then offers its readers an alternative, improvisational space of appearance that is situated well outside of this public sphere.

However, I would want to add to this, that such a clear dichotomy between a private and a public sphere is difficult to maintain in Stein’s case, not least because she deliberately turned her private sphere into the semi-public sphere of the salon. The salon was a space that both enabled the production of her meditative writing and provided alternative infrastructures for its distribution as it was brought into contact with other arts and practices and other people were invited to collaboratively engage with it. Thus, if reading the collaborative poetry of Stein, in the first instance seems unpolitical and confined to the meditative, closed space of the *stanzas* (which is, suitably, Italian for *rooms*), then, as will be developed in the course of the following chapters, Stein’s meditative work enters a public space in new ways as it encourages collaborations and engages in a *poiesis* that takes it into new socio-political contexts. In the last published part of her very Steinian poetic autobiography, *My Life in the Nineties*, which I will return to in chapter two, in the section appropriately titled “Along comes something, launched in context” Hejinian declares “A space of appearance, a space of dilemma” (Hejinian 2003: 67), and this sentence makes an appropriate headline for the complexity of the collaborative space of appearance, as I am conceiving of it in Stein’s poetics.

Consequently, in this study, the primary interest in Stein’s work takes the shape of an interest in the future collaborations it encourages. If Arendt insists on the co-presence of more than one human agent in her space of appearance, then for my current purposes it may be appropriate to further challenge her idea of what an agent could be in the light of later streams of thought like the actor-network theory (ANT) in social theory as developed by Bruno Latour and others, as well as object-oriented ontology and vital materialism. As Levi Bryant writes, if one naïvely considers the world as exclusively “composed of physical things such as trees, rocks, planets, stars, wombats, and automobiles,” then it follows that “thought and concepts only exist in brains, on paper, and in computer data banks, and that ideas can only be transmitted through physical media such as fiber optic cables, smoke signals, oxygen-rich atmospheres, and so on” (Bryant 2007: 6). If this perspective, which agrees with Peters’ relational concept of medium, is allowed to inform Arendt’s thought, then one is forced to consider the possibility of including non-human agents such as...
as printed books or archival artifacts in the space of appearance, as no exchange, not even one between human agents standing face to face, can take place without the presence of physical media, whether the medium in question is a piece of paper covered with printed marks or an oxygen-rich atmosphere. If this is the case, then the technologically mediated and spatially and temporally dispersed collaborations that I am considering can indeed be taken into account. Along these lines, I would suggest that my twisting of Arendt’s original idea of a “space of appearance” is justified by arguments similar to those I have suggested elsewhere in a critique of German performance scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte’s performative feedback loop as being too narrowly tied down to a media specific situation of live performance dependent on the physical co-presence of performers and audience that is in effect not at all necessary for the feedback loop to function (Daugaard 2016; see also brief discussion in chapter one).

Like Arendt’s space of appearance, the collaborative space that comes with reading collaborative poetry is temporary and elusive, but due to the media technologies of literature it also has a different temporal and spatial structure than Arendt’s spaces of mutual deed and word. The collaborative poetics of Stein in the media ecology of literature has a potential to create spaces of appearance that entail social formations not depending on the physical and temporal proximity of the participants, and the altered character of the technological mediation helps to distribute these communities further (and in new ways) in time and space. As we shall see, the collaborative communities thus established are also active in shaping the subject positions of their human participants. I will develop examples of such temporally dispersed communities in all the following chapters. In chapter one, the poetics of Gertrude Stein is taken up by artists eager to break with the version of modernism that was becoming canonized and by the 1960s starting to appear stale. Chapter two will discuss the temporally dispersed relations of friendship between Stein and the community of language poets, and in chapter three I will look at the unlikely community established by the fluctuation of identification and disidentification between Stein and Harryette Mullen. As the material constitution of these spaces is from the very start an assemblage of human and non-human agents, it will also address fundamental issues of hominization and move beyond communities consisting strictly of human agents as I will address in chapter four. As chapter five will develop, the space of appearance can also be active in the appropriation of Stein as an iconic figure without necessarily proceeding from her writings, departing instead from her gender performance, her queer charisma, her artist persona and the way it negotiates affective communication.
Affects and emotions

In his 1648 *Ethics*, Baruch Spinoza first used the concept of affect as referring to the states of mind and body that arise from confrontation with factors coming from the outside and providing a degree of unconscious and “confused” influence upon our perception of the world, and hence, our actions in the world (Spinoza 2001). Spinoza’s work was among the most permanent influences upon the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, whose theoretical framework has been important for the molding of my own approach to thinking about literature in general and Gertrude Stein’s writings in particular (Daugaard 2006; 2012), even if it is not in the foreground of the present study. Deleuze elaborated on the concept of affect in both of his books on Spinoza and it also appears in the collaboratorive works he did with Félix Guattari.17 Mainly inspired by its occurrences in *A Thousand Plateaus* ([1980] 1987), it has been developed further in the corpus of so-called affect theory in its Deleuzian conception, most centrally by Brian Massumi, but also in the work of Elizabeth Grosz, Rosi Braidotti, and others.

Another foundational text in affect theory is Raymond William’s (already evoked) essay “Structures of Feeling” (Williams 1977), in which Williams attempts to incorporate a structure of emotions within a Marxist critique of a capitalist framework to account for changes, for instance in art and literature, not immediately reducible to changes in society’s economic organization or the institutions of labor and production. One question that seems to draw a significant divide among theorists in the field is the definition of the concept of affect and whether or not one attaches special weight to a division between affect and emotion. The school of affect theory as shaped by Massumi and others, derive their concept of affect from Deleuze and Guattari, and stress strongly that affects, in contrast to affections (what in conventional speech would be called sentiments, emotions or feelings), are entirely independent from their subjects. Consequently, an affect to Massumi is not an emotion. An affect is something prior to an emotion and it is significantly not tied to a specific subject, but cut loose from subjectivity or (oedipal) psychology. Via examples from children’s cartoons to the rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, Massumi claims af-

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17 The terminology around affects evolves through Deleuze’s writings, but he generally upholds the emphasis on distinguishing between Spinoza’s two latin terms affectio and affectus (that are sometimes both translated into the same word “affection”) as referring to, respectively, conceptualized “affections” (affectio) and not conceptualized “affects” (affectius) that also becomes crucial to the string of affect theory derived from his thinking. In *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza* [1968] (2005) Deleuze states: “A mode thus has affections of two sorts: states of a body or ideas that indicate these states, and changes in the body or ideas indicating these changes.” Deleuze 2005: 220). In a 1978 lecture the short version of the term “affect” is defined as referring to the nonconceptual form: an affect is “any mode of thought which does not represent anything” (Deleuze 1978). This is the form picked up in Deleuze and Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus*. In Deleuze and Guattari’s later collaboration *What is philosophy?* (French 1991; English 1994) the evolution of the affect becomes somewhat more complex as it is paired with “percept” and together the two are established as foundational compositional units of artworks. This last, more specific elaboration of the concept of affect is not relevant to affect theory as I will be using it in the following, where affect will refer to an impression or emotion affecting subjectivation.
fectivity in this non-verbalized form as an increasingly influential quality in late capitalist society (Massumi 2002). Another scholar working in this vein, Steven Shaviro, suggests in his book *Post-Cinematic Affect* (Shaviro 2010) that our emotions and our perceptions are driven by and drenched in affect, a phenomenon preceding the distinction between the physical and the mental. Shaviro thus claims that emotions are attached to subjects whereas affects are pre-individual, they are transpersonal before they become personal, and here he paraphrases Massumi:

I follow Brian Massumi (2002, 23-45) in differentiating between affect and emotion. For Massumi, affect is primary, non-conscious, asubjective or presubjective, asignifying, unqualified, and intensive; while emotion is derivative, conscious, qualified, and meaningful, a “content” that can be attributed to an already-constituted subject (Shaviro 2010: 9).

In this sense, an emotion can be described as an instrumentalization, or, to speak with Deleuze and Guattari, a reterritorialization, of an affect: “Emotion is affect captured by a subject” (Shaviro 2010: 9), and hence it has also been drawn into discourse and can be reterritorialized by power. To Shaviro, then, drawing on Massumi, emotion is what allows the affect to be commodified, sold, capitalized. According to this temptingly clear distinction, affects are autonomous free-floating streams of intensity that cannot be tied down – their movement cannot be brought to a complete stop. In this approach, a significant political or oppositional potential is attributed to affects. As they escape discursive control they can function as ways of opposing dominant discourses of power.

As I will develop in chapter two, this logic is compatible with the radical poetics formulated by some of Stein’s posthumous collaborators in the language poetry communities of the 1970s and the 1980s. The conviction that art and language contain a political, counter-cultural gesture if they are able to somehow escape an interpretative paradigm (or discursive control) by fronting the palpable, sensual qualities of the medium, has endured in this community of poets. This is an important reason why it has also become influential to many readings, poetic as well as academic, of Gertrude Stein’s work that have followed on from the language poets’ engagement with her. To a wide extent this perspective on affectivity makes sense in regard to Stein’s writing, whose poetic indeed shares its fundamental sense of mobility with this approach.

However, another vein of research represented by scholars like the aforementioned Sara Ahmed and American philosopher, feminist and cultural theorist Sianne Ngai has tended towards letting go of the strict divide between affect and emotion, in part due to a difficulty in maintaining it consistently and in part due to a shift of focus, not to the nature of the affect itself as much as to the effects of the affects, therefore not asking so eagerly ‘What is an affect/emotion?’ but rather ‘What does this affect/emotion do?’ In regard to the first reason, these scholars ask questions such as ‘When is an affective intensity an emotion and when is it not an emotion, how can one tell?’
The difference between affect and emotion is taken as a modal difference of intensity or degree, rather than a formal difference of quality or kind. My assumption is that affects are less formed and structured than emotions, but not lacking form or structure altogether; less “socio-linguistically fixed,” but by no means code-free or meaningless; less “organized in response to our interpretations of situations,” but by no means entirely devoid of organization or diagnostic powers. As suggested above, ambient affects may in fact be better suited to interpreting ongoing states of affairs. What the switch from formal to modal difference enables is an analysis of the transitions from one pole to the other: the passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions, and emotions conversely denature into affects (Ngai 2005: 27).

Like Ngai, I want to maintain a pragmatic approach towards Massumi’s divide between affect and emotion. Even if the division appears crucial to Massumi, I am not persuaded that Ahmed’s and Ngai’s toning it down in practice has serious disqualifying consequences for Massumi’s important work on affectivity. Accordingly, the insights that Massumi’s work provides in regard to the nature and effect of affects are generally applicable to many of my discussions.

Ngai’s idea that the difference between affect and emotion is of a more modal than essential character agrees well with my purposes, especially in chapters two and three where I address how affective relations that are in alignment with poetic and social communities determine otherwise surprisingly personal reactions of the poets collaborating with Stein, especially when it comes to more or less unpleasant aspects of Stein’s poetics and her politics. As will become clear in these chapters, the ability to explore gradual transitions and passages between affectivity and emotion is useful in order to conceptualize these cases.

In my discussion of the functionalities of Stein’s collaborative poetics, I touched upon Sara Ahmed’s conceptualization of the effects of emotions or affective economies, which addresses a second reason for toning down the divide between affects and emotion. Ahmed describes the affective relationships in a society in terms of economy: “emotions work as a form of capital: affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation” (Ahmed 2004, 120). This will also be crucial for my discussion of some of the undesired consequences that the affective and emotional relations between Stein and her collaborators produce.

In […] affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective. In
particular, I will show how emotions work by sticking figures together (adherence), a sticking that creates the very effect of a collective (coherence) […] My economic model of emotions suggests that while emotions do not positively reside in a subject or figure, they still work to bind subjects together. Indeed, to put it more strongly, the nonresidence of emotions is what makes them “binding” (Ahmed 2004: 119).

Emotions, in a traditional psychoanalytical approach – as in the common sense of daily language – are considered expressive. They are something that is inside a person and must come out, be expressed. But, contrary to this, to Sara Ahmed “emotions are not ‘after-thoughts’, but shape how bodies are moved by the worlds they inhabit” (Ahmed 2010: 230). In her approach, Ahmed tends to treat both affect and emotion as always already relational. Accordingly, she would extend Massumi’s and Shaviro’s claim in regard to the affects, that they are transpersonal before they become personal, to also include emotions. To Ahmed, neither emotions nor affects are inside a person, but are already out there in the social space – between people and other phenomena of this world. Accordingly, they occur in assemblages and they affect these assemblages, or they distribute the intensities in these assemblages.

But contrary to Massumi and Shaviro, she does not connect any utopian aspirations to this quality in itself. In her book The Promise of Happiness (2010), Ahmed phrases the difference as tied to the “binding” effect of affects as well as emotions:

My argument that affect is a form of stickiness contrasts with Brian Massumi’s work, which suggests that affects are autonomous and distinct from emotions. For Massumi emotion is “qualified intensity” or “a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of experience which is from that point onward defined as personal” while affects are “intensity” that is unqualified and beyond narrative (Ahmed 2010: 230).

As suggested, it is Ahmed’s very manageable conceptualization of the stickiness of affects and emotions that is my crucial motivation for adapting the modifications to Massumian affect theory that she suggests, since this has proven useful for conceptualizing the affective dimensions of some of the temporally dispersed collaborations I will be looking at.

In Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting (2012), Sianne Ngai focuses on the title’s three so-called minor aesthetic categories – as opposed to major ones such as the beautiful and the sublime – all of which are approached in her study, as “subjective, feeling based judgements, as well as objective or formal styles” (Ngai 2012: 29). As I will return to, Ngai’s overall approach to art objects and commodities on the one hand, and

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18 See for instance “Affective Economies” (Ahmed 2004) where Ahmed analyzes the affective logic of the racist website “Aryan Nations” that builds its community upon a collective feeling of hate, which follows patterns resembling the transpersonalized patterns of affectivity described by Massumi and Shaviro.
their reception on the other, as being transgressed by the same aesthetic categories and therefore in equal measure object for aesthetic scrutiny, agrees well with my conception of Stein’s work and its reception as part of an interconnected media ecology that needs to be taken into consideration in its complexity. As subjective judgements Ngai’s categories are conceptualized by a continuum of affects and emotions. Two of them, the zany, and especially the cute – which she explicitly associates with Gertrude Stein’s poetry – have proven useful for my understanding of the aesthetic and affective relations operating in the media ecologies of Stein’s reception.

Ngai describes the zany as “an aesthetic about performing as not just artful play but affective labor” (ibid. 2) that comes to “trouble the distinction between work and play” (ibid. 7), and this category will be applied in chapter five to the reception of Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas’ performance as a queer celebrity couple. The cute, “an aesthetic disclosing a surprisingly wide spectrum of feelings ranging from tenderness to aggression, that we harbor toward ostensibly subordinate and unthreatening commodities” (ibid. 2), elucidates several instances in the collaborative reception of Stein as it is often strikingly precise in conceptualizing some of the attractions and “sticky” effects at play in the collaborative communities that are established between Stein and later artist and poets, because it accounts for both the tendency to identify with its object and imitate it, and the hostility that can potentially be awakened by the same object.

What remains is conceiving of the space in which such affective reactions are embedded: “Is there anyone who has not, at least once, walked into a room and ‘felt the atmosphere’?” Teresa Brennan asks in the opening of her book *The Transmission of Affect*, hence tying affect once again to the ambience in a room (Brennan 2004: 1). Brennan focuses on the transmission of affect between human subjects interacting in a spatial environment based on clinical observations informed by neuroscience as well as the history and philosophy of affects, but also suggests that

once the physical and organic levels are taken into account, one can begin to appreciate that other environmental factors are at work in the transmission of energy and affect. Visitors to New York City or Delphi testify happily to the energy that comes out of the pavement in the one and the ancient peace of the other (Brennan 2004: 8).

In this manner, Brennan establishes both the spatial factor of the transmission of affects and its potentially complex temporality, such as the sedimentation of ancient energies into the walls of the temple of Delphi. Unlike Brennan, my primary interest is in the relations in the media ecology and not primarily in studying the subjectivity and emotions of the specific subjects operating within it. Therefore, the slide that repeatedly happens in the considered material from a media poetics of the material base (such as the page) and an ambient poetics of the space in which it reverberates towards the affective relations it feeds, and that in turn instigate the collaborative engagement, also always entails
a reverse slide. The affectively instituted connection (which, as we shall see, can take the shape of a temporally dispersed community) that via an ambient poetics engages the agents, Stein and Bernard Heidsieck, for instance, in a space of appearance, will always be traced back to the physical manifestation of this concrete artistic collaboration that in turn inscribes itself in a new media poetics of the concrete physical medium utilized in this collaboration.

Identification and disidentification

Even though my scope is that of the media ecology, and the tracing of relations within it, it is obvious that questions of identification will come up in a study dealing with artists engaging collaboratively with the work of a long-since deceased avant-garde writer. In addition to the corpus of affect theory described above, in addressing such questions I will resort to Cuban-American performance and queer studies scholar José Esteban Muñoz’s concepts of identification, and what he calls disidentification, as these are helpful for understanding the relationship between Stein and her collaborators and can even conceptualize Stein’s own public identity performance as a female, queer version of the autonomous male genius. Muñoz is studying identity formation within late capitalism, and initially establishes that neither an approach of pure “essentialism” nor one of pure “social constructivism” will apply. Instead he regards identity as “produced at the point of contact between essential understandings of self […] and socially constructed narratives of self” (Muñoz 1999: 6). His focus is on identity formation of minoritarian subjects, and he holds that “the fiction of identity is one that is accessed with relative ease by most majoritarian subjects” (ibid. 5), whereas subjects that in one way or another diverge from the fixed positions in normative discourse will have their identities formed in response to such cultural logics as “heteronormativity, white supremacy and misogyny” (ibid. 5).

In defining the concept of disidentification, Muñoz builds on the work of the French linguist Michel Pêcheux, who departed from Louis Althusser’s theory of subject formation and interpellation, according to which subjects are instituted as they are called out, or “hailed” by ideology, and focuses on the way that “identities-in-difference emerge from a failed interpellation within the dominant public sphere” (ibid. 7). Pêcheux identifies three modes of subject construction within the Althussarian framework. In the first, a “Good Subject” chooses a path of identification with discursive and ideological forms”. The opposite position is that of the “Bad Subject,” who will “resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel or ‘counteridentify’ and turn against this symbolic system” (ibid. 11). However, this position includes the risk of validating “the dominant ideology by reinforcing its dominance through the controlled symmetry of counterdetermination” (ibid. 11). That is, the risk of being just as defined by the ideological position it is trying to reject, albeit negatively so.
But what is of particular interest to Muñoz, as well as to this study, is the third option mentioned by Pêcheux:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this “working on and against” is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local everyday struggles to resistance (Muñoz 1999: 11-12).

Muñoz adapts this framework to his material of artists and performers subjected to intersectional marginalization. An artist being for instance both queer and racialized within a framework where both are marginalized will experience convergences between black and feminist critical issues. Disidentification accordingly becomes a complex process that is able to negotiate several discursive systems and stereotypes, and overall is “descriptive of the survival strategies the minority subject practices in order to negotiate a phobic majoritarian public sphere that continuously elides and punishes the existence of subjects who do not conform to the phantasm of normative citizenship” (ibid. 4).

As several scholars have pointed out, Stein’s identity performance, from her choice of words to her style of dress, intercepts codes from the patriarchal discourse on male literary genius and reshapes them in a mutated, queered version (Will 2000, Bay-Cheng 2004). Also, Stein and Toklas’s performance as a queer couple, both inside and outside of Stein’s writings, questions traditional positions of masculinity and femininity and produces embodiments that, in Stein’s case, are bordering on contemporary categories of transgender or transmasculinity (Coffman 2017), as well as producing public images of gay sexuality in a time when this was practically unheard of (Solomon 2017). As such, Stein’s simultaneous embracing and queering of the discourse of genius is a strategy of disidentification, of simultaneously working “on and against dominant ideology.” As will be discussed in further detail in following chapters, for Stein this strategy constituted the available path to becoming the important writer she aspired to be in a literary infrastructure that had no place for a female, Jewish, lesbian “genius.” As Muñoz claims, such public performances of disidentification “offer the minoritarian subject a space to situate itself in history and thus seize social agency” (Muñoz 1999: 2) and as I will discuss, especially in chapter five, Stein’s public performance of queer identity has in turn influenced the infrastructure of public agency available for gays and lesbians in America today.

If we turn to the reception, gestures of identification and disidentification occur as later writers and artists naturally find themselves under bodily circumstances and in so-
ciocultural historical situations that both correspond to and differ from Stein’s. Frequently, instances of identification will be parts of the collaborative process. For example, the responses to Stein’s “cuteness,” as described by Sianne Ngai, often imply such instances that can be transient and are not always decisive for understanding the collaborations in question. Yet in other cases, the fluctuation between identification and disidentification with Stein as a writer, as a historical person, and as an iconized public figure is a crucial component in the collaboration.

In framing the potential complexity of the processes of disidentification, Muñoz imagines the example of a young woman, a “queer revolutionary from the Antilles,” reading the indispensable anticolonial thinker Franz Fanon, who has both homophobic and misogynist moments. To her, a disidentification with Fanon would be a way of “reformatting” him for her own thinking:

Disidentification offers a Fanon, for that queer and lesbian reader, who would not be sanitized; instead, his homophobia and misogyny would be interrogated while his anticolonial discourse was engaged as a still valuable yet mediated identification. This maneuver resists an unproductive turn toward good dog/bad dog criticism and instead leads to an identification that is both mediated and immediate, a disidentification that enables politics” (ibid. 9).

As I will develop in further detail, particularly in chapter three where I read the collaborative engagements with Stein by African-American poet Harryette Mullen, this strategy of disidentification can prove very powerful for realizing the collaborative potential in Stein’s poetics. Mullen approaches Stein’s work via strategies of disidentification and appropriation, releasing both the political and the conflictual potential in collaboration, especially when it stretches across nearly a century and involves agents with very different life conditions and sets of beliefs that to a certain degree negate each other. Where Stein’s language has instances that directly negate the possibility of a black reader, Mullen’s talks back to this language, not by “sanitizing” it, but as Muñoz has it, by working “on and against” it.

Finally, Muñoz’s concept addresses the topic for this study on a metalevel, as he frames disidentification, not just as a process of adjusting subjectivity, but also a productive process, as he writes: “Disidentification can be understood as a way of shuffling back and forth between reception and production” (ibid. 25). Like the performances of disidentification that Muñoz studies, the collaborations with Stein that I look at are such shuffling processes of reception and production.
What is a media ecology?

Before proceeding to uncover and trace some of the Steinian communities distributed across the latter half of the 20th century and into the 21st, a discussion of the principal concept of media ecology is required as it accounts for important aspects of the foundation of both theory and method of this study. Media ecology is a concept often affiliated with Canadian media philosophy, more specifically the so-called Toronto School of Communication initiated in the early 1950s and counting famous representatives such as Eric Havelock, Marshall McLuhan, Harold Innis, and Neil Postman as well as prominent associates in American academia like Walter Ong, Elisabeth Eisenstein and Lewis Mumford. The history of the term itself is a little foggy, but its introduction into public discourse is generally, especially in accounts by the academic offspring of the Toronto School, attributed to Neil Postman at a conference in 1968, where he defined it as “the study of media as environments” (Cali 2017: 9). However, Postman repeatedly attributed the actual coining of the compound “media ecology” to McLuhan in a personal communication between the two.

The general definitions of media ecology are pretty uniform, if one sticks with the representatives of the Toronto School. The discipline or mode of thought referred to as media ecology applies to thinking about media not in terms of their qualities as isolated technical artifacts, but in terms of their connectedness to their surroundings, and centered upon the human agents in these surroundings. The relevance of the concept to a study of the collaborative reception of Gertrude Stein should appear straightforward in a definition like Dennis Cali’s:

Media ecology, then, is the study of the interrelationship of people, media, culture, and consciousness, and of the changes that occur among them, and of their symbolic alteration of human environments. It attends especially to changes within and among these elements that touch off changes in the larger ecology (Cali 2017: 9).

Looking at the artistic reception of Gertrude Stein’s work across different cultural spheres and different media is essentially a project that seeks to reconfigure audience, artist and artwork as parts of an assemblage, which affects both perception and embodiment at several points in a highly complex media ecology of interrelations between mutually disparate parts as suggested by Cali. As Sianne Ngai has stressed when considering artworks and cultural products in late modernity, sustained attention towards both the level of production, circulation and consumption in regard to the studied cultural artifact or practice is crucial (Ngai 2012). This seems to an increasing degree to be the case for the materially diverse corpus of this study that depends on collaborative processes that are dispersed in

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19 See the website of The Media Ecology Association <http://www.media-ecology.org/> The anecdote of McLuhan coining the term in oral conversation is also recounted by Cali 2017; Fuller 2005 and others.
time and space and thus become distributed across different agents as well as different media and environments. The idea of a media ecological network seems to me more able to contain and connect all the levels addressed by Ngai than alternative approaches.

In particular, a range of literary theory and approaches to aesthetics based in either hermeneutics or formalism will pay partial or no attention to the sphere of circulation. Here, the focus is on either the formal or semantic features of the work in question, on the intentionality, psychology or creative process of its author, or, in the case of reception aesthetics and reader oriented hermeneutics, on the reader’s reconstruction of the work in the act of reading. But in much rarer cases, the focus will be on technologies or practices of distribution that in practice carry out the crucial connections between artist, artwork and audience. This, again, reminds us of Peters’ call for an infrastructuralism – circulation, essentially, is dependent on the infrastructure – and suggests how relevant this call appears to be for the present study. It is exactly in terms of its delayed and deferred dissemination through artistic collaborations rather than through regular hermeneutic reading progressing towards canonization or institutionalization that Stein’s work establishes its unique status as an enlightening precedent to present day media ecologies of literature.

As mentioned above, the circulation of Stein’s experimental writing is an interesting issue. Tender Buttons (1914), her only book published in America for years, was printed in only one thousand copies, and yet, people in very wide circles knew this work. This knowledge, as I will develop in further detail in chapter three, was circulated, not primarily through the printed book, but through a growing and swiftly changing media ecology of literature, that can be exemplified by, but not reduced to, newspaper literary columns and supplements and radio talk shows. Arguably, the level of circulation or distribution is also one that has gained new meaning and significance in a post-digital situation of networked art and media. This condition will be approached in more detail in chapters to come, for instance in chapter three’s discussion of the postproductive paradigm suggested by French art historian Nicholas Bourriaud. As conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith has said, “the new artistic paradigm is distribution” (Quoted in Voyce 2011: 407).

**Media as environments**

It is no coincidence that the contemporary representatives of the concept of media ecology in its Toronto variant tend to maintain that the term originates in Marshall McLuhan’s work even if direct evidence to support it seems hard to come by. A colorful and flamboyant personality, as well as an original and productive thinker, McLuhan is often referred to as the world’s first media theorist, and is, not unlike Stein, widely known both inside and outside academia for strong one-liners like “the medium is the message” and “the global village.” McLuhan had his finger on the pulse of the transmedia and intermedia
movements that were flourishing in the art scene of the 1960s, as indicated by the fact that Fluxus artist and publisher Dick Higgins published McLuhan’s essay *Verbi-voco-visual Explorations* as a small booklet on his Something Else Press in 1967. As will be clear from the account of Higgins’ ideas and publishing practice in chapter one, McLuhan’s notion of the verbi-vocal-visual fitted Higgins’ own idea of intermedia perfectly. Artists like John Cage and Andy Warhol have both referred to McLuhan when discussing their own work and the state of society in general.20 McLuhan’s statements about the significance of technology and media for the conception of the general conditions of the early information age resonated strongly with the avant-garde circles of the 1960s that are at the center of the next chapter, as did his conception of that age as a post-literate era, where the effects of new mass media like radio and TV on the psychic formation of human beings were beginning to be felt.

Another famous proclamation of McLuhan’s, that media are “the extensions of man,” appears as the subtitle of his most well-known work, *Understanding Media* (1964), and already suggests the contextual approach to media that is implied in the idea of media ecology. But it also cements the position of the human agent at the center of the study of media. According to McLuhan, the primary meaning or effect of “any medium or technology, is the change of scale or pace or pattern that it introduces into human affairs” (McLuhan 1964: 8). Thus, in *The Gutenberg Galaxy* (1962), from the vantage point of the dawning information age or “electrical age” in his own terms, McLuhan addressed how the particular scale or pattern of print was introduced into human affairs and how it profoundly shaped and affected European culture for 600 years.

If McLuhan’s catchy concepts are among the most widely popularized in the field, research along these lines is of course not exclusive to McLuhan or his associates, but constitutes an abundant domain marked by significant contributions from Innis, Ong, Kittler, N. Katharine Hayles and many others. As German media philosopher Sybille Krämer has put it, “alphabetic writing” in this tradition is conceived “as western civilization’s best route to reflexive modernity” and thus writing is “promoted as the cultural technique that enabled reason, enlightenment, science, art and democracy” (Krämer 2006: 2). Major importance is, accordingly, attributed to the various technologies of alphabetic writing, from handwriting and the invention of the bound codex via the printing press to the typewriter and, later, the personal computer.

The degree of technological determinism implied by this analysis was much debated in the 1960s. Not least, this discussion was vivid in non-academic circles where the ideas of McLuhan were also disseminated, in relation to the theorizing of the media situation of late modernity, post-Gutenberg. In such discussions, a darker tone often arises – what Matthew Fuller has called a “spiritually troubled technological determinism” (Fuller 2005: 3) – where comparisons between the early information age and the reflexive

20 For instance, Cage refers repeatedly to McLuhan in the interview book *Conversing with Cage* (Kostelanetz 2003). Warhol is quoted as calling McLuhan his “honorary muse”, according to the blog *McLuhan Galaxy* 2011.
modernity of alphabetization points to many concerns, the most troubling being the seeming lack of human agency in the age of mass media. This dystopic note on technological determinism that can be detected in many broader debates on mass media in the 1960s comes to dominate increasingly in a number of later writings on media ecology produced in the wake of the Toronto School, especially writings by Neil Postman like *Amusing Ourselves to Death* (1985) and *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology* (1992).

If McLuhan is often criticized for being inconsistent and excessively emphatic, and sometimes dramatic in regard to future prospects, he is consistent in insisting on seeing technical media as connecting and extending devices that work upon and change their surroundings. This fundamental insight about the importance of the current media in the determination of a current situation is acknowledged by media theorists from Friedrich Kittler to John Durham Peters, and the suggestive and dramatic language used by McLuhan in his writings without doubt plays a part in the constant reoccurrence of his writings in contemporary media theory, whenever a contextual approach to media is being suggested.

**Cybernetics and the three ecologies**

Not departing from McLuhan and his associates, but from Gregory Bateson, a 1960s theorist of networks and ecologies coming from the empirical and social sciences, Félix Guattari has articulated his theory of three ecologies: a mental ecology, a social ecology and an environmental ecology, that address in turn the human body and subjectivity, social relations and the physical environment, all three connected to the others. (Guattari 2014).

Now more than ever, nature cannot be separated from culture; in order to comprehend the interactions between ecosystems, the mecanosphere and the social and individual Universes of reference, we must learn to think transversally (Guattari 2014: 28).

What I want to emphasize by looking at media as ecologies is this transversality offered by Guattari. Through the transversal jumps, the three ecological orders are repeatedly intertwined and they also frame how connections are made in a spatial milieu between the objects of art and literature and other human as well as non-human agents that are actualized in the collaborative situation.

So, even if he is not specifically a media theorist, Gregory Bateson is a more profound source for the extended use of the term ecology in the way that I will be using it, than is McLuhan. Bateson uses the term specifically to address the interrelations of mind and matter in his studies in numerous fields of the social and natural sciences such as anthropology, evolitional biology and psychology, as well as the humanity disciplines of
linguistics, semiotics and cybernetics. Bateson’s profound influence on later cybernetics and media theory as well as Félix Guattari’s general philosophy also provides an alternative genealogy for the use of “ecology” in compound with “media”.

In spite of the fact that Postman attributes the coining of the expression “media ecology” to McLuhan, McLuhan in his own writings rarely uses the word “ecology” and not once in direct compound with media, although he does suggest looking at media as environments. One of the earliest explicit exclamations on this subject is the following from 1967, which is not found in Marshall McLuhan’s own writings, but recalled and quoted by his son Eric McLuhan: “It is now perfectly plain to me that all media are environments. As environments, all media have all the effects that geographers and biologists have associated with the environments of the past. Environments shape their occupants.” (Quoted in Cali 2017: 621).

To my approach, however, the difference between environment and ecology is not merely a consequential matter of terminology. To McLuhan, an “environment” implies a human figure that is conceived in the center of this environment, even if he also uses the term “milieu” as an alternative to environment, in this way indicating that the human figure in the middle (French “milieu”) is always already entangled with the media environment (milieu) and suggesting a relationality resembling that proposed by Peters when stressing that, per definition, the “media are in the middle.” As Timothy Morton has argued in detail in Ecology Without Nature, the concept of environment, much like synonyms such as background or surroundings, conceptually implies a figure that constitutes the center of this environment and with which it has to achieve an equilibrium, which is why Morton discards this terminology in his attempt to establish a less anthropocentric concept of ecology, by exorcising from it the romantic idea of “nature.” Morton’s implications of the term environment are also relevant to McLuhan, as even his catchphrase that media are “the extensions of man” reveals. Man is still indisputably positioned at the center of McLuhan’s universe.

According to Matthew Fuller, the term “media ecology” in the McLuhan-Postman tradition is essentially used to describe “a kind of environmentalism: using a study of media to sustain a relatively stable notion of human culture” (Fuller 2005: 3), and thus, the “spiritually troubled” stream in it is a sign of it not adapting a thoroughly ecological, or in the words of N. Katherine Hayles, “posthuman” perspective:

In the posthuman view, conscious agency has never been ‘in control.’ In fact, the very illusion of control bespeaks a fundamental ignorance about the fundamental nature of the emergent processes through which consciousness, the organism and the environment are constituted. Mastery through the exercise of the autonomous will is merely the story consciousness tells itself to explain results that actually come about.

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21 The quote is from Eric McLuhan’s article “Marshall McLuhan’s Theory of Communication: The Yegg” (2008), but Cali’s reference is imprecise, making it easy for the reader to assume that it was the father, Marshall McLuhan, who wrote it.
through chaotic dynamics and emergent structures (Hayles 1999, 288).

Rather than repeating the bedtime story of conscious agency, the ecological model is meant to challenge it. As Fuller asserts:

Ecologists focus rather more on dynamic systems in which any one part is always multiply connected, acting by virtue of those connections, and always variable, such that it can be regarded as a pattern rather than simply as an object (Fuller 2005: 4).

The work of Gregory Bateson was developed in the same period as that of the early Toronto School, and it does to some extent share its preoccupation with the possibility of obtaining a new equilibrium between nature and man-made technology in the contemporary, industrialized society of the 1960s, but it differs from the Canadian media theory through its base in empiric, qualitative research methods, and its foundation in the cybernetic construction of the feedback loop. As Hayles has phrased it, all cybernetic thought attempts to “establish a framework encompassing both biological and mechanical systems” (Hayles 2010: 146), and this goes for Bateson’s as well, but with the specification that, along with other cybernetic thinkers of his time, he also includes digital systems into this framework. Moreover, Bateson’s cybernetic thought is of the second, open-ended order of cybernetics according to Hayles’ account, as he does not consider the investigated systems as closed. 22 Hence, Bateson’s correction to the evolutional biology of Darwin is that the unit of survival is neither the organism nor the species, but the “organism plus environment” (Bateson 1972: 483, emphasis in original). Bateson called his most significant collection of essays Steps to an Ecology of the Mind (1972) and the cybernetic thought permeates his work. In Bateson’s conception, a mind is never isolated inside a single agent. A mind is a system – thinking is something that operates across the system not in either one of its units, as is clear in this consideration about computer intelligence:

Now, let us consider for a moment the question of whether a computer thinks. I would state that it does not. What “thinks” and engages in “trial and error” is the man plus the computer plus the environment. And the lines between man, computer and environment are purely artificial, fictitious lines. They are lines across the pathways along which information or difference is transmitted. They are not boundaries of the thinking system. What thinks is the total system which engages in trial and error, which is man plus environment (Bateson 1972: 483, italics in original).

22 Hayles classifies cybernetic thought into four distinct phases. The first phase, covering cybernetic thought roughly up until 1960 was characterized by its construction of closed feedback systems. In the second-order cybernetics (until 1985) the observer has become a crucial part of the open-ended system in Hayles’ third order, which she also calls ‘virtuality’ and dates after 1985 the human body is included as an informational medium. Hayles’ fourth, most recent order is departing from a condition of augmented or mixed reality (Hayles 2010: 147-149).
Thus, in Bateson’s example a computer does not think, but neither does the human as an isolated being; what thinks is the system they constitute when connected. Important on a methodological note is that there are no “boundaries of the thinking system.” One therefore always has to select when studying such an ecology; per definition you can only study the string of processes you decide to trace – you cannot study the system in its entirety. In an open system infinite variation and flexibility is possible, which is perhaps why the question of technological determinism rarely crops up in responses to the ecological thought of Bateson, or of Guattari and Deleuze who continue in this vein, as it is sometimes does in regard to more ‘pure media theorists’ like McLuhan or Kittler.

We are not outside the ecology for which we plan – we are always and inevitably a part of it. Herein lies the charm and the terror of ecology – that the ideas of this science are irreversibly becoming a part of our own ecosocial system (Bateson 1972: 504).

Thus, in the manner of Hayles’ description of second order cybernetics, the “observer” is included as “part of the system” (Hayles 2010: 147). There is a possible agency for any actor in the ecology, even if comprehending the system and predicting the consequences of our actions will often be beyond our ability. As Hayles stresses, “the cybernetic perspective implies that human and animal bodies, no less than cybernetic mechanisms, are media because they too have the capacity for storing, transmitting and processing information” (Hayles 2010: 148), in this manner suggesting the close relationship between this cybernetic perspective and contemporary media theory, and once again demonstrating the costs of binding oneself to too narrow a definition of media as technical devices.

Guattari picks up on Bateson’s ecological thought and specifies three ecologies conceived as three interconnected networks that cover the registers of the body-psyche, the social-interactive society and the physical-environmental. All ecologies are conceived as materially tangible and cover qualities traditionally thought of as both mind and matter. He stresses the multiple linkages and jumps between the three ecological modes and thus the importance of always shifting between them, causing them to cross-fertilize each other.

As Michael Goddard emphasizes in his reading of Guattari’s thinking on media, Guattari’s conception of the mental and social ecologies is crucial for grasping his notion of political action and acts of resistance in late capitalist mass media societies. Accordingly, he specifically suggests that “an essential programmatic point for social ecology will be to encourage capitalist societies to make the transitions from the mass-media age to a post-media era.” But it is via the mental ecology that the processes of subjectivation as “the actual site where politics takes place” are effectuated, since without these processes, no change will ever occur in societies. Equivalent to the power that Muñoz invested in disidentification as a possibility for the minoritarian subject to construct for herself a platform from which to act, to become an agent, the process of subjectivation for Guattari
also “becomes where new modes of sensibility and intelligence can be experimented with, mutate and transform themselves” (Goddard 2011: 9).

Thinking in the ecology

In his book Media Ecologies (2005), Matthew Fuller takes the discourse on media ecology in a direction that somewhat breaks from its origins in the Toronto School of communication. Fuller brings forth the “media” of Kittler and Hayles and the “ecologies” of Guattari and Bateson, which he operationalizes in connection with the related figure of the rhizome developed by Guattari and Deleuze, and pieces them together. On his choice of term, Fuller stresses that “the term ‘ecology’ is used here because it is one of the most expressive language currently has to indicate the massive and dynamic interrelation of processes and objects, beings and things, patterns and matter” (Fuller 2005: 2).

One could add that, in the more than ten years since Fuller’s book came out, the use of this particular term has only increased in frequency, as it has been applied by influential theory in the fields of ecocriticism and new materialism from Timothy Morton’s The Ecological Thought (2010) to Jane Bennet’s Vibrant Matter (2009) with the subtitle A Political Ecology of Things, and ecology is currently a more popular term than ever when discussing everything from the global economy to climate change. Often, the term is applied with specifically environmental purposes as is the case with Morton, and others, like Joshua Schuster, whose The Ecology of Modernism. American Environments and Avant-Garde Poetics (2015) examines the relationship of major modernists, including Stein, to questions regarding nature, industrialization and pollution. I am not in contradiction with this more specific environmental use of the term, yet in my approach it is crucial that an ecology can never be conceived as a part of a larger whole the way this implicitly suggests. Rather, I align with the increase in theory that conceives of ecology as a broader, structural model of thinking, as can be witnessed by the recent General Ecology. The New Ecological Paradigm (2017) edited by Eric Hörl, which collects contributions from a number of ecological thinkers within different fields, including Luciana Parisi, Matthew Fuller, Brian Massumi, Jussi Parikka and Bernard Stiegler.

Like Fuller, I use the idea of media ecology in a way that structurally resembles the way Deleuze and Guattari use the idea of the rhizome in A Thousand Plateaus. Thus, like the rhizome, the ecology is in principle an unlimited and centerless structure of connections and relations that tie together materialities and ideas onto the same plane. Therefore, the media ecology of Stein, or the media ecology of a certain place and time (such as New York in the 1960s), is not a thing with strict borderlines. And it is not a media ecology in the sense that it only consists of media conceived as technological devices, but only if one takes media in the meaning suggested by Hayles as enlightened by the cybernetic perspective. What is central in applying an ecological perspective to the media historical
approach is that in accordance with its cybernetic influences as exemplified by Bateson’s open systems, it connects technical media with other agents and processes and with the environment they are all embedded in.

A fundamental figure in *A Thousand Plateaus* is that of the *assemblage* that underlies the ontology of Deleuze and Guattari, who use it to describe the always already complex, mixed and “unclean” nature of any studied, material phenomenon in which the relation between its parts is not fixed or given but can always be renegotiated and dispersed by new elements entering the assemblage from other parts of the ecology:

An assemblage, in its multiplicity, necessarily acts on semiotic flows, material flows, and social flows simultaneously (independently of any recapitulation that may be made of it in a scientific or theoretical corpus). There is no longer a tripartite division between a field of reality (the world) and a field of representation (the book) and a field of subjectivity (the author). Rather, an assemblage establishes connections between certain multiplicities drawn from each of these orders, so that a book has no sequel, nor the world as its object nor one or several authors as its subjects (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 22-23).

This figure of the assemblage has proven useful for my descriptions of the compound nature of the temporally and spatially dispersed collaborations I work with. The *machine* is another central figure in *A Thousand Plateaus* where it describes how entities, or rather, assemblages, dynamically operate upon each other to produce outputs. For instance, Deleuze and Guattari describe a book as a machine that performs functions and operations upon language and world, upon its characters and its readers. In Levi Bryant’s so-called machine-oriented ontology, he distinguishes between corporeal and incorporeal machines, in which the incorporeal are characterized by their iterability and potential to reemerge in new spatial and temporal locations, which is helpful for theorizing the temporal aspect of the collaborations I examine (Bryant 2015: 26).

As my initial accentuation of Caroline Bergvall’s suggested Stein machine – her invitation to “do a Gertrude Stein on it” – this machinic understanding of books and other literary components, not as static objects but as appliances that affect and function upon their surroundings, has been crucial for the conception of this project in its initial phases and still underlies most of it, even if it will mainly be in chapters one, four and five that it distinctly surfaces to play part in the discussions.

Further, I have adapted my terminology to fit my field of enquiry. Thus, where Deleuze and Guattari would speak of transversality and lines of flight running through the rhizome, I will most often speak of infrastructures. As already stated, to me, an infrastructure runs through the ecology, highlighting certain parts of it and connecting them with other parts in certain ways and making other parts less prominent. For instance, in Gertrude Stein’s ecology of genres, each genre entails an infrastructure: it actualizes a certain behavior towards the text, calls for a certain use, and involves certain materials,
people and rooms. Thus, it makes its particular set of connections in the ecology.

The interface as defined by Emerson above is the gate through which specific media objects connect to the infrastructure and further out into the ecology. The book’s interface is its technological specificities and material traits as readers interact with it. When reading, we interact with its interface of printed pages, but we also connect to the infrastructure of books as I will describe in further detail in chapters four and five. The infrastructure defines the book’s position and optional movement in the media ecology, from where it can connect to other material components, agents and practices. An interface need not be a delimited object, like the book. A theater room is also an interface through which we engage with a theatrical artwork, even if it is much clearer how its material edges are frayed towards a broader space.

Another important insight I gained from Fuller’s book is formulated in its very first pages, namely that: “The only way to find out what happens when complex media systems interact is to carry out such interactions” (Fuller 2005: 1). By insisting on a consistent bottom-up approach also practiced by Deleuze and Guattari in A Thousand Plateaus, Fuller is able to trace complex contemporary examples of media ecologies consisting of a range of disparate agents, processes and devices and avoid the pitfalls that come with the establishment of a meta-perspective. As such, it corresponds with the strictly empirical strategy of “following the actor” in a description rather than an explanation of how social activity occurs within a complex network as performed by Bruno Latour and other representatives of actor-network theory (Latour 2005). In the light of Fuller’s insight, I have chosen as my approach in the following to develop the theoretical framework of thinking in terms of media ecologies in a concrete, if inevitably partial, tracing of the multiple and complex networks of artworks that constitute the artistic reception of Stein in the seventy years since her death.

Tracing the media ecologies of Gertrude Stein’s aesthetic reception

My additions to the definition of media ecology derived from the ideas developed by McLuhan and associates in the latter part of the 20th century are foremost motivated by my research interests pointing less in the direction of pure communication studies, and more towards aesthetics and materiality, including the different material characteristics of different media. Also, I am interested in exploring the innovative, political or subversive potentials that could be implied in strategies and practices used by artists and audiences alike in a specific media ecology. How the media ecology can be shaped, manipulated and exploited, for instance when different media are used or read against the grain, or, when media poetics and ambient poetics is applied on various points in the ecology, pushing an individual medium to its limits and forcing it to connect with other media to enter into
new relations or collaborations that may alter the infrastructure.

In this respect, I am once again referring to Guattari, since, as Fuller phrases it, “the stakes he assigns to media are rightly perceived as being profoundly political or ethico-aesthetic at all scales” and thus “aligning such political processes with creative powers of invention that demand ‘laboratories of thought and experimentation for future forms of subjectivation’ also poses a demand for the inventive rigor with which life among media must be taken up” (Fuller 2005: 5). Here, Fuller is quoting from the aforementioned paper “Entering the Post-Media Era,” in which Guattari calls for a post-media revolution that would use media technologies and infrastructures subversively, against the grain, in ways that can renegotiate the terms of the media ecology and, as Fuller suggests, make possible alternative “forms of subjectivation” that resist majoritarian discourse and power. This line in Guattari’s thinking has also been explored by Michael Goddard, taking up Guattari’s activist engagement with the amateur, dissident radio station of situationist inspiration Radio Alice in Italy in the late 1970s (Goddard 2011: 6-17). What Guattari’s engagement with radio leads to is the key role he attributes to the concrete use of media in restructing the ecologies towards the “post-media era.” In Goddard’s words, it involves “a rethinking of media themselves, which function for Guattari as just such vectors of subjectivation and perhaps the most important ones in contemporary societies” (Goddard 2011: 10). It is along these lines that I think of the application of media poetics, ambient poetics and collaborative poetics as available strategies that are able to produce change in the ecology, and the overall perspective of media ecology as enabling analysis of agency, resistance and change of sufficient complexity.

Hence, by using the term media ecology, I wish not only to imply that I am more interested in the system in which media connect to other objects and living beings than in the various technical media themselves. According to the Toronto School, the system in its entirety amounts to something more than the sum of its parts, and this is a fundamental insight, including to this study, but it is one that could be equally met by concepts such as the discourse networks of Friedrich Kittler. When Kittler writes that the media determine our situation, he is referring to the entire discourse network that is materialized in the media of information, storage and exchange. But it is less evident how to approach the alterations and resistances that the media ecological framework allows me to explore within that of the discourse network.

In addition, I am applying the term media ecology to account for the actual, concrete media diversity that characterizes my material. The discourse network of Kittler focuses on the historical dominance of one medium over others, as is the case with alphabetic writing in the discourse network of 1800 and with the computer in the discourse network of 2000, or a few particular media as in the discourse network of 1900 where the hallucinatory monopoly of writing is broken by the invention of “gramophone, film, type-writer.” Needless to say, Kittler’s analysis is not as simplistic as this would suggest, but, as noted in the discussion of Lori Emerson’s practice of media archeology, in Kittler’s
discourse on media history, there is a strong preoccupation with the media that are tied to writing technologies over other types of media, particularly such visual and spatial media as painting or the theater, that makes it less self-evident to base a study like the present one primarily on this conceptual framework.

This is another point where I take inspiration from Matthew Fuller. In his book, the chapters all trace complex media ecologies where works of art or cultural phenomena are created by a network of different actors and material devices; where users and creators cannot be separated consistently, but the investigated phenomenon is taking place in a networked web of relations that are characterized by the diversity of their material parts and agents. Thus, in the case of Fuller’s exemplary first chapter that deals with the London pirate radio scene flourishing in the early 2000s, the actors are: cell phones, radio transmitters, radio receivers, drugs, mixers, music sampling computer software, DJs, MCs, club owners and employees, radio hosts, drug dealers, weekend dancers, listeners, underground magazines, flyers, posters, stickers, graffiti, vinyl record stores, and so on.

As already mentioned, the media ecological scenario unfolded by Fuller requires a complex bottom-up approach of constantly tracing the concrete relations in the ecology and thus reduces the possibility for applying otherwise rather useful scholarly techniques of reduction or deduction, and makes the question of how to delimit one’s material as well as when the investigation of a specific relation is exhausted one that is constantly pressing and constantly posing a practical challenge.

Yet, in spite of these difficulties, it seems to me a fundamentally convincing equivalent to the diverse media situation from which I am working – where, if the ubiquity of technical media and their impact on our lives seems unprecedented, we are at the same time living in a turbulent and heterogeneous media situation where it seems imperative to think in terms of many types of media working in decentralized networks, in which a range of different technologies and devices connect to other agents, both human and non-human, in materially diverse assemblage structures.

Relatedly, it also seems an appropriate description of the media ecology that constitutes the reception of Gertrude Stein. As is the case with Fuller’s examples, a striking quality of the aesthetic reception of Stein remains its transmedia character. Stein’s name and work is recurring in all of the arts and well beyond this realm to cultural expressions that would not normally be considered as artworks. Thus, each collaboration I examine can be conceived as a string in the media ecology connecting, in most cases, the following agents: a book or textual artifact first written in the early 20th century, an artwork produced at a later point in time, Gertrude Stein as a historical figure, the artist producing the new work, myself as an observer attentive to both the historical points actualized, but also shaped and biased by my own historical situation and in accordance with cybernetic theory influencing the observed situation by observing it, and last but not least, the distribution channels and media that have made all these connections possible. Once again, it is an open system, and accordingly it will repeatedly be relevant for me to follow new
and sometimes unexpected strings and folds in the ecology whenever they appear in order to unfold the ways in which Stein’s threefold poetics becomes read and rewritten in her varied aesthetic reception. Appropriately, Stein issues the following permission for us to rewrite her as we read her in the final lines from *Tender Buttons*’ “A Center in a Table”:

Next to me next to a folder, next to a folder some waiter, next to a foldersome waiter and re letter and read her. Read her with her for less (TB 60).

Evidently, the evoked situation involves at least as many agents as the collaborations as I have listed above – me, her, a folder, a waiter, and combinations of the two, as well as the implicit and open you of the imperative grammatical form – and I will now proceed to follow Stein’s enigmatic request to “re letter and read her” in interaction with her diverse, aesthetic reception.
CHAPTER 1:

THE ECOLOGY OF INTERMEDIA:
GERTRUDE STEIN IN POST-WAR NEW YORK

The aesthetic reception of Gertrude Stein was catapulted by the avant-garde in the 1960s New York, notorious as a time and place of roaring activity and change in social relations, civil rights, technology and the arts. But, as we shall see, the foundations for this explosion in collaborations with Stein were laid in the comparably quieter decades after Stein’s death. In this chapter I will present a tentative mapping of the Stein reception that took place in this environment. As dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer has said, Stein was everywhere at this point — “She was probably in my blood by that time” (Quoted in Corn and Latimer 2011: 283) — and thus an exhaustive account, even of this limited slice of the media ecology of Stein’s reception, is not an option. Rather than trying to present a sweeping overview of the scene, the procedure I have chosen is to zoom in on a smaller number of key collaborators whose work will chart a certainly incomplete and fragmentary, but hopefully also veritable, image of Stein’s reception in this historical interval. As implied, my examples are hardly chosen at random. Rather, I have sought them out of consideration for their importance to the reshaping of Stein that happened in these years, not least due to the formative influence they each had on the respective environs of the art scene in question: John Cage on music, performance, dance and the Fluxus movement; Andy Warhol on the visual arts in its Pop Art incarnations and on the experimental film scene; and John Ashbery on the experimental poetry of his own and the coming generation.

It is hard not to notice of the fact that I have thus picked three men to play the parts of the first key collaborators in Stein’s reception. Several scholars have noted that Stein’s collaborative aspirations in her own day seemed to extend especially to younger male artists and writers, many of them homosexuals, naming Hemingway, Carl Van Vechten, Virgil Thomson, Bernard Faÿ and Georges Hugnet, and suggesting, like Richard Kostelanetz, that this tendency has continued after her death, noting her influence on Cage, Ashbery and the Canadian poet B.P. Nichol among others, while claiming that her influence on female writers has been absent (Kostelanetz 1980, xxx-xxxi). But as Catherine Stimpson, Deborah Mix and others have pointed out, this is a truth that comes with
modifications. Stein had several women artists and writers close to her at different points in her life (Mabel Dodge, Edith Sitwell, Marie Laurencin, Jane Heap, Janet Flanner, Laura Riding to name a few) whom she also engaged with professionally, but the men have tended to become more canonized by posterity (Stimpson 1984, Mix 2007). A similar observation can be made for the posthumous collaborators that this chapter will address. As we shall see in discussions of the work of Yvonne Rainer, Alison Knowles, Judith Malina and Jill Johnston, there are plenty of women among the men, and the 1960s was certainly a decade when the conditions for women artists were improving. The changes in social structures and family norms were making things possible that had seemed out of reach in the 1950s. However, as the indisputable, albeit queer, maleness of my three key figures demonstrates, even the roaring art scene of the 1960s was still very much a scene governed by pivotal male figures, who were more successful, and who more easily achieved positions from where they could define and formulate the theoretical and historical grounds of much of the collective and interdisciplinary creative work being done, including by women. Thus, the massive influence of these three artists may confirm the patriarchal structures of the art world, but it also, along with their commitment to Stein’s work, makes them crucial figures for the mapping carried out by this chapter.

The composer John Cage was reading and collaborating with Stein’s writing as early as the 1930s, making him one of the first in the New York art circles to bring up her name. Further, he was immensely well connected and thus a key figure in disseminating Stein’s work. The version of Stein that has emerged from his collaboration with her is still, arguably, among the most influential, both in the aesthetic and the academic reception. Hence, after a brief introduction of the place and time, and a survey of the crucial reprints of Stein’s work that allowed it to circulate among the artists of the 1960s scene, a thorough discussion of the collaboration between Gertrude Stein and John Cage will follow. This will bifurcate into briefer snapshots of collaborators within the “intermedia” contexts of concrete poetry, Fluxus, and the blasting contemporary dance and theater scene. Another leading figure in my account is Pop artist Andy Warhol, whose connections to Stein may seem less directly collaborative than Cage’s, yet they are no less extensive and foremost they point towards other parts of Stein’s media ecology, tied to her public persona and performance as a queer celebrity. Thus, if Cage is engaging with formal characteristics of Stein’s poetics, as well as with her concrete writings, Warhol is more piqued by her persona, and his conscious molding of his persona and his development of the figure of the celebrity or “superstar” elaborate on Stein’s author performance in the 1930s.

Finally, I will engage with the critical writings of the poet John Ashbery, whose early readings of Stein’s work were among the germinal steps towards its canonization as experimental poetry, and thus constitute a suitable bridge to the ensuing chapter. But before throwing myself into the roaring sixties, I will, in the first part of this chapter, conduct a brief reflection on how to read in a temporally dispersed media ecology, and
provide a more in-depth account of the media poetics and the media situation of Gertrude Stein’s work as it appeared on the verge of the upcoming rise in her aesthetic reception.

How to read in the ecology

Sybille Krämer has suggested the mathematically compelling idea that inscriptions on flat surfaces, through the utilization of the two-dimensional space of the flat page or screen, generally mediate between the three-dimensionality of space and the one-dimensionality of time (Krämer et al. 2017). Considering the spatial and temporal conditions of the reading of such inscribed surfaces in the codex in particular, the complexity and fluidity of this mediation moves to the fore:

I read to sense the doubling of time: The time of a book’s form, which pertains to the enclosure and topology of rooms, allegories, houses, bodies, surfaces; and the time of my perceiving, which feels directional, melodic, lyric, inflectional. Then, because of the book’s time overlaying my own, reading opens a proposition. It receives in me the rhythm I didn’t know I missed (Robertson 2012:15).

What Canadian poet – and competent Stein reader – Lisa Robertson is getting at in this quote from her essay “Time in the Codex” is how reading puts her in a genuinely relational position between two types of temporality – the time of reading as a durational and progressive process and the possibilities for arresting time, leaping, skipping, or turning it back that literature in the shape of the book, the codex, can provide, due to its material, spatial qualities that are outstretched in both two- and three-dimensional space.

So, on one hand, there is the slow and durable, but also dispersed, interrupted and non-linear time of the book, that, as a relatively stable, material artifact, can bridge or tie together a string of past moments situated in time and space – like the times when this book lying in front of you was conceived, written, typed, printed, reprinted, handled, sold, lent out, lost, found, read, read and read again – with the present moment of you reading it. This temporality of the book’s form, as Robertson calls it, becomes more complex, when you take into account that a book, fundamentally, is not an auratic unique object. It is not a relic, like the visual artwork was to Walter Benjamin. A book is not an original; in its essence it is multiple, repeatable. The concrete copy on your desk is closely tied to all the other (almost) identical copies that are distributed to other desks and shelves, as well as to all other versions of this particular work of literature (including translations, illustrated versions, abbreviations, imitations), to all the discourse that exists about it in any medium, and even to other books by the same author, publisher or editor, or in the same genre, language or color, or from the same period, bookstore or shelf, and thus, the codex in your hand is already connected to an intricate web of space-time coordinates.
even before you start reading it.

On the other hand, you have the durational, continuous, or, in Robertson’s words, “directional, melodic, lyric, inflectional” time that you are immersed in when engaging in the reading of a book. And just as the temporality of the physical book was thoroughly permeated by space, so is the time of the reading, as a reading is always situated in both time and space: you read through physical interaction with the codex as a three-dimensional object, even if your main focus is on eye-scanning its two-dimensional pages to access information contained in the black marks on flat white surfaces and transforming this information into the one-dimensional, durational stream of (language) reading, and you are also always handling these pages in a three-dimensional environment.

This suggests some aspects of the media ecology of the book, any book. The media ecology of the book is slow; it exploits the two-dimensionality of the page, but also stitches these flat surfaces into the three dimensions of spatial surroundings and into the one dimension of the progressing time of lived experience. And crucially, the book has the potential to reach widely across time and space, and as a result, it opens up in the reader “a proposition,” as Robertson puts it, a new rhythm that was not there before reading began.

Out of the complexity of this ecology of one single medium comes the media ecology of Stein’s reception in the field of “intermedia arts” in the post-war period. It is important to bear in mind that this temporal double structure of the book is essentially what makes the particular dissemination process of Stein’s work possible, and therefore it also determines the material condition for her reception as collaboration, dispersed as it is in time and space. In the “proposition” of reading Stein lies also the invitation to collaborate. What the artists, poets and other people in the following chapters do is taking up the proposition opened by the reading and engage in collaborations with Stein’s work, that follow the same doubled temporal structure as Robertson’s situation of reading.

Thalia Field is both a poet and performance artist and the co-author of a poetry collection and Stein collaboration to be revisited in chapter four. In an interview with Seneca Review, she compares her experiences with the different temporal structures of audience participation or collaboration on the stage and on the page, outlining two types of performative collaborations in her own practice – that of the interactive performance situation versus that of the reading:

Those pieces [improvised live performances, SD] engage an interplay (a poetics) of reading and timing and improvisation/indeterminacy which foregrounds “thinking” on stage (for the audience and the performer simultaneously), the “thinking mind” rather than rehearsed roles. How it functions on the page is torqued from that – more slow and layered. On the page, you open up the place of contingency and invite the reader’s mind to overflow the text. Live performance […] relates to “the work” differently – it is experienced in one collective world-event. Books reveal themselves as events differently – both for the reader and the writer. Audience is dispersed, sometimes separated by centuries (Butler et al. 2008: 6).
If Field’s description may appear self-evident – naturally books have a different temporality than live events – it is interesting because it implicitly reverses the ontology of presence that is widely held as tied to the performance situation, for example in Erika Fischer-Lichte’s influential theory of the so-called “performative turn”, a transformation of the conception of the cultural product as object or text into a conception of the cultural product as event.

By adapting the terminology of performativity and performance theory, she sets out to investigate the participatory aspect in what appears to be a more broadly conceived view of the arts, covering also the non-performing ones. Yet, in her definition of the performative feedback-loop that is the participatory mechanism at the core of her argument, Fischer-Lichte’s sets up a condition of mutual co-presence, much like Field’s “collective world-event”, for the feed-back loop to even take place. Therefore, studies of the performative qualities in written literature have often had difficulties adapting Fischer-Lichte’s theory, even if it makes transmedia claims.\(^2\) What Field is stressing in the quote, is how the event-ness and the audience’s experience of participation are not by any necessity smaller, or less significant in the book as event, than in the performance as event. Both are identified by a “place of contingency” that the reader is invited to occupy to engage in a co-thinking process of performer and audience, only in the book-event this process can be dispersed in both time and place, and thus from a certain perspective seems to imply even larger freedom and complexity, due to this layered temporality than the here-and-now-bound performance situation that takes place on a stage.

What is interesting in the case of Stein, however, and especially as she is received and recycled in the 1950s and 1960s, is that there seems to be an overlap between these two types of performative collaboration. As we shall see, in her ambient poetics Stein is actively addressing the physical space around the reader, inviting the reader to connect what is read, not just to her own interior mental processes, but also to the surroundings, not by representing those surroundings, but by situating herself in them, creating something like a potential or future collaborative performance situation that, like Field’s book-event, can be separated from her own time “by centuries,” or at least, as we shall see examples of in the following, by decades. This quality also testifies to Stein’s particular media situation, where she is dependent on the codex, and completely dedicated to writing conceived as a media exclusive art form, but at the same time she is relying on different, more ephemeral and spatial systems of distribution, not traditionally considered among the primary infrastructures of books, like the salon, the letter, the art talk, the lecture and the celebrity appearance.

What is special about Stein in the 1950s and the 1960s is that at this point in time, her written works had been largely out of circulation, and thus the risk that her works could dissolve into oblivion, or at least fall out of the mainstreams of literary history,

\(^2\) For in-depth discussion of this in relation to the performative qualities in Stein’s writing, see my article “I am always wanting to collaborate with some one”: The performative poetics of Gertrude Stein and its reception as collaboration” (Daugaard 2016: 231-40).
seemed substantial. This experience is an important precondition for the space in which these works are reenacted, creating a social room between the artists and their audience in which Stein can be revived. This condition is perhaps even more determining for the way Stein is revived and re-inscribed by the poets of the language poetry movement addressed in chapter two, which becomes determinant for re-situating Stein in the context of poetry or writing, after the wider medial dispersal that characterizes the 1960’s reception.

In the media ecology of Stein as it emerges during the 1960s, media are not exclusively writing technologies, and not exclusively objects/material bases either, but become assemblages that connect disparate points in time and space. In the media ecology of Stein’s present day, the important points are the book as artifact (its cover, typeface, format), its production (act of writing, copying, typing, acceptance/rejection from publishers, proofs, printing), Stein’s correspondence (which often includes and becomes indistinguishable from her other writings, like when her literary portraits become gifts of friendship before they become publicly printed texts), (semi-)public readings and lectures, the literary press (papers and magazines, radio) and beyond these, the iconography of Stein’s author persona (social point of assembly, queer icon, superstar) and the establishment of aesthetic and social communities around this persona (Paris salon, American fame). In the extended ecology of Stein’s transmedia reception in the post-war period, these points are all actualized and extended further into a performative, ambient, and collaborative situation. I will, however, start with Stein and the twists she added to the still extensively book-bound media ecology of literature in the first part of the 20th century.

I. STARTING WITH STEIN: DESCRIPTIONS OF LITERATURE, OR, “BOOK WAS THERE”

Gertrude Stein’s short piece Descriptions of Literature (1924) consists of sixty-five sentences, (almost) all of them opening with the words “A book”, naming or describing all kinds of books (“A book where nearly everything is prepared”, “A book which makes the end come just as soon as it is intended”, “A book more than ever needed”, “A book of dates and fears”), thus implicitly equating the title’s concept “literature” with, simply, books. A number of sentences bring attention to books as actual material objects piling up (“A book narrowly placed on the shelf and often added. Added to that.”, “A book and a bookstore. A book for them. Will they be in it.”) and as objects that can leave all sorts of marks on their surroundings (“A book attaching importance to english and french names”, “A book which plans homes for any of them”).

The piece reads like a tribute to the multiplicity of books – or all the diverse meaning, effect and action that a book can generate, and yet, as Ulla Dydo has remarked, there could be a slight, bitter irony to this work feasting on books, but doing it from a distinctly outside perspective, written as it was in 1924, when only two books by Stein were in print,
Three Lives (1905) and Geography and Plays (1922), both printed at her own expense for limited distribution, and she was exhausted by failed attempts to find a publisher for her “long book,” The Making of Americans, a selection of which had just come out, not as a book, but, not quite to Stein’s satisfaction, in serialized form in Transatlantic Review (Stein and Dydo 1993: 471). A further twist to the plot is that Descriptions of Literature was actually printed and published only a few years after its composition (1926). Like the majority of Stein’s publications that came out before she and Toklas started their own press, The Plain Edition, around 1930, the publication is permeated by relations of friendship. It was published and printed by Stein’s friend, the photographer-to-be George Platt Lynes, as an exclusive fold-out pamphlet in an envelope – and thus not really a book. It is fronted by a drawing made by another of Stein’s friends, the Russian painter Pavel Tchelitcheff, and the text runs in elegant green print over six pages, constantly shifting the print direction, so that you are forced to turn the paper pamphlet in your hands whenever you finish a page, either by unfolding a fold, flipping the whole thing over, or rotating it 90 degrees, but never by merely turning a page or progressing directly from the bottom of one page to the top of the corresponding page in customary, codex-reading manner.

The flow in the movements you have to make feels quite logical when you are reading – you instinctively know what to do next when you finish a page – but the physical experience of reading the pamphlet becomes completely different from turning the pages of a regular book. There is a tension between, on the one hand, the series of imagined, more or less enigmatic, book blurbs that the text consists of (strongly invoking the books on whose covers or dust jackets they could be printed and hence the paratexts and publicity surrounding and defining books, a sphere that was growing exponentially at this time) and, on the other hand, the pamphlet’s physical form and the reading experience this generates, which undoes the implicitness of the piece’s initial equation of “literature” with “books” and instead calls our direct attention to the material base of literature, particularly to the codex as the customary medium for carrying text. This is a medium that over 500 years in the Gutenberg Galaxy have left us used to consuming in large quantities, without paying any attention to its concrete technology (McLuhan 1962, Ong 1982, Kittler 1990). Also, because the format and technology of the pamphlet forces its reader to turn it over and twist it around in a way that is not as habitual as the turning of a book’s pages, the reader’s consciousness of her own physical body as situated in a concrete space while reading becomes stronger. Awareness is raised about what George Perec has referred to as the socio-physiology of reading, the way the reading body is situated in temporal and spatial contexts (Perec 1985).

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24 At this point Lynes had not taken up the career in photography that later made his name, but ran a bookstore in Englewood New Jersey from where he briefly edited and printed pamphlets of avant-garde art and writing in his small publishing venture, As Stable Pamphlets.

25 For an elaboration on the “friend” as publisher, agent, illustrator etc., see Dean 2014:13-35.

26 See a brief account in my introduction, but consult McLuhan, Ong and Kittler for specific analyses of the historical process of how print technology’s standardization of the printed text via the development of print conventions such as margins etc. has removed attention from the physical base of the printed book to increase reading speed and thus the efficiency of information transfer.
In *Tender Buttons*, the one early book by Stein that was both published and funded by an independent publisher (but which was long out of print in 1924 when “Descriptions of Literature” was written), one poem bears the title “Book.” It opens by bluntly stating that “Book was there”. As we have already seen, to Stein in her writing, “book” was very much “there.” In accordance with the characteristics of Kittler’s discourse network of 1900 describing the text as transfigured towards the technical preconditions of literature, to Stein, “book was there” in a manner that was unusually attentive to its often overlooked technical functionalities.

In the terminology established in the introduction, Stein adapted a practice of media poetics to the book that can be detected throughout her work. Take for instance *A Novel of Thank You* (1925), described by Nils Olsson as “a novel in the making,” (Olsson 2012) as it constantly singles out the different components that constitute a novel, whether structural units (such as the “Part” and particularly the “Chapter” by breaking with their expected consecutive order, and repeatedly naming the chapters simply “CHAPTER”), elements indicating the order of things (playing endlessly with words like “first”, “next”, “in the middle”, “beginning”, “introducing”) or applying to the story (like the characters, sentiments and events, always prevented from joining together in a developing story).

Another prominent example is the subtitle of *Four Saints in Three Acts*: “An opera to be sung,” explicating the implicit technology of its medium. Or observe the method used in most of Stein’s plays, where she, in W.B. Worthen’s reading, reintegrates the physical presence of the written word into the modern drama by constantly intertwining lines to be spoken with stage directions and other paratextual markers, sometimes making it impossible not only to determine the number of characters, acts or scenes, but even to differentiate character names from spoken lines or act designations (Worthen 2005: 57-73). Or browse through *The Geographical History of America* (1935) with all its self-conscious literary genre miniatures, indicated by headlines such as “Autobiography number one”, “Autobiography one again”, “Detective Story number VII”, “A little play”, “Play number X”, its loose running structural units: “Part III”, “Chapter XVI”, “Part fifteen”, “Act I Scene I”, “Number six and seven”, “Example Four”, “Interlude I” – not to mention all the quantitative, material book parts that appear, dressed up as structural units, “Volume III”, “Page number five”, or “Page nine” which, naturally, is directly followed by “Page I.”

In regard to the dramatic genre, Stein’s frequent use of a marginal generic label like “curtain raiser” also calls for attention with its explicit invocation of the theatre room, including its equipment (in this case, the curtain) and staging of the play as an activity/action to be performed in a concrete space which points us beyond the practice of media poetics, towards the extensive, complex practice of *ambient poetics*. Generally, opinions differ on what to make of Stein’s unconventional approach to generic labels like play, portrait or autobiography. Ulla Dydo and other scholars have suggested that Stein, once her meditative writing process was established, attributed minor importance to questions
of genre, and thus, that through her play with generic labels she was somehow mocking them or revealing them as arbitrary or unimportant (Dydo 1985: 60).

But, as Claudia Mense has pointed out, it may be more productive to conceive this practice as an indication of Stein’s dynamic understanding of genre as something that cannot be determined as a text-intrinsic ontological quality but more like an exterior perspective that is applied to a text, and consequently altering our reading of it (Mense 1996: 27-30). In the genre miniatures of The Geographical History of America, Stein is demonstrating the functionality of genre as a spatial perspective applied to a text, actively changing it in a way that is comparable to a theatrical staging of a text. And this is a crucial work for conceiving Stein’s ambient poetics, as it not just exhibits a very explicit unfolding of her media poetics in its pointing toward the material interfaces of writing like pages and volumes but also – as the title’s intermingling of geography with history, of time with space, indicates – unfolds an examination of the American landscape and how this landscape shapes and is shaped by history. In this work, Stein’s practice comes particularly close to Timothy Morton’s understanding of ambient poetics, as Morton – via Angus Fletcher’s theory of American poetry – defines the practice as concerned not just with the channel of the poetic object and the space immediately surrounding it (room), but also with actual (American) open-ended space of nature. Consequently, it also connects to Bonnie Marranca’s point about the ecology of theater as a relational and a spatial practice including the actual ecology of the landscape.

But the ambient implications of Stein’s poetics of genre are in a sense wider than the concrete environmental claims made by Morton and Marranca. By applying a certain generic label, Stein activates a function that dynamically operates upon the text, like an incorporeal machine as defined by Levi Bryant (Bryant 2014). Further, this machine suggests a specific string through the media ecology of literature, activating some connections and relations and downplaying others, and in this process, Stein is connecting the flat, textual materiality to a spatial materiality of the room, and of the “air and land” (EA 204).

In this way applying a genre to a text will insert it into a particular infrastructure that illuminates some aspects of the text that were not visible before. In The Marvelous Clouds, John Durham Peters explains how infrastructures work to physically change their surroundings as they distribute distinctions in the world of nature and culture. Here, Peters also addresses infrastructures of an immediately less concrete and more discursive nature than the roads, electricity cables, and canals mentioned earlier. For instance, the “logistical media” of “names, indexes, addresses, maps, lists (like this one), tax rolls, logs, accounts, archives” (Peters 2015: 37).

I would suggest that the use of generic labels in Stein must be conceived equivalently to this. The application of a generic label to a text physically changes that text.

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27 Surprisingly, Fletcher (like Morton) has no references to Stein, but bases large parts of his argument on Walt Whitman (Fletcher 2004). Joshua Shuster has developed a similar argument in relation to Stein in The Ecologies of Modernism (Shuster 2015).
There was no play here, before it became designated as such. The knowledge of the play as play changes the text into a play. And Stein is making this fact explicit for us, when in *The Geographical History* she characterizes the text we are reading: “It is perhaps a play if it can be done in a day and is perhaps a detective story if it can be found out” (GHA 409). If it is a detective story, the reader will approach it in one way, probably trying to solve some kind of mystery, maybe even skipping back and forth in the text to look for missed clues; if it is a play, the reader is asked to perform it (or imagine it performed), which will add a completely different pace to the realization of the text and a different set of material connections: as a play is (potentially) spoken out loud, it will most likely activate actors, props, a director and a theatrical space, while a detective story is a genre of silent reading par excellence. Thus, the relational nature of the text changes fundamentally depending upon whether it is being read as a detective story or a play. The incorporeal machine activated by each genre connects it to infrastructures that pull entirely different strings through the media ecology, activating entirely different connections.

This way of conceiving of genre can be illuminated further by the example of the portrait. Stein wrote an extensive number of literary portraits throughout her career, but with the center of gravity in her formative years around 1910-20. This makes the portrait the earliest genre in which Stein experiments with the relationship between text and context in this way. As Wendy Steiner claims in her 1979 pioneer study of the portraits, when confronted with the fact that Stein recycles long stretches of writing between different pieces, so that a portrait of a named person can consist solely of lines that reappear in identical or almost identical form in other pieces that are designated as plays, novels, meditations or poems: “the genres are not defined formally in connection to texts, but are different perspectives on the same text. A genre is simply an orientation toward a piece of writing” (Steiner 1979: 196). And yet, when Stein is writing someone’s portrait it changes that someone as it changes the relationship between Stein and that person, and turns the person into a node in the social infrastructure of the salon. In many ways, the portrait genre as conceived by Stein shows off her connections to a literature of the early modern period, such as the often both collective and situational writing that was being produced in the French salons as they flourished in the 17th century, and which was much closer to the genres of oral conversation and the art and performance of social conduct than to those tied to the printed book as a literary artifact. (Lecoeur 2011).

By taking a brief look at a famous piece by Robert Rauschenberg, who was a key figure in the 1960s “intermedia” art scene, with a documented dedication to Stein’s work (Sayre 1984: 35-39), this point can be extended further in relation to the particular case of the portrait genre, which was always a major genre in visual arts, if generally a minor one in literature. Nevertheless, it seems likely that the visual artist Rauschenberg took a hint from Stein’s particular take on the genre when he conceived of his notorious “portrait” of the Paris gallerist Iris Clert from 1961.
Rauschenberg’s portrait is most obviously conceived as a piece of conceptual art, often categorized as something of a prank, and there has been speculations as to whether it was Rauschenberg’s original intention that the piece be displayed on the gallery walls. It simply consists of a telegram with the words “This is a portrait of Iris Clert if I say so,” signed Robert Rauschenberg and sent from Rauschenberg, who was in Stockholm at the time, to Clert in Paris as a contribution to an exhibition at her gallery that was to consist solely of portraits of Clert done by various prominent artists with connections to the gallery. From a certain point of view, Rauschenberg’s piece might twist the question of genre further towards a problematic enlargement of the artist as an indisputable authority controlling the nature of an art experience so heavily that the sensual experience of the audience is practically irrelevant (i.e. the dictatorial ring to his final clause: “if I say so”), but it can also be taken to illustrate a key point of Stein’s take on genre, which is understanding how a genre is not a text-internal or work-internal factor, but a spatial one, a “perspective.” As we shall see in a moment, Stein utilized the genre of the portrait in a similar way, as a genre that was occasional and functional, or machinic.

But let us return for a moment to “Book” in Tender Buttons. As Peter Quartermain has noted in his instructive reading of the piece, its title suggests a shift from a referential to a notational mode of reading, due to the missing article (Quartermain 1992: 24). Thus, it can be read as a poem about the notion of “book” more than a deictic pointing towards a concrete, singular book, or a representation of this book. Unless of course, the title’s “book” is not even a noun, but a verb, perhaps in the imperative form. Beginning at the title, and continuing throughout the text, “Book” is a perfect demonstration of the technique so dominant in Tender Buttons, that Stein herself considered as a liberation of the words from their “associative habits” (quoted by Dydo 2003: 15), allowing them to
be present with all their possible connotations and functions, instead of their meaning being narrowed down by the context of the other words. As Quartermain’s reading testifies to, this aspect of Stein’s poetics has frequently and fairly successfully been investigated with inspiration from poststructuralist theory. It appears a perfect illustration of Roland Barthes’ distinction of between ‘textes scriptibles’ and ‘textes lisibles’, which in a strictly linguistic sense can be brought to account, at least partially, for the productiveness of Stein’s writing that is the interest of this study. But if we follow the suggested track of a conceptual investigation around the concrete word and concept of “book,” something other than the strictly linguistic (or textual) is suggested by the poem’s temporal structure.

"BOOK" in Tender Buttons (Facsimile of text on page 28-29 Claire Marie Edition 1914)
Beginning in a descriptive past tense, “Book was there”, the first paragraph moves on in an abrupt, almost telegraph style to the imperative “Stop it”, leaving, at first, the impression that “book” is no longer here, and that the reader is urged to either get rid of it (again, or once and for all?), stop it from doing what it is doing, or perhaps catch it in its flight. Supposing, of course, that “it” does in each case refer back to “book”, something that is far from self-evident. As Quatermain also observes, the word “it” appears eleven times in the first paragraph, potentially shifting function and reference every time. The next paragraphs follow up on the imperative mode of request and enter the realm of possibility or supposition so prevalent in Tender Buttons (“Suppose”). If we insist on keeping both the actual, physical word and the media technological concept of “book” in mind, these obscure suppositions could be thought of as concerning themselves with dreaming up a future book. The suppositions finally materialize, at least temporally, into the here and now as each paragraph, apart from the first, ends in the present tense, like in the final lines, imagining what kind of organization of phenomena and sense impressions could lie beyond or after the book or be implied in the new book: “It is a sister and sister and a flower and a flower and a dog and a colored sky a sky colored grey and nearly that nearly that let.” If we here take “it” as referring to the new book coming after the known book, and also note the presence of a domestic situation, the contextual circumstances – or the surroundings – becomes equally implied in the “it” – and thus we experience the opening up of the book to the world, to the ecology.

Bobbed Brown

A later indication that the physical shape of the codex and the ability to dream beyond it was indeed a matter of interest to Stein is her relationship to the avant-garde innovator and entrepreneur Bob Brown, who was on a mission to revolutionize reading by automating it on a machine the size of a typewriter, designed to “unroll a televistic readie film” (Brown and Saper 2014: viii). Stein was highly amused in 1929 when addressed by Brown, who had recently co-dedicated his book of visual poems 1450-1930 to her (and to himself – a gesture Stein could surely appreciate). A cheerful and punning correspondence ensued, culminating with Stein gladly contributing a text written specifically for the occasion to his anthology of “readies” designed for his futuristic “Reading Machine” (“We Came. A History” 1930), and writing a portrait of Brown “Absolutely As Bob Brown Or Bobbed Brown” in 1930, turning his first name into a verb, a process or movement, not unlike

Andrew Piper, who snatched the title for his book on reading, Book Was There. Reading in Electronic Times from Stein’s “Book”, suggests that, even if there is a consensus in media studies of literature that the awareness and questioning of the material aspects of printed writing and of the codex as a physical medium has grown in line with the invention of new media to challenge it (see for example, Hayles 1999), humans writing and reading books have also always found ways to dream or think beyond it (Piper 2012: vii-xiii).
Caroline Bergvall would do years later with Stein’s full name. In the portrait, Brown’s name signals something modern and fresh, like the bobbed hairdo Stein herself had recently gotten. The rather extensive portrait (it runs over three full pages in *Painted Lace*) is built up from smaller vignettes or portraits, and uses the technique also found in Stein’s “readie” of cutting up sentences into short phrases separated by periods and line breaks. Like so many of her other portraits, it came out of a longer piece not at all associated with the portrait subject, in this case “Sentences and Paragraphs” (1930) (included in *How to Write*, 1931), in which Stein was investigating grammar and movement (Dydo 2003: 356). It was sent to Brown as a gift, but in its portrait form remained unpublished in Stein’s lifetime and is thus a good example of the occasional and performative nature the portrait genre often takes in Stein’s work: the portrait text becomes a social bond including its subject more than it is a representation of this subject.29


**Reading-writing interfaces or writing in conversation**

The set of self-conscious gestures of Stein’s toward her literary medium that I have been addressing in the preceding paragraphs can, to a certain extent, be approached as examples of the discourse network of 1900 transfiguring the literary object towards its technical conditions. If we further recall the media poetics of Lori Emerson, Stein’s various gestures towards the printed book and its customary generic structures and material parts could be conceptualized in terms of a media poetics. Like most of Emerson’s examples, Stein is also infamous for pushing the limits between genres and forms. And, as we have

29 For an in-depth analysis of the portrait genre as relational and social, see Daugaard 2012 [in Danish] and 2013. For contexts around the composition and a reading of the Bob Brown portrait, see Dydo 2003: 386-89.
seen, the media ecology of Stein further applies an ambient poetics when going beyond the textual object and artifact, for instance in connection with her use of genres as spatial angles, perspectives or machines operating on a text (Steiner 1979, Mense 1996), or the relational aspect introduced in the portraits (“Bobbed Brown”) – and in an even wider perspective when we approach the reception as collaboration in the following.

The poet John Ashbery, whom I will return to in the final part of this chapter, once observed about his own relationship to Stein’s writing that reading her spurred him on to be a “writing reader” (Quoted in Setina 2012: 147). In this formulation, Ashbery is (in a rare moment) turning his attention towards the collaborate poetics of Stein. Following this lead, I would suggest that, even if Stein did not herself approve much of mixing writing with reading (Gallup 1947: 30), her media poetics is a practice that fundamentally decreases the distance in her readers between reading and writing as well as other cognitive and creative practices, as is the case is in Emerson’s conceptualization of recent literary practice in a digital epistemology as readingwriting, thus adding a collaborative quality to both processes (Emerson 2014).

This quality in Stein’s work of shortening the distance between reading and writing has been noted by several scholars, most strikingly perhaps by Astrid Lorange whose Brief Index to Gertrude Stein is equipped with the telling title How Reading is Written. To Lorange, Stein’s “work is endlessly generative, each engagement raises different and often vexing issues, and problematizes normative conceptualizations of both reading and interpreting meaning” (Lorange 2014: 6). Reading Stein, according to Lorange, demands an enduring effort – it demands time and engagement, and a maximal attention to the temporal processes of both reading and writing.

Lorange stays in the textual space of poetry, but also touches upon Lisa Robertson’s “proposition” of reading, and this becomes an opening of an ambient and social space in and around the reader. If Stein, with Lori Emerson, is demystifying devices such as the codex and other textual technologies through media poetics, then moreover, in Lorange’s conception, Stein is demystifying the processes through which we engage with these devices, as she “was concerned with the durations of reading and writing, and with the broader, experiential ambit that contains them both” (Lorange 2014: 7). Lorange’s focus is on Stein’s challenge of the seamlessness of the reading process:

One central tenet of this study takes reading as a practice that in its teaching and learning often depends on normalizing and habituating assumptions about the function of language and the reality it claims to describe. I argue that poetry is one way of challenging the naturalization of such assumptions by focusing critical and discursive attention on the construction of language in noncommunicative contexts. To challenge the assumptions that make reading possible is also to challenge the limits of reading so that it includes other kinds of imaginative and cognitive activities – thinking, speaking, and writing, for example. Reading as writing is always writing in conversation. It is, by nature, expe-
rimental, in a literal sense of the word: to experiment is to experience by trialing; to essay: to make an attempt (Lorange 2014: 31).

Thus, this challenging of the process of reading becomes an invitation to engage with the work, not just through reading it but also through other acts, not least “writing in conversation.” Once again, the affinities with the conversational, yet written, salon genres of earlier centuries when the codex-bound institutionalization of literature was not as pervasive, are striking. And when Stein, if we are to speak in Emerson’s terms, demystifies the readingwriting process, its devices and its interfaces – like when she writes “a novel in the making” or an “opera to be sung”, or, as Logan Esdale has shown and as I will return to in chapter five, lays open her own intertextual work in composing *Ida. A Novel* (Esdale 2012) – she also invites interaction. By exposing the technologies at work in the assumed black box of the writing, she allows for other agents to enter and intervene – and a concept of the social, or the relational (of shared agency) is introduced into the art of reading and writing. It becomes collaborative at its core; it encourages “writing in conversation” – or, with Ashbery, it inspires “writing readers.”

Lorange’s point of view indicates the importance of moving beyond the artifact/device focus towards the processes and relations that connect them to other nodes in the network. In my reading, the futurity of Stein’s media poetics makes it something more than a poetics played out on the interface. Through the collaborative impulse it applies an ambient poetics and thus connects the interface to a larger infrastructure running across the ecology. If we follow Peters and conceive of the interface as a gate to larger infrastructures, then the interface can appear in the shape of the codex, and Stein can indeed, as we have seen, apply media poetics on a linguistic, text-intrinsic level to make this interface tangible, and make it open for intervention when challenging the naturalization of reading to include other cognitive activities (Lorange 2014), thus actualizing an ambient poetics that includes the immediate surrounding space. But crucially, she is also working with other levels of the ecology.

The book or printed matter as an artifact may be a point of departure, as is the case in different ways with the pamphlet *Descriptions of Literature* or in Stein and Toklas’ publishing venture, The Plain Edition. In general, Stein and her publishers worked consciously with covers, typefaces, proofs and illustrations, but always defying the creation of exclusiveness, objectifying or fetishizing the book object. Stein was dedicated to book design primarily in terms of functionality as is documented in several studies of The Plain Edition and as I will return to in chapter four (Dean 2014, Stone 2013), but beyond this she was constantly reworking the space around the book as an artifact. She did this, for instance, by interfering in the publicity surrounding the books, whether by writing fictional book blurbs or going on a publicity tour, through her approach to genre, featuring portraits as relational, occasional poetry, plays to be played and operas to be sung, and finally, by working actively with the performative, affective aspects of being an artist practicing in a public or semi-public sphere.
It is also important to note in regard to the question of agency that a collaboration in this case is not necessarily equal or free of dominance; it may not even be neutral and symmetrical, but can also take the shape of a struggle. This is supported theoretically if we return to Arendt’s space of appearance, which is also the condition for the existence of power. In Arendt’s account, “power springs up between men when they act together and vanishes when they disperse” (Arendt 1998: 200). As suggested earlier, collaborations often became twisted into disputes with Stein during her life time; most spectacularly in the failed collaboration with Georges Hugnet, but most of her collaborative enterprises have an aspect of a struggle for dominance in them. This is even true when others have engaged with her work, like in the various “hostile” takeovers of Stein’s writing style and persona through appropriation and mockery that occurred extensively in the American newspaper and magazine press through the 1910s and the 1920s (Leick 2009; see also chapters three and five).

What is important to this study, though, is that when Stein demystifies devices and socializes the written artwork, she also hurls literature into a networked condition resembling the post-medium condition in Rosalind Krauss’ sense – a media ecology that extends way beyond the material conditions of the codex. And this is an important explanation why artists in all fields and media – and particularly those fields that are muddled, assemblage, at their core – have taken to her work.

Stein in post-war American consciousness

If Gertrude Stein was at the peak of her fame in the mid-1930s in the wake of the publication of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas (1933), the Broadway staging of Four Saints in Three Acts (1934) and her American lecture tour (1935-36), it forms a striking contrast to how genuinely forgotten she appeared to be by the general public in the immediate wake of World War II in America. As Catharine Stimpson has documented, Stein’s name rarely came up in the American public sphere in the decade after her death in 1946, be it in mainstream media or literary periodicals, and when it did, it was practically always in connection with her capacity of modernist art collector and society hostess (Stimpson 1984: 303). During these years, Stein’s literary heritage in the United States was attended to by a small number of “advocates and guardians” (Stimpson 1984: 302) who were working to preserve her work and publish more of her writing, and attempting to make a canonized modernist out of her that would fit in with the art historical narrative of modernism being composed during these years. The American novelist and critic Carl Van Vechten, whom Stein had appointed as her literary executor, oversaw the publication of the series of her previously unpublished writings issued by Yale University Press in eight volumes between 1951 and 1958, along with playwright and novelist Thornton Wilder, who had also been a close friend of Stein’s in her later life, and the scholars Donald
Sutherland, who wrote the first academic monograph on Stein (Sutherland 1951) and Donald Gallup, curator of the Yale Collection of American Literature.

The publications from Yale University Press, both the series of unpublished writings and the reprints and selections that came out in the late 1940s and early 1950s, were the reading public’s primary source of access to Stein’s work, most of which was either unpublished or out of print in the post-war years. The basis for these publications was Stein’s archive at Yale, with Gallup in charge of its construction and expansion along with head of the Yale American Studies’ Program, Norman Holmes Pearson. The collections had been initiated by donations of manuscripts, typescripts, books and correspondence from Stein herself, as well as from Wilder, Van Vechten, Robert Bartless Haas and Toklas among others, and quickly achieved a unique position in the library’s collection of American literature due to both the quantity and the quality of the material (Gallup 1947; Kuhl 2014). Stimpson suggests that a congealing impulse controlled Stein’s literary heritage in the post-war years, where her conservatively colored image that was produced in broad media was somewhat paralleled in the attempt at canonization from her advocates:

The advocates and the media shared a conservative, and a conserving, function. They were part of the mid-twentieth century institutionalization of the avant-garde and of the canonization of modernism – in brief, of the transformation of the atelier into the museum; of the little magazine into the textbook. Despite their efforts, despite a common acknowledgement of Stein as a “great” modernist, she remained – as a writer – on the margins of a codified modernism (Stimpson 1984: 305).

Stimpson is certainly correct in noting that where Stein’s part in the construction of the American version of the history of modernist European painting was quite smoothly recognized – including by major institutions, as demonstrated by MoMA’s first exhibition based on the Stein siblings’ painting collections, *Four Americans in Paris. The Collections of Gertrude Stein and her Family*, 1970-71 – fitting her writing into the narrative of literary modernism proved harder. Yet, from a contemporary vantage point, it is possible to spot other nuances to this – apparently overall unsuccessful – attempt by Stein’s friends and advocates to preserve her reputation in a certain form.

Stimpson identifies a tendency towards normalizing the language around the “companionship” between Stein and Toklas, and conventionalizing their queer appearance to avoid offending the more narrow-minded sections of the American public, which can certainly be characterized as conservative gestures. Yet, intertwined in this discourse is a strong attention towards affective and ambient aspects. For instance, Carl Van Vechten’s several introductions to Stein’s writings pay attention to her social nature, the warmth of her personality and the engaged quality of her writing that make it intuitively appealing.30

30 Van Vechten wrote about Stein on numerous occasions, for instance in early articles such as “Cubist of Letters Writes New Book” (in: *New York Times*, 1913), “How to Read Gertrude Stein” (in: *The Trend* 1914) and in his introductions to *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), *Last Operas and Plays* (1949), *Selected
Many of Van Vechten’s pieces on Stein are also fairly distracted and contain imprecisions and factual inaccuracies, and later academic reception has paid little attention to them. Edward Burns’ formulation in his introduction to *The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Carl Van Vechten* that “Van Vechten’s affection for Stein resulted in a personalized reading of her works that had little depth but expressed profound admiration” (Burns 1986: 12) represents the widely held position that such contributions were well-meant, but mainly contained irrelevant metatalk that was not relevant to her actual work. And by Stein skeptics, they have been regarded as evidence that Stein’s work was valuable only to those who knew and admired her (for example, Reid 1958: 5-9). Thus, the affective, enthusiastic reception of Stein, has also been regarded as a confirmation of Leo Stein’s accusation against his sister’s work, as recounted by Stein’s narrator in *Everybody’s Autobiography*:

> He said it was not it it was I. If I was not there to be there with what I did then what I did would not be what it was. In other words if no one knew me actually then the things I did would not be what they were (EA 79).

What Leo’s claim adds up to, is that Stein’s work is nothing without her personality. Yet, as has already been addressed, there are pressing reasons to conceive of this “social stuff” as one of the most characteristic qualities of her work. From Carl Van Vechten, Thornton Wilder and other friends spring an affectionate reception, a friendship-and-tribute reception, that can appear to be subjective hagiography but in fact has an awareness of the social nature of Stein’s poetics that is often missed in more formalist approaches to her work.31 As language poet and scholar Michael Davidson has put it, “Stein diagnoses a flaw in the aesthetic insofar as that category is thought to exist beyond the social” (Davidson 1996: 40), and what the affectionate reception demonstrates is how she, in response, tries to install the social into the heart of the aesthetic.

A quick survey of the introductions to the volumes of *The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein* testifies to such a “social” strategy in the choice of authors. They are written by a cast of Stein’s friends and acquaintances, all of whom include their personal relationships and collaborations with Stein or their memory of aspects of her personality in their introductions to the specific writings in each volume: Janet Flanner (Volume 1: Two: Gertrude Stein and Her Brother and Other Early Portraits), Lloyd Frankenberg (Volume 2: Mrs. Reynolds and Five Earlier Novellettes), Virgil Thomson (Volume 3: Bee Time Vine and Other Pieces), Natalie Clifford Barney (Volume 4: As Fine as Melanchta), Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler (Volume 5: Painted Lace and other pieces), Donald Sutherland (Volume 6: Stanzas in Meditation and Other Poems),

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31 Thornton Wilder’s introduction to Stein’s *Four in America* is an early piece on Stein’s work that pays extensive attention to her personality and life as part and parcel with her creative and philosophical project (Wilder 1947). It has (well-deserved) attracted more critical attention than Van Vechten’s, in comparison, more superficial accounts.
Donald Gallup (Volume 7: Alphabets and Birthdays) and Carl Van Vechten, (Volume 8: A Novel of Thank You). A few of them may have less to say about the actual writing, but generally the introductions are interesting for their sense of the importance of sociality. If pure and unequivocal tribute does not always supply the most interesting critical insights or complex aesthetic experiences, important points about the affective relations at play in the collaborative poetics of Stein can be sought here.

I am not contesting that the efforts of both Stein herself and her friends were to some extent directed towards obtaining her recognition as a “proper” modernist writer modelled on the template of the male genius as has been put forward by scholars such as Stimpson, Perloff and Dydo. But, as will become clearer in later chapters, through the relational aspects that these advocates continued to emphasize in their depiction of her, they were already disturbing the stability of this modernist figure. In effect, the Stein figure thus constructed seems closer related to queer, performative and rambling figures of what Amelia Jones has called “irrational modernism” such as Baroness Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven (Jones 2004) than to figures of male literary genius like Pound or Joyce.

Archival gestures

In regard to the archive, the preserving nature of any archival endeavor superficially supports the claim against the institutionally sanctioned Stein image made by Stimpson, but even the archive contains strong impulses that cannot be regarded as solely conserving or conservative. Stein herself took a great interest in the initiation and construction of the archive during the last ten years of her life (Gallup 1947; Esdale 2012). As Logan Esdale has shown, this archive played an active part in Stein’s intertextual composition process when she was working on her late principal work Ida A Novel (1937-1941). In several letters to librarians at Yale, Stein confirmed that she intended to donate her entire life’s correspondence to the archive: “I have a habit of keeping all sorts of letters” (Gallup 1947: 25). She made it very clear that she intended to include everything, including the homely, everyday correspondence with servants, family members, concierges, even if the corpus of letters was “in a great deal of mess” as she put it (Gallup, 1947: 25).

Today the correspondence in the archive is huge, due to both Stein’s donations and the donations of friends and associates, but apart from this and from the manuscripts, Stein’s archive also contains a generous amount of other materials, some of which were supplied by Stein, but most of which came by way of friends after her death. Press clippings, photographs, notebooks, sketches and small artworks from Stein’s art collection are among the more common records, but decontextualized everyday objects and kitsch items are also included. As I will return to in further depth in chapter five, the archive is also a site of multi-materiality in which Stein (as well as her friendly “advocates”) continued the preservation and restaging of her own earlier writings that she had begun with...
her autobiographies and lectures. Ultimately, this practice has saved them from oblivion, in a manner similar to the auto-archival practice of Marcel Duchamp in his *Boîtes-en-valise* (1935-41). As Sven Spieler has suggested, many of the assisted ready-mades that Duchamp included in miniature copies in his suitcase works were ephemeral works in their first versions that were not intended for preservation or sale, but through this auto-archival practice they were made available for later art historical canonization (Spieler 2008). In Stein’s case, an important part of this preservation, documentation and restaging conducted by the archive attends to the posthumous maintenance of Stein’s public persona. Numerous portraits and sketches of Stein, Toklas, their homes, and their dogs made by artist friends contribute to the construction of an icon. The appropriations of Stein’s name and writing are documented in her own collections of newspaper clippings, which are filled with caricatures and jokes, all the way back to the earliest columns mocking her style that followed in the wake of the the *Armory Show* art exhibition (1912) and the publication of *Tender Buttons* (1914) – the first events to bring Stein’s name to the awareness of a broader American public – to the massive coverage of her American lecture tour and the staging of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, and the appropriations and jokes it generated.

As I will examine in more detail in the final chapter, the collection also documents the creation of the Stein persona via items such as identity papers, medals and diplomas, horoscopes and fortune teller’s prophesies and the like, and even its material and technological construction via items such as the wax seal with a rose motif and the inscription “rose is a rose is rose is a rose” used for correspondence, copies of the letterhead with the rose quote, several items of clothing that belonged to Stein and Toklas and many photographs documenting how they wore it, seeds and dried flowers from the garden of their summer house, and the wonderfully paradoxical set of Louis XV chairs that Toklas embroidered with Picasso designs. These chairs are arguably among the first items to fully conceive of cubism’s potential as a ‘dentist’s office’ decorative art style, anticipating by at least fifty years the present status of modernist art as ‘good taste decoration’ or even kitsch. As I will explain in further detail in chapter five, what is happening here is quite contrary to the conservative impulse one would intuitively identify in an archival practice. Stein’s archive is also a multi-material site, and if its items are obviously held together by institutionalized archival organization, they are also joined by relational gestures, by friendship and affection, and together they constitute something like a do-it-yourself toolbox for the future Stein collaborator.
Newspaper clippings from Stein’s own collection that was bequeathed to the archive. All date from 1934-35.

The wax seal fastened to a figurine of the Virgin Mary; the seal used on an envelope; a plate Stein had made at a local pottery in Belley as a gift for Carl van Vechten; the letterhead on Stein’s stationery (photos taken at Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

Wooden chairs covered with petit point embroidery by Alice B. Toklas after two paintings by Picasso. 1930-34. Courtesy of Yale Collection of American Literature at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library.
What this shows us is that we need to broaden what we consider the media ecology of literature if we want to understand the contemporary potential of Stein’s oeuvre. Many parts of this are in the archive, but they need to be revisited and revitalized in order to make a difference. In the post-war period this did not happen. Even if the influx of objects into the collections continued, few scholars have made notes on it. A number of philologists and literary scholars (Robert Haas, Leon Katz, Donald Sutherland, Richard Bridgman, Michael Hoffman, Allegra Stewart), several of whom had known or met Stein and Toklas, worked during these years mostly with the conventional paper material in the archive, and their work is largely devoted to classical philology and literary scholarship as well as to philosophical and psychological themes played out in Stein’s work. Yet, the important philological work started by Haas-Gallup and continued up to the present by Dydo and Burns, as well as scholars behind the critical volumes of Stein’s work that have appeared in later years, also lays the ground for any future engagements with Stein’s work. Crucially, the archive collections were the source of the publications of Stein’s unpublished writings that started appearing during the 1950s, and thus are also indirectly the site where the artistic and poetic reception, which is to be the focus of the rest of this chapter, can pick up from.

In spite of the cooling of public and academic attention in the 1950s, Stein’s presence is continually felt in the arts and poetry of this period. In the following part of this chapter I will trace the complex media ecology that Stein’s artistic reception forms in the media ecology of post-war America from her death and into the 1960s. What is striking about the art from this period that addresses Stein’s poetics or her persona is that it appears across a range of artistic communities and in practically all known artistic media – and frequently in combinations of media, thus lifting Stein’s media poetics of writing and reading into a broader media ecology. Or, as American Fluxus artist and Stein publisher Dick Higgins phrased it, into the domain of “intermedia.”

II. THE MEDIA ECOCOLOGIES OF POST-WAR NEW YORK

It is commonly recognized that significant social, political and cultural changes hit Western societies in the 1960s. In his account of this “cultural revolution,” Arthur Marwick lists a number of parameters under which these changes took place, including a rise in movements, initiatives and subcultures in opposition to established society, causing an extreme innovation and entrepreneurship, not least within the arts (Marwick 1998: 17). Massive technological innovations within mass media (especially concerning television and the technological options for recording and distributing music), communication and transportation (telephone and jet travel, increasing global communication and mobili-
ty), industrial production (increased automation, freeing up young people from the work force) and computational media (causing ideas that artificial intelligence would soon equal human intelligence to flourish) also turned many solid impressions about the order of things upside down. In the years following World War II, New York was replacing Paris as the international center for the production and sale of art, “launched by the migration of artists from Hitler’s Europe” (Marwick 1998: 184), and from the mid-1950s an extremely diverse and productive alternative and multi-disciplinary art scene emerged in the city with activities from poetry, installations, painting and music to dance, theater and any imaginable mix of the above. As Rebecca Schneider has written, in New York City by the 1960s,

we find an almost frenzied intersection between visual arts, film, dance, poetry, and theater. Dick Higgins’s phrase “intermedia” catches the sense of the intersection if not the feel of the frenzy. (Schneider 2005: 27).

The Something Else Press

Before moving on the first concrete collaboration, I would like to dwell for a moment on the distribution of Stein’s work to the art scene of this period. Dick Higgins (1938-1998) was an extremely versatile artist known as a composer and visual poet and a publisher, and was among the earliest advocates of the international and interdisciplinary art movement Fluxus in New York. But in the enthusiastic spirit of the period, Higgins also pursued a career as a literary scholar, playwright, performance artist, and painter. Higgins founded the Something Else Press in 1963. The publishing profile of the press reflected the plural interests of its founder and thus it can be thought of as a diverse media ecology in its own right. Higgins published concrete poetry and other writings and projects by members of the international Fluxus community as well as theoretical texts addressing the same paradigm like Marshall McLuhan’s Verbi-Voco-Visual Explorations.

The press also took to older works that could be considered predecessors of the contemporary movements. Most extensively it published Gertrude Stein, whom Higgins considered “the most important writer between Matthew Arnold and Bertholt Brecht” (Higgins 1990: 51). Reissuing a long list of unobtainable Stein titles during the 1960s and 1970s in facsimile editions – including The Making of Americans (1966), Geography and Plays (1968) and the original Plain Edition titles, Lucy Church Amiably (1969), Matisse Picasso and Gertrude Stein (1972), A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story (1973) and How to Write (1973) – the Something Else Press may be the single most important publishing label for the distribution of Stein’s work overall, alongside the Yale University Press and Stein and Toklas’ own Plain Edition, which had been the first publisher of most of the reissued works. The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein constituted the first public access to over two thousand pages of writing.
by Stein that had never been in print before. Yet, it was not widely distributed and only sporadically reviewed and discussed, with the important exception of John Ashbery’s game changing review of *Stanzas in Meditation*, with which I will terminate this chapter. In contrast, the publications from the Something Else Press were widely read and discussed in the 1960s and the early 1970s, due to the central position of the press on the experimental New York art scene.

As Henry Sayre has stressed, what makes the Something Else Press unique in Stein publishing is not huge print runs, but the diverse avant-garde public to which the press had access in the circles of young artists and intellectuals of the 1960s:

> The audience Higgins anticipated for the Stein books was hardly limited to the literary establishment – in fact, it hardly included the literary establishment at all. These books were meant for the avant-garde art scene – for the dancers at the Judson Dance Theater, for the painters who were their associates and the musicians who scored their performances. (Sayre 1984: 33).

It seems the publications of the Something Else Press and comparable small presses that thrived in the same environment also accessed an international audience due to the international networks of travelling art movements like Fluxus. The Stein books also reached avant-garde artist’s circles in Europe, and the reception of Stein in Germany and Scandinavia that also starts to take off in the 1960s also has some of these titles as their primary source of access to Stein’s writings (Ørum 2015: 233).

**Intermedia**

In 1966, the same year that the Something Else Press published its first Gertrude Stein reprint, *The Making of Americans*, Higgins also issued his first “Something Else Newsletter.”34 Here, he declared that “much of the best work being produced today seems to fall between media” (Higgins 2001: 49), and consequently suggested the term “intermedia” in order to underline this.35 Higgins uses the term in two ways. First, as a material charac-

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33 In this context, it should be noted that a reception of Stein does exist in both Germany and Scandinavia prior to the distributions of the Something Else Press editions. Swedish concrete poet Öyvind Fahlström wrote about Stein and translated extracts from Tender Buttons already in the early 1950s (Olsson 2005: 185-186) and in Germany the Stuttgart-based journal *Augenblick* edited by Max Bense published both translations, readings and collaborative engagements with Stein’s work by Bense, Helmut Heißenbüttel and Elisabeth Walther among others, in the latter half of the 1950s and into the 60s (Döhl 1993).


35 To be entirely correct, Higgins did not invent the word, which was used by Coleridge as early as 1812 in a somewhat similar meaning, but lifted it into this particular context and it travelled into the discourse on avant-garde art of the 1960s via his usage. See Higgins 2001: 52.
terization of an increasing body of experimental artworks, since: “The world was filled at that time with concrete poems, happenings, sound poetry, environments” (Higgins 2001: 52) that appeared in forms not reducible to classical art forms such as sculpture, painting, music, theatre or poetry, and thus appeared inaccessible to a large part of its potential audience. At the same time, the notion functioned as a positive evaluation of this work. As Higgins boldly claims, “part of the reason that Duchamp’s objects are fascinating while Picasso’s voice is fading is that the Duchamp pieces are truly between media, between sculpture and something else, while a Picasso is readily classifiable as a painted ornament” (Higgins 2001: 49). Higgins goes on to give a brief survey of 1960s American art, operating mostly in what he conceives as a field between the visual and performative arts, but also touching upon poetry and music that exhibits qualities of “intermedia.” Higgins does not mention Stein directly in this piece, but almost every name in his suggested intermedia canon will connect with Stein’s oeuvre in one way or another.37

There seems to be an immediate coherence between Higgins’ label and the media diversity of the Stein reception during this period. Following Higgins’ argument, a tempting conclusion could be that the reason why Stein was so “fascinating” to the art world of the 1960s, while the voice of for instance Eliot would seem to be fading, is that Stein’s writings are “truly between media,” between poetry, painting, music and performance art, while the work of Joyce or Eliot at this point was more readily classifiable as printed books to be put on shelves.

At the point when Higgins wrote the piece, the dominance of abstract impressionism in the immediate wake of the war was being challenged, and Higgins’ intermedia term is to be understood as part of the clash with the discourse of modernist art historians like Clement Greenberg and Michael Fried, building upon medium specificity and thus favoring visual art like abstract expressionism that cultivated the flat surface of the canvas.

However influential Higgins’ term was in the avant-garde discourse of the mid 1960s, it has subsequently been criticized for a lack of precision when applied in concrete analyses. Returning to the concept in 1981, Higgins himself complains that it has often been mistaken for the descriptive term “mixed media” referring to artworks, mainly in the domain of visual arts, that apply different materials in an assemblage or installation, thus utilizing simply more than one medium in the same work, but never causing any doubt as to which is which. In contrast, “intermedia” is – according to Higgins – to be understood as something not intrinsic to a single object of a specific medium but a quality that adheres from relations. As we shall see, there are resemblances between Higgins’ idea of

36 Higgins’ claim about Picasso is of course also disputable (see for example Schultz 2005 for a comparative study of Stein and Picasso that contradicts it), but one that demonstrates the success of institutionalizing the modernist art of Picasso, Cezanne, Matisse, that is the 1950s “transformation of the atelier into the museum” suggested by Stimpson above. Higgins’s indifference towards Picasso’s work certainly testifies to its mainstream canonization by the mid-1960s.

37 I.e. John Cage, Emmet Williams, Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Benjamin Paterson, Nam June Paik, Claes Oldenburg, and the crowd around Judson Memorial Church.
intermedia and ambient poetics. However, the addressed confusion between “interme-
dia” and “mixed media” is hardly surprising if we look at a few works alluding to Stein
by some of the artists Higgins refers to in his original intermedia piece. Nam June Paik
and Benjamin Patterson, who associated with Fluxus and came into the movement from
a background in music in the early 1960s, have both, albeit at a significantly later date,
made humorous “intermedia” works evoking Stein.

Benjamin Patterson: A Short History of the 20th Century Art – at least three versions of the work
exist. This version was included in a Fluxus retrospective that toured for 18 years, therefore subti-

Detail of Paterson’s Stein panel; Nam June Paik, Gertrude Stein, 1990.
A work like Nam June Paik’s *Gertrude Stein* (1990) does indeed combine disparate materials and make use of the medium of video, via the TV screens that are installed in a sculptural piece in a way that would be likely to be labeled “mixed media.” Patterson’s wooden panels in *A Short History of the 20th Century Art* (1993) combine found objects, text and figurative imagery to create a humorous art historical narrative covering several known media (visual art, music video, literature, dance, music) and giving them a mutual “end” in “Fluxus.” However, the “intermedia” quality of these works, according to Higgins’ definition, lies not in the fact that several materials are assembled by the works, but in the way these works place themselves in between known media, and by pushing the conceptual tools of these media upon each other and making them indiscernible. Hence, by integrating the video screen into the sculpture, Paik is using video images and devices sculpturally, and through the use of toy-like brightly colored letters, Patterson is fusing the visual element and even the aspect of “found object” with words as linguistic units.

Both Paik’s and Patterson’s works frame Stein as a key figure in 20th century art history, and address her role as one pushing her own medium to its fringes. Both stress the sense of deluge coming from challenging rigid rules of specific media and letting the works work more freely, dissolving the boundaries between artist, work and spectator. Yet, this difference can be somewhat difficult to pin down, and in his own recourse of the concept, Higgins finally suggests that perhaps “it is more useful at the outset of a critical process than at later stages of it” and even grants that maybe “in all the excitement of what was, for me, a discovery, I overvalued it” (Higgins 2001: 53).

It would seem that the challenge of “intermedia” becoming indistinguishable from “mixed media” occurs particularly when the situational context is removed from the artwork, especially the Fluxus work. When the trace produced by a processual artwork is all that is left, it is easily mistaken for the artwork itself, as is to some extent the case with these two examples, which were originally conceived as parts of performative situations. Patterson’s panels were casually constructed and meant to be temporary and mobile, and several elements were set in motion when the work was exhibited. Paik’s “Gertrude Stein” robot is built almost entirely out of audio media (vintage radio consoles, vinyl LPs and Victrola horns), some of which were installed to make noise. The two incorporated television sets run loops of film documenting Paik’s collaborative work with John Cage and Merce Cunningham (Corn and Latimer 2011: 278). When encountered today, especially via the photo documentation I have been able to come by, they too can perhaps begin to look too much like “a painted ornament” to be truly interesting, if the viewer is not aware of reconstructing the situational context. I would suggest that a similar risk applies to Stein’s work if it is conceived mainly as printed artifacts and its relational and contextually connective aspects are not sufficiently recognized.
Stein in music, minimalism and beyond: John Cage

A number of the artists who refer to Stein or appropriate her work in the 1950s and 1960s were led to Stein by protean avant-garde composer, artist, writer and thinker John Cage (1912-1992). Cage’s importance in most corners of the experimental American art world of the latter half of the 20th century and beyond is well established, as the extreme connectivity and sociality of his artistic and theoretical practice that also included extensive teaching during the course of a career of fifty years makes his influence felt in many different artistic communities.

In the introduction to his seminal lecture collection *Silence* (1961), Cage claims that in his first years of college, he started writing “in the manner of Gertrude Stein” (Cage 1961: x). By his own account, he was interested in her writing from his youth, but was unsuccessful in an attempt to meet Stein when he first travelled to Europe around 1930, although he did get a chance to visit Alice Toklas in Rue Christine in 1949 (Cage 2016 33; 103; 218).

As has been well established, Cage and Stein shared an enthusiasm for the music of Erik Satie, as well as a detailed knowledge of the work of Virgil Thomson (Dickinson 1986, Stimpson 1984). Although Cage never met Stein, he was quick to take up the collaborative invitation her work implies. Among the very first musical compositions by Cage registered in his list of works are “Three Songs”, with words by Gertrude Stein from 1932-33 when he was just embarking on a career as a composer. The first two of the brief songs, “Twenty years after” and “If it was to be”, are based on lines from Stein’s highly melodious and repetitious “Van or Twenty Years After. A Second Portrait of Carl Van Vechten” (1923) written some ten years earlier, and the last song “At East and ingredients” lifts the repetitious first paragraph from “Near East or Chicago. A Description” (1924). The songs are composed for a duo of voice and piano, and the repetitious lines by Stein are repeated and cut up and repeated further, extending the technique already applied by Stein. Both pieces by Stein were printed in her “American collection” *Useful Knowledge* that came out in 1928, and this was probably where Cage first encountered them. As Cage himself puts it, “the Stein songs are, so to speak, transcriptions from a repetitive language to a repetitive music” (Cage 1990, no paging). Stein’s particular relationship with repetition is probably the easiest way to understand the many connections between her work and Cage’s, as well as the connections that run towards other players in the 1950-60s art scene, especially if sticking to music and dance (Cage, Cunningham, La Monte Young, Rainer).

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38 Asked to make a list of the ten books that influenced him the most, Cage started it with “Gertrude Stein Any Title” (Kostelanetz (ed.) 1970 :138).
39 Cage’s early compositions are included in this chapter (even though they were produced before Stein’s death and thus fall outside the time frame) because he did not meet or exchange with her directly, in contrast to Virgil Thomson and the painters and artists who met and collaborated with Stein in her life time, and thus are not included into the scope of this study.
John Cage: Living Room Music

The British musicologist and pianist Peter Dickinson has argued for Stein’s unacknowledged importance for new music precisely due to her pioneering work on repetition and her analysis of the effects of repetition throughout her career (Dickinson 1986).\footnote{Arguably, this influence is somewhat more acknowledged today than it was in the 1980s when Dickinson wrote about it.} This is clearly the case in the Three Stein Songs, but in Cage’s only other direct Stein collaboration, Living Room Music from 1940, Stein’s focused attention to the domestic space and everyday life appears equally important. In this composition, Stein’s use of ordinary words and her attempt at liberating them from devaluation and blind habit to let them glow in their own right is mirrored in Cage’s use, not only of some of Stein’s ordinary words, but also of some ordinary non-linguistic sounds, implying the space of domestic everyday life that is rendered in Tender Buttons and the near-sighted attention to ordinary household objects this interest carried along with it. By writing the composition not for regular instruments but to be performed on living room objects, the composition is tied to the actual room in which it is performed. The sounds have to come from objects, tables and chairs in a living room, and thus the spatial element of the performance situation is enhanced. This is evidently music that is realized in a spatial situation, and not just in any room, but a living room. Thus, the room we are living in is literally brought into play: it makes music. Here, Cage is also alluding to the roomy or ambient quality of Stein’s writing. The sections of Tender Buttons are called “Objects”, “Food”, and “Rooms”, which are the three elements surrounding the living body: the objects the body handles, including the clothes it wears, the food it processes and the rooms it dwells in. Cage’s choice of spoons, teacups and tabletops as instruments is a musical realization of this framing of Tender Buttons.

With Living Room Music, the implicit spatiality of the media ecology of music as the organization of sound in an environment is demonstrated, but in the spirit of Higgins’ “intermedia,” the piece also contains a theatrical gesture that points towards the happenings and other spatial and ephemeral forms that began flourishing in the 1960s. Yet, although it has elements of improvisation it still is a composed piece of music, and not a “happening” governed by chance operations in the manner of later collaborative works by Cage, Cunningham and other associates of the Black Mountain College, such as the Untitled Event (1952) that has been canonized by Erika Fischer-Lichte as a threshold event for the performative turn (Fischer-Lichte 2008:131-133).

Moreover, it is indebted to the media poetics of Stein, way beyond the use of her words as part of the rhythmic composition and the sharing of her attention to the domestic setting and its everyday objects. The very naming of the parts calls to mind Stein’s way of paying attention to the functionalities of her medium. By calling the first part “To begin” and the final Part IV “End,” Cage is stating the obvious in a way that quotes Stein’s dead-
pan habit of doing what she is saying. The same goes for the names of the middle parts – Part II, “Story”, where the lines from Stein are repeated and spoken in a way similar to rhythmic percussion, and Part III, the only melodic/tonal part of the composition, which is logically called “Melody” – and thus Cage follows the lead of Stein in naming the parts and functions of his composition by pointing towards their material structure or technical function. The words used in “Story” are the opening lines of Chapter I of *The World Is Round*, called “Rose Is a Rose”: “Once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around.” However brief this passage is, it is a perfect accomplishment of the task set by the part’s subtitle, “Story.” It opens like a fairytale, embraces the whole world in its simple circular movement and forms a completed story in one sentence while embracing the spatiality of the whole composition.

To the right: More and more, music is about playing with materials, creating an environment, creating wants. In *The World Is Round*, the repetitions of Stein are carried out in a slightly more talkative, naïve narrative tone of voice, which differs from the briefer 1920s compositions that Cage used as basis for his *Three Songs* and also from most Stein compositions set to music by Virgil Thomson, but is similar to the voice used in *Ida* (1937-40) that Stein

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41 Thomson’s Stein compositions include the songs “Susie Asado” (1926), “Preciosilla” (1927), “Portrait of F.B.” (1929), “Capital Capitals” (1927), and the opera Four Saints in Three Acts (1927). These

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was also working on around the time she wrote *The World is Round* (Esdale 2012: xi). Repetitions and rhyme are still crucial stylistic tools, but the use is less concentrated and cut up; instead it appears outstretched in mostly grammatically correct full sentences like in traditional narrative verse for children. But what Cage does in his adaption is to take the first lines of Stein’s novel and basically “do a Gertrude Stein on it,” as Caroline Bergvall suggested. Not by redoing Stein’s negations, like Bergvall, but by redoing her repetitions. In the manner of Stein, he is repeating the words, splitting them up into shorter phrases and making variations and new combinations of them, letting them form a rhythmic movement. He even cuts out individual words (“like”, “round”, “time”, “it”) and sounds (“t” and “s”) that are repeated in sequences by the performers. Linguistically, the technique appears almost like a combination of what Stein did with the repetition of almost identical sentences with small variations in *The Making of Americans* or her early artist’s portraits and what she did with sound play and single word repetition in the more melodic texts from the 1910s and 1920s, previously adapted to music by Cage and Thomson. The humorous, almost cheerful feeling of the percussion sections go extremely well with the energy of Stein’s most funny writing and also carry on the apparently light naïveté wrapped around an existential profundity that runs through *The World is Round*. What reveals itself as the greatest difference between the way Cage engages with Stein’s words in this composition and the way Virgil Thomson has done it, both in his Stein songs and in his opera scores, is that Cage uses Stein’s words as material to compose with, and does not, like Thomson, make music to accompany the words. The words are used as an instrumental element in the composition on equal terms with the other sounds used, which continues the radicalness of Stein’s media poetics into the field of intermedia as described by Higgins. Arguably, Cage’s composition is also taking a more active collaborative stance towards Stein as he also alters Stein’s word order, instead of just leaving the words to Stein and dealing with the music as Thompson did to some extent.

If Cage paid musical tribute to Stein very early in his career through the *Three Songs* acknowledging her importance for his work as a composer, his own writing is perhaps where he seems most directly shaped by her. His “Lecture on Nothing” (1950) and many of the other lecture-performances included in *Silence* are indebted to Stein’s *Lectures in America*, both in their themes, such as insistence and continuous present, and in their linguistic shape, and most of all, in the magnificent manner these aspects tend to weave into one another (Perloff 1981: 305-307). If a clear media poetic attention is paid to opening up the interface of writing – and lecturing – in Stein’s lectures, plays and novels, then this attention is even more intense and funny in Cage’s “Lecture on Nothing” that constantly comments on itself as happening, names its own parts, repeats the structural principles they are controlled by, and denies the possibility of addressing any content other than that of the form: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as

are all based on texts that are fairly abstract and concentrated in sound play, repetition by word, punning, rhyme and alliteration.

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I need it. This space of time is organized” (Cage 1961: 109).

The active interference of Stein herself in the reception of her own work that becomes evident with “Composition as Explanation” (1926) and increasingly distinct with the late autobiographies and meditations of the 1930s, above all with her Lectures in America, is also a model for Cage’s characteristic practice of shaping his own reception. Like Stein, he has read and interpreted his own work so extensively that his own discourse about his art has dominated the reception for years, even after his death (Robinson 2009: 58).

Speaking about influence in this case becomes misleading as the exchange between Cage and Stein is a relationality going both ways. It is collaborative in the sense that Stein has shaped Cage but Cage, has shaped Stein at least as much. Stein, in Cage’s essentially minimalist reading of her, has shaped his practice in many ways that are extensively addressed by himself and his reception, but his reading also became a foundation for later readings of Stein. For instance, the readings of Stein performed by the language poetry community that will be approached in chapter two owe extensive debts to Cage’s Stein, even if, as we shall see, these readings became gradually more media exclusive as the new poetry community withdrew from the older generation of minimalist artists that they had initially connected with. Reading Stein in an extension of Marjorie Perloff’s “poetics of indeterminacy” is arguably one of the most influential ideas in academic Stein reception after 1980, and is thus an indirect, but convincing way to frame how much Cage’s reading of Stein has shaped future readings of her, since Cage’s lecture “Indeterminacy” (from Silence) could be cited as a crucial source for Perloff in her initial coining of the concept.

The liberation of the word and the sound

When the poet E. E. Cummings read from Stein’s Tender Buttons in his Harvard address in 1915, he criticized Stein for trying to take abstraction impossibly far in the medium of writing:

“‘The unparalleled familiarity of the medium’ (that is, words) ‘precludes its use for the purpose of aesthetic effect. And here, in their logical conclusion, impressionistic tendencies are reduced to absurdity’” (Cummings, as quoted by Dickinson 1986: 396). That Stein should in fact be committed to a poetics of abstraction as Cummings is claiming is debatable, but the poetics described by Cummings does have important similarities to the reading of Stein that Cage also conducts. This connection is also stressed by Dickinson: “for Stein’s emancipation of the word to be translated into the emancipation of the sound itself in music, we have to wait for Cage in 1955” (Dickinson 1986: 397). In his lecture “Experimental Music: Doctrine” (1955) Cage writes:
A sound does not view itself as thought, as ought, as needing another sound for its elucidation, as etc. it has not time for any consideration – it is occupied with the performance of its characteristics (Cage 1961:14).

By extension, Dickinson claims:

If “word” is substituted for “sound,” this describes Stein’s practice; the idea came from Cage’s study of Stein. The difference is that Cage meant any sound; Stein was forced to use preexisting units in a language (American English) […] (Dickinson 1986: 397).

In her lecture “Poetry and Grammar,” Stein discusses how in Tender Buttons and other works from this time she was committed to using words as if they existed on their own and were not dependent on a system of words for their meaning. Here, she formulates an aspiration to allow every word to be there in the text with all its qualities, like when it was brand new and had just been made up by Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It seems that Cage intends to do a similar thing with sound, linguistic or non-linguistic. He is interested in letting sounds be themselves, but as it turns out, this can only be done with the help of silence.

Dance and music critic and writer Jill Johnston (1929-2010) wrote a contemporary review of Silence in Village Voice under the title “There Is No Silence Now” (1962). Johnson was a dedicated Stein reader and one of the contemporaries to formulate the most articulated connections between the intermedia art scene of the early 1960s (in particular experimental dance and the work of Yvonne Rainer) and the poetics of Gertrude Stein. In her review of Silence, Johnson does not mention Stein directly, but nevertheless it is impossible not to think of her when reading it. As Johnston opens, “Silence is the book by the man who might qualify for ‘best known, least understood’ of contemporary artists” (Johnston 1970: 145), which arguably, apart from the gender, would have been an equally precise claim to make about Stein’s The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas thirty years earlier. Johnston also discusses Cage’s idea of working with sound independently that Dickinson identified as coming from Stein, “so that each sound may be heard only as itself and not depend for its value on its place within a ‘system’ of sounds” (Johnston 1970: 145). Johnston sees this “acceptance of all audible phenomena as material proper to music” as parallel to the found object or the ready-made of Duchamp.

But more interestingly, for my purposes, she goes on to stress the originality of Cage’s artistic vision in the field of music by his relationship, not to sound, but to silence:

In some important sense, Cage has reversed all traditional practices of composing music by making silence the material of music as well as sound. […] Cage may be the first composer in history to say that there is no such thing as silence. He quotes, as personal proof, an experience in an anechoic chamber, a room made as technologically silent as
possible, in which he heard two sounds: his nervous system and his circulatory system. In terms of music, this means that the conventional “pauses” of the past are as filled with sound as the music made by performers from a notated score. This sound is what happens to be in the environment, and it is “called silence only because it does not form part of a musical intention” (Johnston 1970: 146).

In Johnston’s account, it is striking how Cage’s description of silence is related to Stein’s description of repetition in “Portraits and Repetition”:

Then also there is the important question of repetition and is there any such thing. Is there repetition or is there insistence. I am inclined to believe that there is no such thing as repetition. And really how can there be […] once started expressing this thing, expressing any thing there can be no repetition because the essence of that expression is insistence, and if you insist you must each time use emphasis and if you use emphasis it is not possible while anybody is alive that they should use exactly the same emphasis (LIA 288).

Essentially, the point for both artists is that there is no such thing. With Stein’s take on repetition one thinks two instances or sentences are exactly the same, yet, as it turns out, the emphasis is always different. Or, with Cage’s take on silence, one thinks it is absolutely quiet but one’s nerves are singing and one’s blood is pounding. What both Stein and Cage essentially do in these explanations is to push the decisive factor of the aesthetic experience out of the art object (the word in the composition or the sound or pause produced by the performer) as an isolated artifact and into the environment. With Stein, when understanding the implications of repetition, we have to extend our attention beyond the words as they appear on the page or spoken out loud in a play, and with Cage, when contemplating music, we have to extend our attention beyond the note on the score or the sound produced by a performer. In this way, both artists cultivate an ambient poetics as they stress the connectedness of any expression or mark made in any context to the surrounding ecology. This connection, certainly, is something that is always there, but in the demonstrations of both Cage and Stein, it becomes much more clearly visible through their use of reduction. It may seem that Stein’s concept of repetition connects to the environment in a less literal way than does Cage’s concept of silence, yet it is a difference in degree and not in kind.

This demonstrates a very similar logic to that developed in regard to Stein’s take on literary genres and how she continuously plays with generic markers to demonstrate their power over the text as perspectives or machines. As we saw, in The Geographical History of America Stein teaches us that if a specific text is read as a detective novel, we will try to figure something out, and if the same text is read as autobiography we will more likely consider the identity of its author in relation to the writing, producing
an entirely different reading experience. Further, if a text in Stein’s ecology of genres is designated as a portrait, it becomes a different sort of machine connecting itself to other machines: it may also be a gift and be sent in a letter instead of being printed in a book or magazine, it may generate feelings of friendship or spite, and the reader may recognize the subject, or she may not, and thus the contextual space will affect the reading further, and – a point I will return to – the connected machines will constitute an entire infrastructure around Stein’s salon, which becomes functional in distributing her work. And if a text has the generic marker *play* other machines will be coupled to it, and we set in motion yet another infrastructure; a different space is constituted around the text, where someone may raise a curtain or start to sing. Thus, in Stein Deleuze and Guattari’s claim that “when one writes, the only question is which other machine the literary machine can be plugged into in order to work […]” becomes very concrete; as they fittingly conclude: “literature is an assemblage” (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 4).

In this way, Stein’s poetics is essentially always an ambient poetics. As soon as we, as Stein indeed does, draw the attention away from the autonomy of the words and towards their connectedness with their material surroundings, we are set on the path that leads to Cage’s music of all sounds or into Dick Higgins’ space of intermedia where both concrete poetry and the occasional artworks of the Fluxus movement can be found.

**Concrete poetry and Fluxus, 6 words by Gertrude Stein**

In his brief essay “From Line to Constellation” (1954), Bolivian-Swiss concrete poet Eugen Gomringer (sometimes referred to as “the father of concrete poetry”) formulates a confrontation with the implicit linearity of writing, suggesting as an alternative the instantly perceivable “constellation” to be interacted with:

> So the new poem is simple and can be perceived visually as a whole as well as in its parts. It becomes an object to be both seen and used: an object containing thought but made concrete through play-activity (Gomringer 1954, no paging).

The poem as constellation in its visual and linguistic simplicity thus resembles a commercial slogan or logo, in which content and visual expression coincide. It is a sign that is not read as a linear sequence but as a spatial configuration:

> The constellation is the simplest possible kind of configuration in poetry which has for its basic unit the word, it encloses a group of words as if it were drawing stars together to form a cluster (ibid.).

As such, the constellation of concrete poetry in Gomringer’s phrasing addresses primarily
the inscriptive flatness of the page suggested by Sybille Krämer (Krämer et al. 2017; Krämer 2017) and thus connects to Stein’s media poetics in bringing attention towards the materiality of this two-dimensional interface, but it also implies a collaborative invitation toward the reader to join in the “play” defined by the poet:

The constellation is ordered by the poet. He determines the play-area, the field or force and suggests its possibilities. the [sic] reader, the new reader, grasps the idea of play, and joins in (Gomringer 1954, no paging).

Thus, an ambition towards a collaborative poetics is inherent, and Gomringer suggests that it has a spatial implementation (“play-area”) even if it is not entirely clear how this ambition is conceived and to what extent it includes a collaborative space of appearance as described in Stein’s collaborative poetics. Yet the very concreteness of the constellation depends on this collaborative play-activity:

In the constellation something is brought into the world. It is a reality in itself and not a poem about something or other. The constellation is an invitation (ibid.).

As Marjorie Perloff has proposed, the genuinely intermedial practice of concrete poetry has exhibited a tendency to flourish in geographical peripheries of the art world. Thus in its earliest years, the movement was strong in countries like Brazil and Sweden while less dominant in world art centers like Paris or New York City (Perloff 2010: 12). In Sweden, Stein was an important reference to early concrete poetry, especially Öyvind Fahlström (Olsson 2005: 185-186), whereas the Brazilian communities were more inspired by Joyce and other modernists in the 1950s but rediscovered Stein at a later point as evidenced, for instance by Augusto Campo’s 1989 collaboration with Stein, Porta-Retratos: Gertrude Stein (Perloff 2010: 70). American concrete poet Emmet Williams (1925-2007) lived and worked in Europe during the most productive years of his career and was part of the Darmstadt circle of concrete poetry in the late 1950s. But he was also closely connected to the international Fluxus movement both in Europe and in New York, where he was official editor-in-chief of the Something Else Press for a number of years. Williams also edited the press’ crucial publication An Anthology of Concrete Poetry in 1967, which gave a wider distribution to a range of international work in concrete poetry, much of which had primarily been available locally as pamphlets and chapbooks in small print runs, or as artist’s books and other unique specimens available only in gallery spaces or performance contexts often located in the concrete poetry periphery centers addressed by Perloff.

In 1958, Williams conceived the idea for 13 Variations on 6 words of Gertrude Stein, which was first exhibited as thirteen wall prints in the German-Danish Fluxus artist
Arthur Köpcke’s Copenhagen gallery in 1960 and later turned into the printed artist’s book with the same title. The work lifts the signature line “when this you see remember me” from Stein’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Interestingly, this very line was already appropriated by Stein herself, as it has been an established letter writing stock phrase in the English language from sometime in the 16th century, but it certainly gained new notoriety via Stein’s opera. Its familiarity, simplicity and straightforward rhyme provides it with slogan-like qualities that recall the pronounced simplicity of the constellation described by Gomringer.

Further, Williams’ piece builds on Stein’s inclination towards repetition. Each of the six words is assigned a color and stamped on the paper base. As he describes it: “The six words of the first variation are doubled in the second, these twelve become twenty-four in the third, forty-eight in the fourth and so on until in the end, with twenty-four thousand five hundred and seventy-six, the words fuse, and the ikon and the logos are one” (Williams 1965). The fragmentation of the consecutive order of the printed page already commenced by Stein through her media poetics as seen above is continued by Williams in the printed variations that spread the words out in colored clusters across the white surfaces. The iconic, instant readability suggested by Williams here, where the visual and verbal planes of the poem finally coincide, recalls Gomringer’s constellation, yet with the final pages being completely illegible, progression is still essential, as Peter van der Mejden describes it: “if a spectator started at the wrong end, he/she would not know what he/she was seeing – or remembering” (van der Mejden 2014). By spreading the thirteen panels out into the gallery space, and thus breaking up the linearity of the pages’ sequence into three-dimensional space, the media poetics is taken out into the room, opening up towards an ambient poetics.

This ambient dimension was already inherent in the staged version of *Four Saints in Three Acts*, where the phrase is sung by the chorus in Virgil Thomson’s abrupt, rhythmic intonation, becoming something of a refrain that lets go of its attachment to an individual speaker, thus already making it a highly open question what and who the spectator is meant to see and remember. Williams also conceived of his pieces as a potential chorus piece – “I have also heard it in my mind’s ear as a choral work for 24,576 voices” (Williams 1965) – pushing the opera’s choir of close to forty saints to new extremes. But instead of realizing this impulse, Williams gave the piece a more palpable format as an artist’s book hand printed with rubber stamps in 1965. The accordion fold format of the artist’s book in a

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42 In his introduction to the 1965 artist’s book version, Williams suggests 1958 as the year he conceived the piece and dates the exhibition at Köpcke’s gallery to 1960. However, other sources render probable that the work was conceived around 1960 and that the exhibition took place in 1962 during the so-called Fluxus Festival in Copenhagen (Orum 2011: 57 and van der Mejden 2014 (conference presentation, no paging)). Artist’s book: Emmet Williams, *13 Variations on 6 Words of Gertrude Stein*, 1965.

43 It is worth noting, perhaps, that concrete poetry as a genre or intermedia practice is defining for the development of the concept of media poetics as carried out by Lori Emerson.

44 Peter van der Mejden, “When this you see remember me”, paper delivered at A Valentine to Gertrude Stein, University of Copenhagen, 2014. Quoted from abstract, notes and memory.
sense reinstates the linear progression of the piece as it places the variations in consecutive order that the reader is encouraged to follow, and thus reduces the ambient quality of the panels in the gallery room, even if the format in combination with the thick paper quality invites the reader to let the book sculpturally stand up rather than lie down flat on the table.

But, as van der Meijden recounts, another performative remake of the work was realized by Arthur Køpcke only a few years after the first gallery exhibition (1964) when he painted the syllables of the sentence on placards and had them carried by performers onto a darkened stage and then set on fire one by one, thus dissolving completely the material base of the words. Køpcke’s performance explicitly addresses the subject of remembering, as the piece dissolves itself in the situation leaving nothing for the viewer to see and thus nothing to remember someone (“me”) by. Køpcke’s performance dissolves the material traces of the artwork, which certainly entails a practical hindrance for discussing
the piece today, as the remaining documentation of the performance is very sparse. But if
the intermedia artworks by Ben Patterson and Nam June Paik when considered via their
material “remains” were in danger of fossilizing into displayable “mixed media” pieces,
then by contrast, this risk is not imminent for Køpcke’s concrete poetry performance
piece.

Concrete poetry as a genre remains stretched out between visual art, sound art and
literature. As in the “6 words” pieces, it is preoccupied with dissolving the linear time of
sequence so fundamental for the way the book is normally conceived by the reader, to
approach the page, and the book, as a spatial environment. As Peter van der Meijden has
argued, in both Fluxus adaptions of Stein’s line, the multimedia aspect already present
in the opera is turned into a genuinely intermedia effort as the words are made to work
visually, sculpturally and performatively. When working with concrete poetry, both Wil-
liams and Køpcke are also relating in different ways to the artist’s book and this genre’s
particular implications in regard to the infrastructures of distribution, defying the distrib-
utive channels of the commercial book, to exploit instead more site-specific strategies tied
to the gallery space or, in other cases, the open public space beyond the gallery. In this
practice of working with books and pages as environments or ecologies, concrete poetry
is unpacking some of the tensions that Stein hits upon between the space and time of the
book as a medium, suggesting both media poetics and ambient poetics.

Yet, what is even more significant is how these pieces realize the collaborative im-
pulse suggested in general terms by Gomringer. In the Fluxus movement it was generally
common to perform not just one’s own pieces but also pieces by other people as a strategy
to challenge the cult of originality around both the unique artwork and the original artist,
as well as the original performative moment of origin. Thus, Køpcke’s “repetition with a
difference” of William’s exhibition based on an already appropriated line by Stein, made
famous when intermedially intertwined with Thomson’s music, is entirely “in the Spirit
of Fluxus” to paraphrase the name of an important retrospective exhibition documenting
a number of the movement’s highly ephemeral works.45

In an article about the heritage of Gertrude Stein in the work of Fluxus artist Alison
Knowles (b. 1933), Tania Ørum has pointed to the way that art in Fluxus ended up almost
erasing itself, becoming indiscernible from the flux of everyday life (Ørum 1994: 15-19).
Ørum discusses a work by Knowles that is constituted by an unceremonious everyday
ritual of eating for lunch a particular type of cheeseburger at a particular, but entirely
unspectacular New York deli, and documenting the act with a photographic snapshot.
Knowles’ artwork consists of framing this repeated action or habit as a score that anyone
can decide to follow, thus inviting anyone to repeat the action in his or her own way and,
if desired, to document it with a photograph. The work thus has no absolute limits; it can
continue in eternity, with anyone performing the role of the “artist.” As Ørum argues,
the devoted attention towards the unspectacular and undramatic aspects of everyday life

45 In the Spirit of Fluxus, Whitney Museum, New York, 1993
that is present in Knowles’ work and in other Fluxus pieces, can be conceived as a direct continuation of Stein’s preoccupation with the sensual and unspectacular world around her in works like *Tender Buttons*. It also builds on Stein’s resistance towards notions of psychological depth in her writing, insisting instead on a devotion to the surface of things, as well as the “democratic” quality of her writing that consists of simple words not demanding high-brow cultural education – what Juliana Spahr has referred to as her connective writing. Yet Ørum also differentiates Knowles’ practice from Stein’s by returning to Stein’s strong plea of the essential difference between speaking and writing:

> It is upon this division between speech and writing, everyday life and art, that Gertrude Stein establishes her artistic monument – in the aspiration of gaining recognition, if not in her own time then in posterity. The sixties’ avant-garde gives her this recognition, for example by making her writings available again in print. But a sixties’ avant-garde artist like Alison Knowles administers this artistic heritage by trying once again to eliminate the divide between art and life, everyday object and object of art – and hereby runs the risk of losing herself as an almost object-less *Spirit*, a name without works, a vague furrow in the continued, but unheroic and history-less roll-out of everyday life, day by day, epoch by epoch. (Ørum 1994: 19; my translation)

Even if Ørum clearly has a strong point in regard to Knowles taking her work far beyond where Stein herself would ever have gone, one could also argue that what Knowles is doing in a work like the cheeseburger piece that dissolves itself as an artwork is, in essence, a continuation of Stein’s collaborative poetics. It is here that Stein herself is challenging the division between art and life that she pledges allegiance to elsewhere. In her work, unlike Stein herself in her own writing, Knowles is leaving behind entirely the media poetics – such as the materiality of the surface, which is still intact in concrete poetry, but which becomes phased out in Køpcke’s performance. Knowles is specifically following up on Stein’s collaborative poetics in this piece, which more than anything is a score for establishing an ephemeral community, a space for social interaction and collaboration like Arendt’s space of appearance. It is to a certain extent tied to a particular space, but, like the collaborative poetics of Stein, it is capable of transgressing time. One could argue that here, the art practice is in a sense reduced to nothing but the collaborative impulse. This, like many other situational and social Fluxus works can be conceived as creating an artistic practice by taking the collaborative impulse I have described in Stein’s work and isolating it, or enlarging it to turn it into the whole work itself.

Along with John Cage and a number of other members of the New York avant-garde art world, Alison Knowles has been involved in arranging the yearly marathon readings of *The Making of Americans* that took place around New Year’s Eve in the Paula Cooper Gallery between 1974 and 2000. This event is a realization of the social, collective and ephemeral situation of reading. It is a repeated gathering establishing a provi-
sional community around the reading aloud of Gertrude Stein’s long book. It is no longer meaningful to frame the activity as a “work of art.” It is a social situation formed on the base of the social, collaborative impulse in Stein’s writing.

Stein in theatre and performance in the 1960s

Among many other scholars interested in American avant-garde theater, Bonnie Marranca situates the late 1950s and early 1960s as a period of crucial beginnings. Like many others, she identifies the influence of Gertrude Stein’s play writing and her reflections on the theater as a medium as one of the most central elements that the artists experimenting in performing arts at this time were building on, not least because of the central position of the Black Mountain College, from where “European avant-garde drama and American poetic drama was being introduced to the artistic community” (Marranca 1996: 18). In *Mama Dada*, a monograph focusing on Stein and American avant-garde theater and film, Sarah Bay-Cheng is corroborating Marranca’s claim about the importance of Stein to American theatre, suggesting that

although Stein herself was rarely considered a playwright during her life and has rarely been treated as one since her death, perhaps her most enduring legacy resides in the theater, most especially in America (Bay-Cheng 2004: 114).

Bay-Cheng’s claim is a strong one, not least in the light of the extensive literary reception Stein has had in later years, which I will begin addressing in chapter two, but related arguments can be retrieved, even in more ‘literary’ readings of Stein by Catharine Stimpson and Henry M. Sayre (Stimpson 1984, Sayre 1984). In her book, Bay-Cheng demonstrates that the importance of Stein to the experimental theatre theater scene of the 1960s largely came out of her own efforts as a playwright, even if the seriousness of this contribution has been doubted, both by Stein’s contemporaries and by many subsequent readers who have considered her plays “closet drama” (e.g. Palatini Bowers 1993). There are several matters at the core of Stein’s poetics that suggest why the theater would appear so decisive for a mapping of her actual impact.

As already noted, the inherent collaborative aspect that any theatrical production carries out in practice has obvious affinities with Stein’s collaborative poetics, and as suggested in the introduction, the medium of theater and the genre of the play hold a special position in regard to the ambient poetics of Stein as well. As we have seen – including in portraits, prayers, meditations and novels in the making – Stein insistently demands that we translate the two-dimensionality of the written text into three dimensions by continuously pointing out of the text and into the room surrounding it. The theater, of course, is an art form that in its very foundation builds upon this translation between the
two-dimensionality of a text, a score, or a set design and the three dimensions of a staged performance. Further, it is crucial to appreciate the particular position of the performative arts in the media ecology of post-war New York. The new tendencies generally exhibited by minimalism, concrete poetry, Fluxus, and in particular the rise of the genre of the happening, were framed in American art historian Michael Fried’s famous words “What lies between the arts is theater” (Fried 1967). In brief, the intermedia tendencies discussed above are closely tied to what Erika Fischer Lichte has described as “the performative turn in the arts,” which in her account is inextricably bound to the performing arts, and pieces such as the “Untitled Event” (1952) at Black Mountain College.

One of the theater companies often mentioned as “America’s first truly avant-garde production company” (Bay-Cheng 2004: 125) is the Living Theater, run by Julian Beck and Judith Malina. The Living Theatre company is known for its contribution to physical theater and early development of forms of audience participation, producing open collaborative works that attempt to bring down the fourth wall of the theater. The troupe began its inaugural season in 1951 with a staging of Stein’s brief play *Ladies Voices* (1916), and shortly hereafter staged, as their first full-length performance, the first ever complete production of *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938), which has since become one of Stein’s most performed plays.

Even more crucial for the New York avant-garde scene emanating from the Black Mountain College crowd and the Fluxus movement was the Judson Poets Theater, proclaimed as “The site of Happenings” (Banes 1983). There were multiple creative forces engaged around the space of the Judson Church, led by Reverend Al Carmines, including the Judson Dance Theater that I will address shortly. Starting with *What Happened* in 1963, Carmines – in collaboration with Lawrence Kornfeld – put on several Stein productions that were widely talked about in the avant-garde environment. The choice of Stein’s first play focused – according to her own account – not on telling a story or conveying events, but on making conceivable “the essence of what happened” (LIA 261) is hardly a coincidence, as both its title and this anti-dramatic theater-vision of Stein’s relate directly to the new genre of happenings, which was on the rise on the New York art scene in the early 1960s. The most successful Stein production by Carmines and Kornfeld was *In Circles* (1967-8), their music theater adaption of Stein’s *A Circular Play* (1920), which was extended well beyond its original running time due to its popularity.

**Richard Foreman’s radical ambient poetics**

There are numerous other artists and productions one could take up in relation to Stein’s relevance for the performative arts of the 1960s, but the most central figure, in terms of both his own recognition of Stein’s importance to his philosophy of theater and her work’s presence in his theatrical production, is Richard Foreman (b. 1937). Although he
only once, relatively late, staged a whole Stein play (Doctor Faustus at Volksbühne, Berlin 1982), he was extremely involved with Stein’s writing and thinking from his earliest development of his own ideas about theater. The connections between Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theatre and Stein are well covered by Kate Davy (1978) and others. As Foreman himself declared in a group interview from 1969: “I have returned to Gertrude Stein’s writing on literature and the theater at least twice a year and continually ponder, and am troubled and am led, and ruminate it” (Quoted in Davy 1978: 109).

In her article, “Richard Foreman’s Ontological-Hysteric Theater: The Influence of Gertrude Stein,” Davy unfolds how Stein’s thoughts about composition, time and repetition, and particularly her thoughts on the “continuous present”, “beginning again and again” and “using everything” as she formulates in Composition as Explanation and develops in later lectures and reflections, are foundational to Foreman’s ideas about theater. According to Davy, Foreman’s ambition is to adapt to his own here and now, the absolute here-and-now realism of Stein’s continuous present, as a practice of conveying the movements of the mind as thoughts unfold in language instead of recounting thoughts and events enmeshed in habitual retrospective hindsight. This understanding of Stein’s continuous present as a method for documenting one’s own consciousness as one writes is similar to the essentially minimalist interpretation of Stein one can follow in a Cage piece like “Lecture on Nothing” (“I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it” Cage 1961: 109). This understanding of a continuous present should not be mistaken for an idea of a “stream of consciousness” as conveying the illusion of thought as an unbroken, organic flow. As Foreman also stresses:

I wanted a theater that did the opposite of ‘flow’ – a theatre that was true to my own mental experiences, that is, the world as being pieces of things, awkwardly present for a moment and then either re-presented by consciousness or dropped in favor of some other momentary presentation (Quoted in Davy 1978: 114).

For instance, Davy shows how Foreman uses Stein’s strategy of “beginning again and again”, also crucial in Cage’s lecture, as he uses various tricks to reset the mind of the spectator, like the sounding of a load sonorous alarm, and the characters constantly starting anew in relation to each other and the audience, as if previous scenes never occurred. If we adapt the perspective of media poetics, as I have described it in relation to Stein’s writing, it is easy to follow how Foreman adapts a media poetics of the theater in his theatrical practice that corresponds with and also radicalizes Stein’s. The use of annoying loud noises is an operation that attests to this. It is an ambient poetic strategy as well, as the buzzer instantly makes the audience (as well as the performers) aware of where they are, makes them feel their bodies and become aware of the artificial theatrical space in which they are situated; thus in a Brechtian sense preventing the audience from falling back into the theatrical illusion, only in a way that is much more concrete and choleric
than the standard *Verfremdungseffekt*.

In a similar vein, Foreman works with disturbing the illusionary build-up of the theatrical space, by tinkering with the proportions of props and settings, for instance by putting a proportionally very small object – which would traditionally be used to convey the illusion of distance – downstage in the front, and a very large one upstage, in the back, thus destroying the theatrical construction of depth illusion. Also, as Foreman (or rather, an unidentified voice that could be Foreman’s) announces in Foreman’s film *Now You See It, Now You Don’t*, in which he ponders the end of his active career in theater to dedicate himself full time to his cinematic practice, “in my theater I had the actors staring at the audience, and speaking directly to the audience” (Foreman 2017). In his filmic practice, Foreman is obviously transferring some of the media poetic strategies to this new medium in interesting ways. In Sarah Bay-Cheng’s analysis of the correspondence between Stein and Foreman, the parallels between the two artists’ practices are deepened by the inclusion of both writers’ crucial debts to the avant-garde cinema of their time: Stein’s to Man Ray’s, and Foreman’s foremost to Jack Smith’s and Stan Brakhage’s. Both Smith and Brakhage are independent filmmakers who played a crucial part in the media ecology of the New York art scene in the 1960s, and Brakhage in particular has worked directly with Stein’s writing and has discussed her poetics in relation to his own practice (Brakhage 2003). Stein’s direct and indirect relationship to avant-garde cinema in specific, and to the medium of film in general, is a highly interesting line of flight that I must refrain from following further due to considerations of space.46

If Gertrude Stein’s media poetics disturbs the reading-writing interface of the book and the page, then Richard Foreman’s practice is certainly classifiable as a type of theatrical media poetics that deliberately disturbs the interface constituted by the forth wall by breaking the illusion of the actors being unaware of the audience. Instead, Foreman is constantly pointing towards the material constructedness of everything that makes this practice theatrical. What is also striking, is how Stein’s ambient poetics – her attention towards the materiality of the translation process between page and stage discussed earlier – is actualized in Foreman’s work. Kate Davy lingers on the importance of the handwritten manuscript in Foreman’s theatrical vision, in opposition to the looser, more score-like use of written bases that would be rampant in happenings and other performance art practices of the time. This is perhaps where his affinities with Stein are most interesting, as they differ from the essentially minimalist (formalist, even non-retinal) interpretation of Stein progressed by Cage.

As is well established, not least in the work of Ulla Dydo on the handwritten manuscripts, there is also a significant translation process in Stein’s writing between the material realization of her pieces in the handwritten notebooks and the versions typed by

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46 Sarah Bay-Cheng gives a brief survey of Stein’s significance to American cinema (Bay-Cheng 2004:122-124) and touches upon the subject in her discussion of the cinematic aspects in post-war avant-garde in theater and performance, but otherwise this is an aspect of Stein’s reception that deserves more attention.
Toklas. Foreman describes the process of staging as a filling of the gaps that inevitably arise in the typed manuscript, as opposed to the handwritten one, which is filled with his illustrations, doodles and other non-verbal graphic marks. As paraphrased by Davy:

The textual void created by the typewriter is filled during the process of staging through a conscious effort, he states, “to rewrite the text back into manuscript (the imprint of the personal hand) style.” Hence, the staging embodies, in a highly specialized way, the idiosyncratic nature of the handwritten work (play), which is the evidence or unmediated expression of each moment of writing. Foreman states: “…the staging is a series of problem solving tasks which “re-concretizes” the text. It’s a matter of finding equivalencies for the densities and special “auras” established by the graphics – typological as well as drawn – of the original manuscript” (Davy 1978: 120).

It is interesting how Foreman is trying to approach the translation between an ambient and a media poetics in an entirely concrete manner, working for instance with sound layering (Davy 1978: 120), as he is trying to establish a direct relationship between manuscript and staging, fluctuating back and forth in translation between the two dimensions of the writing and the three dimensions of the theater space. It is exactly Stein’s take on this particular spatiality that I want to address with my concept of her ambient poetics. And even if Foreman, in contrast to Stein, puts himself in charge of both the process of writing and the process of staging, he is also dependent on the implication of a collaborative poetics directed towards the concrete, situated spectator, for his performances to be fulfilled.

If Foreman’s practice, in his own words, can be considered a form of “concrete theater” then, just like the concrete poetry discussed above, which in Gomringer’s formulation included a “play-area” in which the reader engaged with the composition, Foreman is also concerned with securing the collaboration of his audience. For him, the crucial path is an awakening of the spectator from the condition of passively perceiving information, towards an active participation in the realization of the piece wherein his or her consciousness “vibrates between a given number of perceptual possibilities.” And as we saw in Timothy Morton’s definition of the ambient poetics, with his increased attention to the margins, blank spaces and outskirts of a poetic practice, Foreman’s strategy to “refocus the spectator’s attention” and make him or her connect directly with the play is via the “intervals, gaps, relations and rhythms which saturate the givens (objects, words and actions) of any particular play” (Davy 1978: 124).
Stein in dance: Yvonne Rainer

According to Dick Higgins, Stein had a “fragmented, grandiose concept of theater” that was imagistic, non-narrative and spatial at its core, much like the genre of happenings that was being developed in the 1960s, and “the way to do them [her plays] would be choreographically, not dramatically” (Higgins 1990: 52). Even if Stein did not compose many pieces she herself labeled as choreographic scores, she did have a close relationship with the medium of dance. Her ambient poetics relates itself in a rather immediate way to the medium of dance as it is constituted by composed movements through space. Stein’s They Must. Be Wedded. To Their Wife. A Play (1931) was made into a ballet set to music by Lord Berners under the title A Wedding Bouquet (1937), and some of the verbal portraits that were most important to the early development of her poetics like “Preciosilla” (1913), “Susie Asado” (1913) and “Orta Or One Dancing” (1911-12) were portraits of dancers. Surely, the weight of Stein’s legacy in dance and choreography could deserve a chapter in its own right.

Dancer and choreographer Yvonne Rainer (b. 1934) had performed in Al Carminie’s production of What Happened in 1963. She was also a key force in the Judson Dance Theatre, a community of dancers and choreographers who “radically questioned dance aesthetics” (Banes 1983, xi) and conducted workshops and staged cooperative dance concerts in the Judson Memorial Church in the early sixties (1962-1964).

The Cage-Cunningham collaboration had a major influence on all members of the Judson cooperative. Through Robert Dunn’s dance workshops at the Merce Cunningham studio and other occasions, the dancers were taught Cage’s methods and preferences in art and literature, including Stein and Satie as part of the heritage of the European avant-garde. Even after the Judson years, the affinities between Rainer’s work and Stein are numerous, most evidently in her dependence on repetition as a primary formal tool and her “mixing ordinary and grotesque movement with traditional dance techniques, pushing the body’s operations and coordination to the limits, and testing extremes of freedom and control in the choreographic process” (Banes 1983: xviii). When asked by Tirza Latimer about her relationship to Stein’s work during these years, Rainer said: “My use of repetition had more to do with Cage’s scores than with Stein’s writing […] Of course, Cage was making work with Stein in mind. […] Stein was extremely influential. She was probably in my blood by that time” (Corn and Latimer 2012: 283).

As suggested, besides Cage’s influence, there were several ways Stein could have found her way into Rainer’s blood. Little documentation is available of Kornfeld and Carmine’s theatrical production of What Happened at the Judson Poets Theater and Rainer’s part in it. But that same year, Rainer did the choreography for (About) Word Words

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47 Robert Dunn had himself been taught by Cage at the New School for Social Research in the late 50s (Banes 1983: xvii).
48 In Rainer’s own published writings, I have only come across very few and brief references to Stein (for example Rainer 1999: 165).
with Steve Paxton at the Judson Dance Theater (1963). The performance “consisted of a ten-minute sequence of movements, danced first by Paxton then by Rainer, and then by both in unison” (Sayre 1989: 117). The second part by Rainer was accompanied by a composition by La Monte Young, *Poem for Chairs, Tables, and Benches* (1960), which in Henry Sayre’s description could sound like a radicalization of Cage’s *Living Room Music*: “composed of the sounds made by pulling, dragging, scraping, and otherwise forcing furniture across or around or in the general vicinity of the performance space” (Sayre 1989: 118). Rainer wrote about this dance in the artist statement “Rreeppeettiitiittioomm inn mmyy wwooorrkkk” (circa 1965⁴⁹), calling it

the purest example of repetition in my work: traveling on a diagonal with slow-motion undulations of pelvis and vague hand gestures … The movement was simple enough so that it could be observed as “one thing” (Rainer 1965, quoted in Sayre 1989: 118).

If we recall Stein’s discourse on repetition as a method for making several statements become “one thing” (LIA 294), the similarities to Rainer’s artist statement are striking. But although Rainer was aware of Stein, she herself did not write on the relevance of Stein to her work. She did, however, write extensively about repetition, and this discourse and its resemblance to Stein’s was picked up by Jill Johnston of the *Village Voice*, who explicitly formulated the connections between Yvonne Rainer’s work and the poetics of Gertrude Stein. Rainer in turn took Johnston’s discourse about her work to heart, as Henry M Sayre observes:

Rainer reprinted an article on her by Jill Johnston which had appeared shortly before in Village Voice. Johnston writes: “I wondered why there was so much repetition [in Rainer’s work]. I wasn’t accustomed to exact repetition. Why should I want to see so much of one thing? But Yvonne says that repetition was her first idea of form. ‘Seeing it again you can see more what it is.’ And then I learned about La Monte Young, the composer, who was obsessed even before he came to New York, as a student in California, with music as a continuum of a single sound. And I had forgotten about Gertrude Stein. The next time I saw Yvonne perform I happened to be reading Stein’s ‘Lectures in America’ and I like what she said about familiarity. She said: ‘From this time on familiarity began and I like familiarity. It does not breed in me contempt it just breeds familiarity. And the more familiar a thing is the more there is to be familiar with. And so my familiarity began and kept on being’” (Sayre 1989: 283-84; italics and bracket insertion in original).⁵⁰

⁴⁹ The statement was originally printed in a performance program, but is unpublished in other forms. The text is unavailable apart from a typescript in Rainer’s archive at the Getty Institute, LA, which I have not had a chance to consult. I quote from Sayre 1989.

⁵⁰ The addressed program “Two evenings of Dances” from 1965 is reproduced in facsimile in Rainer 1974: 316.
When discussing Rainer’s piece *Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle)* (1966), which is actually a solo, and not a trio, Rebecca Schneider connects the gesture of Rainer’s title to Stein in the way that the piece is unbecoming or undoing its name: Rainer’s *Trio* is in fact a solo, not unlike the way Stein’s *Four Saints in Three Acts* may be an opera to be sung, as its subtitle states, but one that has at least twelve saints and four acts, quite contrary to the claim of its title (Schneider 2005).

Further, Schneider speaks of the collective variation inscribed in Rainer’s piece. In a deliberate deconstruction of the idea of a solo, so dependent on a romantic-modernist cult of the artist as a unique personality, the piece is meant for replay by someone else and during this process it becomes unrecognizable (and even, by her own account, unpleasant) to Rainer herself. The collaborative impulse as distributed in time in *Trio A* is thus highly explicit, and in a sense isolated as the primary impulse of the piece like in the case of Alison Knowles. Yet, *Trio A* is not quite as liable to dissolve into everyday life and oblivion as Knowles’ cheeseburger piece was in Ørum’s reading. Even in its unrecognizable replayed version, it still has a concrete framing as an artwork, and thus conducts its own critical media poetics on the romantic idea of the solo, as Schneider stresses: “This decomposition or recomposition is part of the possibility, the countersigning of riff contained in the indiscriminate, the illegitimate solo” (Schneider 2005: 37). Thus, Rainer’s collaborative piece deconstructs the idea of the solo and likewise of the artist as a “unique individual” but, like the collaborative writing of Stein, still remains concrete as an artwork to engage and collaborate with, which is potentially dispersed in time, realizable at any moment, just like Stein’s collaborative poetics.

**Stein in Pop Art: Andy Warhol**

At the end of the 1960s, *Village Voice* critic Jill Johnston moved away from criticism to become a writer and feminist-lesbian activist, and wrote her own collaborative Stein piece “Tender Gluttons” in *Gullibles Travels* (1974). But as Rainer said about her, already in regard to her practice as a critic in the 1960s, “Jill’s own style of writing came right out of Stein” (Corn and Latimer 2012: 283). Johnston also constitutes a direct connection between the performance and dance scene discussed above and the circles of Pop artist Andy Warhol (1928-1987), whose practice I will approach in the following, since she was a friend of Warhol and the subject of one of his numerous portrait films.³¹

Warhol famously claimed that he was “influenced by everybody” (Goldsmith (ed.) 2004:14), but when the poet Gerard Malanga, one of Warhol’s closest collaborators during the 1960s, was asked who the major influences on Warhol were, his prompt reply

³¹ *Jill*, a 4½-minute silent movie shot in black and white in 1964 as part of Warhol’s series of so-called “Screen tests” has not been preserved, whereas *Jill and Freddy Dancing* (1963) and *Jill Johnston Dancing* (1964) in which Johnston also appears are both preserved in the film archive at MoMA (Angell 2006).
was “Marcel Duchamp, Gertrude Stein, television, the movies, John Cage” (quoted in Powers 2014: 6). Ronald Tavel, another poet, who wrote the scenario for about a dozen of Warhol’s films, explained that the challenge for him as Warhol’s scriptwriter was “to make the scripts so that they meant nothing”, which was in no way a simple task to accomplish. Tavel pointed towards Stein as the “one precedent” he had found in this undertaking, as “in much of her work she tried to rob the words of meaning” (Powers 2014: 14). As Edward Powers has suggested, the reading of Stein that underlies these claims is closely related to John Cage’s version of Stein as it comes out most explicitly in writings like “Lecture on Nothing,” stressing the repetitive and non-expressive qualities of her work and the apparent resistance towards semantic transparency and a traditional conveying of subject matter that her media poetics implies.

As the work of Cage, Rainer, and many others implies, the most defining stylistic trait of Stein’s practice picked up on in the 1960’s reception was her cultivation of repetition and insistence. As discussed above, Stein’s idea of repetition as insistence demonstrates how we, by repeating anything, move the attention out of the object itself and into the context. Whenever we repeat something, we insist and thus change the emphasis. As Powers suggests, for the 1960s artists the “difference that insistence wrests from repetition” (Powers 2014: 21) is all the more important since the dominance of series production and endless repetition of images and signs had increased exponentially since the 1930s when Stein described her own time as “the period of the cinema and series production” (LIA 294). In this context, the work of Andy Warhol, hailed by Time magazine in 1963 as “the truest son of the age of automation” (Powers 2014: 16), is one of the most self-evident continuations of Stein’s achievements, as his repetitive series of silkscreened prints are among the most notorious realizations of the principle of repetition in the context of visual arts. On a meta level, Warhol’s oeuvre becomes particularly relevant to the scope of this study with its focus on the recycling of writing, as he is a pioneer in integrating the appropriation and copying of preconceived images into visual art. As Sarah Bay-Cheng has suggested, this practice builds on Stein’s exploration of repetition as well as fragmentation: “Andy Warhol’s silk-screened ‘Marilyn,’ for example, combines both the art of the fragment with the identical repetition of the photograph to create a haunting image of a woman reproduced in four nearly identical squares” (Bay-Cheng 2004: 116).

Thus, there is a certain continuity between the Stein we encounter in Warhol’s work and the Stein shaped by minimalism, Fluxus and the rest of the experimental art and performance scene which is supported by Warhol’s declared admiration of Cage’s work (Goldsmith (ed.) 2004: 42-43) and his attendance of the Judson Poets’ performances in the early 1960s (Stimpson 1984, Corn and Latimer 2011, Powers 2014). But there are also aspects of Stein’s oeuvre that are highlighted in his work that differ somewhat from those dominating in the work of minimalism, Fluxus and associated artists of the 1960s.

Significantly, Warhol did not first encounter Stein’s work through these circles but was well aware of her years before, when – possibly at the initiative of the poet Ralph
Pomeroy, with whom he was collaborating at the time – he borrowed a title from Stein in the print *The Autobiography of Alice B. Shoe* (1955) that was produced in his period of transition from working as a commercial artist to working primarily as a fine artist. It is worth noting that this title, a riff on *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, points towards an entirely different part of Stein’s oeuvre than does, say, Cage’s *Living Room Music* or the work of Rainer or Foreman. It departs from her most accessible and public writing – what Stein herself referred to as her “audience writing” (N: 52-53) – and in fact from the one book that turned Stein into a public figure – a celebrity – a concept that became absolutely crucial in Warhol’s universe. Thus, in Warhol’s work there is an initial sensibility towards the inherent connections between Stein and popular culture that I will be developing in depth in chapter five.

The print also points towards a common inclination in Stein and Warhol to cultivate fashion or consumer objects without taking a clear critical stance towards consumerism or commodity fetishism. Coming from a period when Warhol was still associated with the fashion and advertising industry and produced simultaneously with an assignment of commercials for shoe brand I Miller, the enthusiastic and sincere elegance of this print and the series it belongs to reveal a delight in the shape of these accessories that does not stand back from Stein’s delight in shoes, petticoats, shawls and colored hats in *Tender Buttons*. The general appeal of Warhol’s recognizable consumer objects is comparable to Stein’s preoccupation with using the most commonplace and regular words of the English language, as has been stressed countless times since Sherwood Anderson did it in his introduction to *Geography and Plays* (1922).

Moreover, both Stein and Warhol bought and collected contemporary art, and shared an open attitude towards the economic infrastructure permeating their respective

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52 See chapter five for further discussion of this parallelism between Stein and Warhol. See also chapter three for a discussion of Stein, fashion and consumerism.

53 See Burgoyne 2016 for more examples from Warhol’s series of shoe lithographs, several of which have titles that play on literature and popular culture (*To shoe or not to shoe, My shoe is your shoe, When I’m calling shoe*, etc.)
fields that differ from many of the experimental and explicitly anti-commercial artists who were part of the circles around Black Mountain College, Judson Church and Fluxus. There is a continuity between Stein’s attitude towards visual art as something that was bought and sold, and her constant aspiration towards being published by large commercial publishers and actually making money from her writing. From the very beginning of his career as a fine artist, Warhol was also buying art and keeping up with “what was happening on the art scene” as he writes in POPism (Warhol and Hackett 1980: 198), meaning that he was tuned in to galleries, selling and buying, in an unembarrassed manner that, according to his own retrospective account, had an almost repelling effect on acquaintances like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg from the Black Mountain College circles.

Warhol made direct reference to Gertrude Stein in his visual artwork only once more, in 1980, with a series of silk screen prints of Stein as part of his “Ten Portraits of Jews in the 20th Century.” Warhol himself referred to the series as his “Jewish geniuses,” a choice of words most likely indebted to Stein’s language (Will 2000: 161-2). If the more intellectual renown of the motifs of the Jewish geniuses series (other subjects included Sigmund Freud, Franz Kafka, Sarah Bernard and Albert Einstein) differ from the Marilyn Monroes (1962), Liz Taylors (1965) and Elvis Presleys (1963) that adorned Warhol’s earliest silk screen prints and shaped the audience expectations towards this particular visual medium, then the application of the bright colors and characteristic silk screen techniques suggests that these more intellectual celebrities are in some sense part of the same order of infinitely repeatable cultural icons as the Pop Art classics that made Warhol famous.

As Brian Selsky has proposed, Warhol’s series suggests how the category of “genius” has functionalities that resembles the category of “celebrity,” as both categories are modern concepts that provide alternative grounds for recognition that in a world where mechanical reproduction has “endangered mythologies around originality, authenticity, and aura within the realms of cultural production” (Selsky 1996: 184) work to free their subjects from ties of history and ethnicity. Thus, to Stein, the genius label is a free ticket for her to un-identify with the categories of woman, Jew and queer that prevented her from taking the position of the artist. Warhol’s images of celebrities exhibit the radicalization of this function of genius, as a qualifying label that is free of the traditional anchoring in originality and authenticity. A striking similarity between Warhol and Stein lies in their choice of words regarding the relationship between depth and surface in identity. Warhol’s famous assurance that

if you want to know all about Andy Warhol, just look at the surface: of my paintings and films and me, and there I am. There is nothing behind it (Goldsmith (ed.) 2004: 90).

resonates with one of Stein’s most frequently quoted sentences: “Look at me now and
here I am.” In her reading of Warhol’s Gertrude Stein print, Barbara Will extends this parallel, as well as the implications of the silk screen print’s technical execution:

Warhol reads Stein as a “genius,” but refuses to ascribe to her the kind of interiority that would traditionally be associated with this name; his Stein is literally the copy of a copy, a silk-screened print of a photograph from the 1930s to which Warhol or one of his factory assistants has added variously a few dark outlines or some collage-like blocks of color. A found object or appropriated image, Warhol’s Stein is unoriginal, simulated, depthless; even when the “artisanal” flourishes of tracing and color appended to the image serve less to heighten than to deface or erase their subject; graffiti marks on a screened image of a photographic negative of a celebrity. Stein may well have appreciated this defacement, given her own playful, camp, self-fracturing presentation in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, as well as her recognition in *Everybody’s Autobiography* that having one’s image freed into public circulation is, in a sense, like becoming estranged from one’s own face and name, like having “a little shock of recognition and non-recognition” (EA, 175). Warhol’s Stein can thus be seen as an extension of Stein’s own self-construction in the 1930s: both exceptional and generic in a world where everybody is a celebrity (or as Warhol would put it, where everybody is “world famous for fifteen minutes”); both located within a hierarchy of cultural meaning (a “genius,” or in Warhol’s portrait, a “Jewish genius”) and a copy without an original, an image circulating in depthless public space (Will 2000: 161-2).

I will return repeatedly to Stein’s self-presentation in her late autobiographies and public performances and the crucial place it holds in her posthumous, artistic reception in the following chapters. At this point, I want to stress that Will’s generally convincing analysis also includes the important reservation that Warhol’s conception of the superficiality of “here and now identity” is somewhat more radical than Stein’s would be if it were not to be seen through his mirror. But just as John Cage’s collaborations with Stein made more of a minimalist out of her, there is no doubt that the more ‘glamourous’ and superficial pop stream in Stein’s oeuvre that Warhol’s recycling of her ideas suggests is a cue that is picked up on in her later reception, not least by poets such as Kenneth Goldsmith and other representatives of the conceptual poetry movement around 2000 who approach Stein as a combined avant-garde and pop culture icon.

54 The line is originally from *Before the Flowers of Friendship Faded Friendship Faded* (1930), but was singled out as the title of a widely distributed selection of Stein’s writing, edited by Patricia Meyerowitz and first published 1971.

55 I will return to Kenneth Goldsmith’s reading of Stein in chapter five. Here, it suffices to stress that the connection between Goldsmith and Warhol is crucial. Goldsmith refers to Warhol’s work as the precondition for conceptual writing even more frequently than he refers to Stein’s (and Cage’s). Further, his 2013 publication *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* pays explicit tribute to Warhol (i.e. his “Deaths and Disasters” series) in its title and subject matter. Goldsmith also edited the volume of selected interviews...
As I shall develop in chapter five, it is no hindrance to the influence of this image of her that Stein’s own reaction to her late fame and her doubts as to whether it could be reconciled with her status as a unique artistic innovator were certainly more disturbed than Warhol’s ostentatious indifference towards originality (such as “I think everybody should be a machine”; “I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know whether my picture was mine or somebody else’s” Goldsmith (ed.) 2004: 16, 17). Warhol’s defying originality and the power of the artist’s signature indicates his move from the category of genius to that of celebrity. As Will puts it, even if Stein sticks with the genius label, she actually does take initiatives that suggest a refusing of the “author-function,” like when she decides to publish *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* with an unsigned title page, and in her “construction of the reproducible subject in such texts as ‘An Instant Answer or A Hundred Prominent Men’ and *Everybody’s Autobiography*” (Will 2000: 163).

Besides the concerns about originality, artistic identity and issues of self-portraiture, Warhol and Stein also share an interest in celebrity portraiture as noted by both Brian Selsky and Sianne Ngai. Ngai emphasizes how it runs in continuation of both artist’s interest in portraying everyday objects and commodities (Ngai 2012). Both Selsky and Ngai are primarily addressing Warhol’s silk screen prints of cultural icons (and of wealthy art buyers), but there are also important overlaps with Stein in Warhol’s writing. The twenty-four hours of taped and transcribed conversations between Warhol and his “superstar”, the actor Ondine and a host of other hang arounds in *A: A Novel* (1968) are most frequently referred to as Warhol’s answer to Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922), famously describing a day in life of Leopold Bloom. Yet, the gossipy content of the conversations has much more in common with Stein’s conversational style that she cultivated in portraits and plays from the mid-1910s and into the early 1920s than it has with the multilayered densely literary prose of Joyce. In these texts, Stein used the speech patterns of her subjects to portray them instead of recounting events or stories or supplying background information, and arguably this is also what is taking place in *A: A Novel*. The strict media poetic title certainly recalls Stein’s practice of stating the obvious, yet twisting it to become unrecognizable and materialized through repetition. Also, Stein’s media poetics of the printed book, displaying its technical construction by pages and volumes and chapters as described in the first part of this chapter, is brought one step further to include the material attention to the transcription and typing process. Warhol had the novel transcribed by four different typists. Some – like the Velvet Underground drummer Maureen Tucker – were experienced and others were schoolgirls with faulty spelling skills, and in the printed book Warhol (and his editor) has kept all their typos and omissions (for instance, in Tucker’s case, of the swear words) and different practices of naming or not naming speakers, and organizing the text in columns or broad sheets, thus leaving a highly uneven

with Andy Warhol *I’ll be Your Mirror* in 2004.

56 I will return to this reading by Ngai in chapter five.

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and ruptured textual surface that keeps the traces of its production process intact.

With *POPism* (1980), Warhol arguably wrote his equivalent to Stein’s *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*. Like Stein’s autobiography, it also restages in anecdotal form a time already documented in earlier, less plotted work (in Warhol’s case *A: A Novel*, in Stein’s, the corpus of experimental artist portraits depicting the same characters that appeared in the *Autobiography*). Like the initial confusion surrounding Stein’s autobiography as to whether it was written by Stein or Toklas, Warhol’s *POPism* was co-written with his close friend Pat Hackett, whose name is aligned with Warhol’s on the cover and title page, thus leaving a comparable confusion as to whose voice we are actually hearing behind the narrative I. This ambiguity is enhanced by the book’s subtitle *The Warhol Sixties*, addressing Warhol in the third person, like “Alice” does with “Stein.” *POPism* recounts the first decade of Warhol’s career at the extended studio environment at his Manhattan loft, famously known as “The Factory,” from anecdotes, and thus, just like the autobiography did with Stein’s salon, mythologizes a social and professional space while it is still up and running.

The most interesting parallels between Stein’s literary portraits of friends and acquaintances surrounding her salon, however, can be drawn if one brings into consideration Warhol’s filmic work, especially the large number of brief “Screen Tests” that Warhol recorded of celebrities and hang arounds from the New York art scene who passed through The Factory. They were recorded between 1964 and 1966 and 472 survive, while others, like the previously mentioned one of Jill Johnson, are assumed lost. The “Screen Tests” were short portrait films in black and white in which the subject was filmed in real time (24 frames per second) while keeping as still as possible for approximately three minutes, but the copies produced were deliberately transfigured to be projected at a slightly slower rate (16 frames per second). The result is described in the accompanying web text for an exhibited selection of the “Screen Tests” at MoMA (2003) as, “an unusual fluidity of pace, a rhythm gently at odds with the starkness of the lighting and the boldness of the close-ups of face and hair” (MoMA 2003).

Besides exhibiting a highly tangible media poetics of the film medium as it calls attention to the technical structure of its interfaces of recording and screening, this technique that provides a slowly moving but almost still image of the portrait subject, curiously recalls the technique of Stein’s earliest artists’ portraits. Here, Stein is performing a slow, rhythmic establishment of the “rhythm” of her subject’s “personalities” (LIA 293) through meticulous repetitions of sentences with only slight variation from sentence to sentence. In Stein’s own explanation, she was in fact using the technique of the cinema, where “no two pictures are exactly alike each one is just that much different from the one before” (LIA 294). Correspondingly, in her portrait writing she was “making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one

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57 See Angell 2006. The label “screen tests” was not applied to the series from the beginning where they were designated as “stillies” or “film portraits” and they should not be mistaken for the two longer (70 minutes) 1965 Warhol films titled *Screen Test #1*, and *Screen Test #2* both with scenario by Ronnie Tavel.
thing.” (LIA 294).

Even more significantly, the functions of Stein’s portraits and Warhol’s “Screen Tests” are similar: establishing social bonds or connections to the subjects and staging them as “artists” or “superstars” and as part of a particular community or collective. By portraying people around them, both artists were forming an artistic community around themselves: Stein around her salon and Warhol around the Factory. The very name of Warhol’s studio, and its organization around the collective production of artworks where the individual signature would be dissolved, suggests Warhol’s showdown with the concept of genius. The Factory mass produced artworks like everything else was mass produced in the contemporary society of the 1960s, and thus it was the Factory, not the genius, that produced art.58 But what the Factory also produced, besides the steady stream of automatized artworks, was artists, or “superstars” as the actors in Warhol’s films became known, with an expression coined by the filmmaker and performance artist Jack Smith. The series of portrait films is a pivotal component in this production of superstars. In a similar vein, Stein’s portraits of artists, especially the earliest batch (famous examples are “Matisse” (1909), “Picasso” (1909) and “Orta Or One Dancing” (1911-12) portraying the dancer Isadora Duncan), are frequently preoccupied with the relationship between the person and his or her creation and potential “following,” and are consequently very involved in establishing an artist position for their subjects and placing him or her within a context of an artistic community.

Certainly, in the Factory, the automated and generalized aspect of this production of artists or stars is much more pronounced than in Stein’s early 20th century salon. However, as I will develop in chapter five when approaching the Salon de Fleurus – a conceptual remake of Stein’s salon – a certain “infrastructuralism” can be derived from Stein’s portraiture. Following John Durham Peters, I understand infrastructuralism as a transposition of the interest from the art object itself to the infrastructures it is embedded in (Peters 2016) – and I would suggest that a similar quality is present, in even more pronounced form, in Warhol’s Factory as crystallized in the “Screen Tests.” Furthermore, in the Factory’s attempt at an industrialized mass production of the “superstars” – a composite category between the genius and the celebrity – there is a recognition of the crucial importance of the artist persona as an interface of the artwork that we also encounter in Stein.

At the same time, there is also a disenchantment and a denaturalization of this interface. In this way, it is an introduction of a media poetics, like the one I have unfolded in Stein’s writing, but one that works on an interface that is situated on another level of the media ecology: the performative artist’s persona. As suggested by Will in the quote

58 As Selsky points out, Warhol’s diaries, especially from the 1970s and 80s, reveal that he had several plunges into the “stream of commerce” where his renunciation of intellectual property and the cult of originality is hard to recognize: “Certainly the diaries are full of examples depicting a jealous Warhol whose ideas have been stolen, his works forged, and his paintings lesser market value than those of his competitors” (Selsky 1996: 188).
above, Stein herself already implied this when she displayed the assemblage character of her own persona by transforming herself into a celebrity, or, as Will puts it, in “her own playful, camp, self-fracturing presentation in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas” (Will 2000: 163).

Disidentification and the queerness of Warhol’s surfaces

Warhol’s recognition of the indispensability of the persona as an interface for the public’s encounter with an artwork, combined with his entirely unauthentic conception of identity as an assemblage of various parts that can be performed by anyone and even be mass produced in the Factory, also led to the infamous line of authorized impersonations of Warhol that were part of his public act. For example, the actor and Factory associate Allen Midgette was hired in the fall of 1967 to impersonate Warhol for a series of college lectures. As it turned out, the charismatic Midgette was much better at satisfying the expectations of the college students than the “tight-lipped, shy Warhol” (Goldsmith (ed.) 2004: 53). In the end the bluff was called, and Warhol had to apologize to the colleges, appearing there in the flesh. It is especially due to such pranks, that Warhol’s practice contributes to the understanding of the artist persona as an inauthentic assemblage that is also present in Stein. Furthermore, he is crucial in exhibiting the queerness inherent in this gesture.

As Wayne Koestenbaum has discussed in a study of gay male opera culture and the identification with female opera divas, such an inessential conception of identity can hold connections to queer identity formations:

I want to trace connections between the iconography of “diva” as it emerges in certain publicized lives, and a collective gay subcultural imagination – a source of hope, joke, and dish. Gossip, hardly trivial, is as central to gay culture as it is to female cultures. From skeins of hearsay I weave an inner life; I build queerness from banal and uplifting stories of the conduct of famous fiery women (Koestenbaum, quoted in Muñoz 1996: 152).

Koestenbaum’s serious consideration of “gossip” as the material from which an “inner life” is constructed is as striking in relation to Stein’s self-construction in the gossipy context of the salon as she stages it in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, a chronicle largely woven from Paris art world gossip, as it is to Warhol’s self-fabrication, both in public appearances and in written works like A: A Novel and POPism.

I believe that the connection Koestenbaum makes between the queer individual’s need for cross-identification in self-creation is crucial for understanding the self-fashioning practices of both Stein and Warhol. As the editors of the critical anthology Pop Out claim, even though it was and is commonly known that Warhol was a homosexual, in
much of his reception he has been “degayed”, that is read without references to the queer strategies that permeate his work. In an article in this anthology, José Esteban Muñoz applies his concept of disidentification to Warhol and his younger protégé, the black graffiti artist and painter Jean-Michel Basquiat, showing how instances of cross-gender, cross-sexuality and cross-racial (dis)identification can function as counterstrategies towards identity political restrictions in society regarding who can gain access to a valid platform to speak from, like that of the artist superstar. Muñoz uses the concept of disidentification, which I introduced earlier, to establish an available position, besides identification or counteridentification, for the sexually or racially queer individual who is unable to identify with a particular role model without violating his or her own identity:

Disidentification is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather disidentification is a strategy that works “on and against dominant ideology” (Muñoz 1996: 147).

I will return to how Muñoz’s concept is actualized in Gertrude Stein’s public performance of her artist’s persona, being female, Jewish and queer, particularly in chapter five, where this dimension of Stein’s oeuvre and reception is elaborated extensively. In relation to Warhol, it permeates his oeuvre from the practice of recycling second-hand images in his visual artworks to his recycling, reforming and queering of the powerful position of the sovereign, male artist, which, in principle, is unavailable to him due to his fragility and queerness, since, in Warhol’s own account in \textit{POPism}, it was currently occupied and “engendered by the ’butch’ painters of Abstract Expressionism, as part of the ’macho’ world they cultivated” (Powers 2014: 20).

This practice of revisionary identification or disidentification is invested with a transformative or counter-ideological power in Muñoz’s reading, which is also the reason why the additionally marginalized artist Basquiat, due to the racist undercurrents of the art world in general as well as Warhol’s practice in particular, can pick up on Warhol’s strategies of self-fashioning to perform his own process of disidentification. In Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick’s contribution to the same anthology, she discusses how Warhol’s shyness is a factor often brought up in descriptions of Warhol, but with its connections to the shame imposed upon queer sexuality by the conventional mainstream culture in general and the micro culture of the art world often being ignored. In Sedgwick’s reading, Warhol’s shyness and shame are responses to the challenge of producing a self as “a (white) queer in a queer-hating world […] [and] a white (queer) in a white-supremacist one” (Sedgwick 1996: 135). The fragility, even breakability, of the Warhol persona as examined in the light of the “dysphoric affect shame” (ibid.) introduces an important friction into the interface of the artist’s persona that prevents it from becoming an infinitely reproducible immaculate black box. Rather, it stays open for further collaborations and disidentifications, as performed by Basquiat.
As Edward Powers put it in his reading of Warhol’s own account in *POPism*:

In fairly the same breath that Warhol praised Rauschenberg and Johns for bringing back contemporary painting from ‘introspective stuff’ [of Abstract Expressionism, SD], he nevertheless contrasted their queer, but closeted persona with the ‘swish’ persona that he conspicuously cultivated: in effect, he suggested how their critique of introspective depth in art nevertheless dovetailed with the depth of the closet in their lives (Powers 2014: 20-21).

Thus, in contrast to the male homosexuality that was implicit in the Black Mountain College circles centered around John Cage, Merce Cunningham, Rauschenberg and Johns, and engaged in “excavating, paying tribute, and ultimately rallying” behind the queer history of American Modernism as ‘a discourse, for those who could decipher it, of gay identity’” (Powers 2014: 8), but in a rather abstracted or “closeted” form, Warhol’s work with his persona brings out into the open some of the more flamboyant or “swish” aspects of this queer history that were not attended to by the Black Mountain circles or anyone else in the art world of the 1960s. In the words of *POPism*:

You’d have to have seen the way the Abstract Expressionist painters carried themselves and the kinds of images they cultivated to understand how shocked people were to see a painter coming on swish. I certainly wasn’t a butch kind of guy by nature, but I must admit, I went out of my way to play up the other extreme (Warhol and Hackett 1980: 12-13).

In chapter five I will return to the part played by Gertrude Stein in this history.

**Stein in poetry: John Ashbery**

Another one of the hundreds of people who appear in Warhol’s “Screen Tests” is the New York poet John Ashbery (1927-2017). Along with poets like Kenneth Koch, Frank O’Hara, Barbara Guest and James Schuyler, he is often associated with the so-called New York School of Poetry, which was named after the New York School of abstract expressionism (Jackson Pollock, Willem de Kooning) by whom they were to some extent inspired. As implied, both Warhol and Dick Higgins and other representatives of the intermedia avant-garde saw themselves as being more or less in direct opposition to the spontaneity and expressive immediateness of abstract expressionism. However, such polarizations and divisions of an artistic field can always be nuanced, and Ashbery had connections with both the abstract expressionists and to the art scenes of Fluxus and minimalism. By his own account, the young Ashbery was highly influenced by the concerts of John Cage
in New York in the 1940s and the early 1950s, and it seems likely that it was through Cage that Ashbery was first made aware of the work of Gertrude Stein, in whom he was the one among his peers to exhibit the most ongoing and in-depth interest (Stimpson 1984). As Bonnie Marranca remarks, Ashbery was a member of the Cambridge Brattle Theater Company, which was among the earliest to produce Stein’s work in the early fifties, and thus Ashbery was the most important member of the defining circles of Stein admirers she addresses who had a specifically poetic orientation.

The first audiences for Stein were the poets, visual artists and performers who would define the American avant-garde of the fifties and sixties, particularly what was to be the New York School, and who knew her writings from available books and alternative literary magazines (Marranca 1996: 19).

As suggested at the beginning of this chapter, John Ashbery has responded in general terms to the collaborative impulse in Stein’s poetics, claiming that reading her had been a “spur to him as a ‘writing reader’” (Setina 2012: 147) Several studies suggest more or less direct relations between Stein’s poetry and Ashbery’s, especially his early controversial works like *The Tennis Court Oath* (1962), even if there are few examples of direct appropriation or allusions in his poetry.

However, as Emily Setina has shown, it is striking how expressions formulated in connection with Ashbery’s readings of Stein become key phrases in his description of his own poetics (Setina 2012). What I will direct my attention towards in concluding this chapter, is Ashbery’s reading of Stein as it has unfolded in essays and reviews addressing Stein directly, as these have been highly influential for the literary currency Stein’s name has obtained in posterity. The importance of Ashbery’s comprehension of Stein’s poetry and his embracing of her poetics has increased in line with Ashbery himself, along with his sympathetic readers, struggling to shrug off the skepticism towards the alleged “opaqueness” and “difficulty” that dominated his reception in the early years of his career. He has obtained steadily growing recognition to the extent that, on his death in 2017, he was broadly considered among the leading contemporary poets in the English language, and was repeatedly mentioned as runner-up candidate for the Nobel prize in literature, although he never received it. In that sense, Ashbery – next to John Cage – has been one of the most influential of the early advocates of Stein’s work.

Ashbery’s first and most crucial text on Stein is his review “The Impossible”, which was published in *Poetry* magazine in 1957 in response to the first publication of *Stanzas in Meditation* (1932) in its entirety, as the backbone of the seventh volume of the

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50 Another important Stein reader in Ashbery’s circles is the somewhat younger New York poet Bernadette Mayer (b. 1945) who is loosely associated with Ashbery’s generation, but more frequently with the generation of language poetry that is the topic of chapter two. Mayer was a dedicated reader of Stein and played a major part in disseminating her work to a new generation of poets through her workshops held at the Saint Marks Church Poetry Project during the 1970s.
Yale series that came out the year before. It has had a defining influence on the reading of Stein as a poet for decades to come, especially in a formalist tradition. In it, Ashbery stresses the alternative realism of Stein, as he sees in the abstraction of the poetry a rhythmic mimesis of life that is imitating the un-plotted, unordered complexities of lived existence, precisely because it is refusing to organize it into false coherence. As Setina stresses, Marjorie Perloff has read “The Impossible” as a critical document in the tradition of a “poetics of indeterminacy” (Setina 2012:145) due to Ashbery’s descriptions of the open non-specificity of Stein’s Stanzas:

It is usually not events which interest Miss Stein, rather it is their “way of happening,” and the story of Stanzas in Meditation is a general, all-purpose model which each reader can adapt to fit his own set of particulars. The poem is a hymn to possibility; a celebration of the fact that the world exists, that things can happen (Ashbery 1957, no paging).

Setina shows how several formulations in this quote, like “way of happening” and the idea of a “general all-purpose model” that one can adapt to one’s own set of particulars, reappear when Ashbery is describing his own poetics, and these are also the formulations that become most crucial to Perloff’s conception of an indeterminate poetry, applying shifting pronouns, abstracted referents, estranged syntax and discontinuities to establish a multiplicity of meaning that disturbs direct, emotional identification and lyric intimacy.

I will engage further with Perloff’s poetics of indeterminacy and its huge impact on the reading of Stein in the next chapter, but here I will follow the lead of Setina who suggests a slightly alternative accentuation of Ashbery’s review.

Not yet determined by the concept of indeterminacy […] the version of difficulty that appears in “The Impossible” remains entangled with the particular personality of the writer of Stanzas and the particular emotional responses the poem evokes in its reader (Setina 2012: 145).

As suggested by Setina, who also consults Ashbery’s notes and drafts for the original review, next to the formalist observations about Stein’s poetic technique there is a personalized emotional engagement at play in Ashbery’s reading in which he is considering Stein as a person alongside her writing. Or, as Setina suggests: “Ashbery identifies the scale and scope of the work’s ambition as products of the personality that produced it” (Setina 2012: 147).

As I will return to on several occasions in the following chapters, the dependency of Stein’s writing upon her personality is an issue of some controversy in her reception, as her strong personality’s interference in her contemporary readers’ engagement with her writing has frequently been used as grounds for dismissing her work. But in Ashbery’s reading, “the work’s connection to personality becomes a sign not of simplicity but complexity, not of lack of integrity or ambition but of the work’s (and personality’s) strength”
(Setina 2012: 160). In the affective engagements of Ashbery with Stein as a writer and with her writing, as Setina traces it, there is a reconciling of a common conflict between feeling and intellect in the reception of Stein. According to Setina, Ashbery is representing the disreputable difficulty of Stein’s *Stanzas* as a means of affective engagement, where the poem’s particular use of pronouns becomes an interface through which the mind of the reader engages with the text, while it simultaneously emphasizes the solitude of the writer. Namely, instead of engaging in the common poetic clichés of “we”, “with which so many modern poets automatically begin each sentence, and which gives the impression that the author is sharing his every sensation with some invisible Kim Novak” (Ashbery 1957), as Ashbery dryly phrases it, the *Stanzas* are primarily operating with a “they” and an open, indefinite “I.” In this way, Setina is making a case for the presence of a certain lyric intimacy in Ashbery’s reading of Stein. Not one that has a “solipsistic nature,” but one that is intertwined with social and ambient qualities:

As we get deeper into the poem, it seems not so much as if we were reading as living a rather long period of our lives with a houseful of people. Like people, Miss Stein’s lines are comforting or annoying or brilliant or tedious. Like people, they sometimes make no sense and sometimes make perfect sense; or they stop short in the middle of a sentence and wander away, leaving us alone for awhile in the physical world, that collection of thoughts, flowers, weather, and proper names (Ashbery 1957).

Thus, in stressing the etymology of “stanzas”, which implies the Italian word for rooms, and populating the rooms of the poem with lines that are “like people,” Ashbery is suggesting the entanglement in Stein of ambient poetics with the collaborative poetics, giving life to the social space of reading.

**Stein in the salon: sovereign genius in solace**

In 1971, Ashbery returns to Stein in his review of the previously mentioned seminal MoMA exhibition *Four Americans in Paris*, which displayed the largest selection on American soil of the Stein siblings’ art collection since the Armory Show of 1912 (Ashbery 1989). What Ashbery carries out in the review, which deals somewhat more with Stein than with the paintings of Cezanne, Matisse and Picasso on show, is an isolation of Stein. He paints an image of her, not as the lively salon hostess we all know, but as a somewhat lonely figure. An interesting point in the texts is also that Ashbery punctures the golden image of Paris in the ravishing days of modernism to stress instead the conservative institutions of the city’s official art and cultural life. In Ashbery’s account, Paris for Stein was not foremost a roaring site of wild experimentation and eccentric
avant-garde artists that the popular narrative facilitates, but at least as much a conservative safe space in which she could perform her linguistic experiments in relative undisturbed peace surrounded by people who did not read her language. Certainly, the claim that Stein’s writing was not read or appreciated by anyone in the context of the salon only stands if one ignores Stein’s crucial relationship with Toklas who was her dedicated first reader for almost forty years, as well as many salon regulars of literary orientation (Jane Heap, Margaret Anderson, Mabel Dodge, Janet Flanner, Constance Fletcher and Carl Van Vechten, to mention a few). Yet, Ashbery’s construction of Stein as an expatriate poet working alone, isolated with the English language and the medium of writing, also has its truth value. It is framed by Stein, the character, claiming in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas that she enjoys living in Paris, surrounded by people, yet “being all alone with English and myself” (ABT 730). And it can surely find support in notebook entries and letters, especially from Stein’s earliest years of writing when she was struggling with her identity as an artist. During this period, she was highly discouraged by her difficulties finding publication, as well as by the unenthusiastic attitude towards her writing of her brother Leo with whom she was living until 1914.

Obviously, the review also develops Stein’s connections to the visual arts on show in the exhibition. However, in his account of the relationship between Stein and the Paris painters, especially Picasso, Ashbery explains it as more of an equivalence than an entanglement. In this course, Ashbery deviates from many of the intermedia and minimalist Stein collaborators discussed in this chapter, for whom her media poetics and its intermedia affinities were crucial. If Cage, Rainer and Williams, for instance, showed a strong preoccupation with the writing’s ability to make tangible its own interface as a flat surface and thus entangling with media conditions of other graphic arts (Krämer 2017, Emerson 2015), then the formalism of Ashbery’s engagement with Stein’s poetry is more linguistic – as is emphasized by the interest he formulates in her specific grammar and vocabulary, such as her use of articles and pronouns – and less concretist or media poetic in its focus. What is crucial note is that Ashbery via both reviews is making Stein much more available for future literary readings than she had been before. He is inscribing her with intimate, lyric profundity and reducing the emphasis on her alleged silliness – what he, in “The Impossible” calls her “lack of seriousness,” her “over-employment of rhythms suggesting a child’s incantation against grownups” – which are many of the same traits that were especially appreciated by other 1960s artists for their media poetic effects of emphasizing the interface of the writing. By deeming some of the more cheerful pieces in the Yale volume “charming, though lacking the profundity of Stanzas in Meditation” (Ashbery 1957), and further, by installing a certain “sadness” and “isolation” into the image of Stein as a cheerful and “eccentric American lady” (Ashbery 1989: 107), he is evoking the figure of a modernist poet from the background of the much more rambling avant-garde figure constituted by the 1960’s reception of her. This reading of Stein as a poet assigns a path, as we shall see, for segregating Stein from the 1960’s intermedia art
scene, making her available for the more strictly poetic reception that followed in the years to come, especially by a number of American poets commencing their careers in the 1970s and associated with labels like radical poetics and language poetry.
CHAPTER 2:

CONSOLIDATING A RADICAL POET: GERTRUDE STEIN AND THE LIMITS OF THE POLITICS OF FORM

In the mid-1970s, the young poet Charles Bernstein (b. 1950) made a series of experimental sound pieces on audio tape. One of the products of his investigation of this medium was #4 – a portrait of one being in family living (1975), titled in reference to Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*. Bernstein had already engaged with Stein’s novel a few years before, when writing his final thesis about it and Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations* as a philosophy student at Harvard University in 1972. The second part of the title, “one being in family living”, is a characteristic and recurring line from *The Making of Americans*, and in the title’s first part Bernstein is recalling Stein’s engagement with portraiture. The piece consists of tape recordings of Bernstein alone with the microphone, recounting introvert reflections on his own desires and anxieties, sequences of his father speaking with considerable pathos on the Bernstein family history and its links to Jewish history and traditions and the land of Israel, looser conversational glimpses involving Bernstein himself and both his parents – his mother objecting strongly to the presence of the microphone – interrupted by irregularly looping scraps from a wider cultural context including sequences of dialogue from the movie *Casablanca* (1942) reenacted in Bernstein’s own voice and bits of Billie Holiday singing about domestic violence – with a sort of meta comment supplied by lengthy passages from a lecture on the approaching collapse of the nuclear family in late capitalist society by the South African anti-psychiatry pioneer David Cooper. #4 can be described as a multi-remediation mashup, where Bernstein is using the technique of cutting up and splicing the audiotape to construct repetitive rhythmic sequences. In cutting up the family dialogue sequences – and making the technological media part of the content of this dialogue – in addition to his mother’s objection to the tape recorder, references are also made to the newly introduced VCR – Bernstein is demonstrating the rapid advent of electric recording technology into regular family living that was happening fast in the 1970s. Evidently, the piece is about media – also actualizing radio, recorded popular music and cinema – but via its sonic medium
defying print, although several (American) novels are quoted and paraphrased in Bernstein’s voice. However, a media poetics of the audio tape medium is at play in the piece, as Brian Reed remarks:

By splicing and altering family voices, Bernstein exposes the myth that a technology such as audiotape can make past generations and past collective experiences newly, luminously present. By capturing, repeating, and interrupting statements he demonstrates that tape, as Steve McCaffery has put it, possesses all “the characteristics of graphism,” that is, a system of writing (Reed 2013: 177).

Thus, Bernstein is calling out the textuality of the audiotape, making the listener aware of its material interface rather than exploiting the promised immediacy and transparency of this new medium. This technique runs through the piece, but is especially heavily exploited with the scraps from mass culture, already repeatable at their core. This includes the Billie Holiday song and the Casablanca dialogue as can be followed in this transcription, produced by the poet Danny Snelson, of a passage riffing on two (slightly altered\(^{60}\)) lines spoken by Humphrey Bogart’s character in the movie: “I’ve heard this story a million times” and “Mister, I met a guy once when I was a kid.” Both are repeated numerous times, each time getting just a tiny bit further into the sentence.

Danny Snelson’s full transcription of #4 was previously available on Penn Sound like Bernstein’s piece, but has been removed. This extract is printed in Brian Reed’s Nobody’s Business, p. 178.

This use of repetition with a difference evokes Gertrude Stein’s prose style, particularly as it develops towards the end of The Making of Americans and in her early portraits, with

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\(^{60}\) As noted by Brian Reed, Bernstein deliberately alters the lines from Casablanca. In Reed’s more evolved reading of Bernstein’s piece and Danny Snelson’s remediations of it, these variations become significant, but for my (more superficial) reading they are not relevant which is why I will not address them further (Reed 2013: 173-193).
the repetitions of almost identical sentences with only the slightest variation forming a monotonous rhythm, which Stein herself described, with an analogy to the technology of cinema, as creating movement by a sequence of images, each one only slightly different from the preceding.

What I was doing in the Making of Americans, I was doing what the cinema was doing, I was making a continuous succession of the statement of what that person was until I had not many things but one thing (LIA 294).

However, even if the cut-up technique with which Bernstein is adapting his audiotape would seem to be at least as close as Stein’s writing was to do what the cinema was doing, the effect of Bernstein’s repetitions is hardly the continuous succession gradually becoming “one thing” as described by Stein. It appears mechanical and compulsive, as Stein’s sentences certainly also may do at first encounter, but instead of moving on in rhythmic continuation, #4 appears to be stuck on certain phrases, that are apparently hard to get past. Even if the piece eventually moves on to something else, there is no sense of release; it proceeds for a short while, only to almost immediately get stuck on the next tricky passage, and several stuck sentences recur to stick once again later in the composition. The Casablanca parts in particular recall Theodor Adorno’s pessimistic assessment of mass culture as having taken over social control in late modernity, making it impossible to exist outside of the control of the culture industry (Adorno 1991).

Besides the passage transcribed above – explicitly commenting on its own stuckness (“I’ve heard this story a million times”) and evoking a theme of male role models (“I met a guy once when I was a kid”) – the passages that appear most “sticky” are all Bogart lines with a strong individualism and a macho ring to them (“I stick my neck out for no one”, “I’m not fighting for anyone except myself,” and so on). Moreover, Billie Holiday repeats the sad phrase “he beats me too, what can I do” over and over. As Brian Reed also notes, a passage from the family parts, that the piece keeps stumbling upon is Bernstein’s father speaking about the Bernsteins’ “indulgence for the enlightened of knowledge and the interest of their Jewish traditions and the fervent devotion to the land they love,” where the flow is repeatedly interrupted before coming to “the land they love.” Through this sonic patchwork of the traditional domestic and popular cultural (patriarchal) role models that were available to him in his childhood and adolescence, Bernstein is investigating the contemporary conditions of self-fashioning in a domestic environment – as Stein was examining the making of her characters through their family living – and he appears to experience these conditions as being somewhat constraining, to say the least. Throughout the piece, Bernstein is focusing on and problematizing – almost ridiculing – the position of the heterosexual white male on the course to becoming a patriarch of his own “family living.” He is trapped in cultural clichés objectifying women (Casablanca) and powerless in the face of domestic violence (Holiday). As Brian Reed puts it, #4 is
ripe with “Bernstein’s male heterosexual plaint” (Reed 2013: 181) – which is topped by the question of how to adapt the Jewish family identity propagated by the father to a contemporary (left-wing) political awareness of the son, where one does not necessarily love Israel unconditionally.

In this way, #4 develops patterns and themes from Stein’s monstrous novel of how an extremely broad palette of American men and women are gradually “made” through their varied, more or less bizarre, versions of “family living.” Without quoting directly from Stein – apart from the title of the piece – Bernstein applies the investigation to a range of sound material closer to his own life, thus making the “portrait” of #4 a self-portrait. This constitutes an immediate contrast, both to Stein’s ambition in The Mak-ing of telling the story of “everyone who ever was or is or will be living” (MOA: 180) and to the ambition in her portraiture of creating social and professional bonds with other artists of her time.

There are certainly continuities between the transmedia Gertrude Stein reception of the 1960s mapped in the previous chapter and Bernstein’s audio piece. Its impulse to participate in Stein’s endeavor of covering in writing how all Americans were made, is also a way of responding to her collaborate poetics. And by including literature, documentary audio recordings, telephone conversation, blues song, lecture, film dialogue and confessional radio address in one sonic assemblage that progresses via sampling and rhythmic looping, all the elements become integrated and their functionalities inseparable in accordance with Dick Higgins’ ideal of intermedia art, even if the finished piece is not directly transmedia. The materiality of the piece as it meets its audience appears uniform; it is, in the end, an unbroken sound sequence that meets the ear. And if Bernstein, like Cage, Williams, Rainer and Warhol, to some extent applies Stein’s method of composing via repetition, then, when compared to the others, his Stein composition has a stronger prevalence of subject matter. Where we have seen Cage and Williams progress via appropriation of Stein’s concrete word material (“once upon a time the world was round and you could go on it around and around” and “when this you see remember me”) and then reworking it to make medial interfaces palpable, Bernstein’s piece more dominantly engages with Stein’s novel by addressing its subject matter: to understand the formation of identity in an American family context.

Finally, the explicit meta-reflection upon the everyday life material that is actualized in #4, both in Bernstein’s introspective talk parts and in the David Cooper parts, points towards the more articulate political motivations behind the literary practices that were taking shape in the poetic communities of the 1970s and 1980s – what is often referred to as language poetry – that Bernstein was a part of, and that will be the center of this chapter. #4 is one small example from the vast amount of collaborative poetry engaging with Stein that came from the language poetry communities. As we shall see, this piece is atypical in many ways, not least in terms of its choice of a sonic medium of expression, as printed, published poetry and poetics quickly became all the all-dominant
material base of language poetry’s engagement with Stein’s writing.

In the following chapter, I will trace a route through this diverse ecology of textual material that demonstrates its lasting contributions to the reception of Stein without having any ambition to cover more than a fraction of this work. Charles Bernstein will be a recurring figure in the chapter, sometimes performing the role of a lens through which I contemplate the field. Others could probably have been chosen instead, but Bernstein serves the function well because he has had a sustained engagement with Stein’s work that he continues to articulate to this day, and thus he is suitable for illustrating many of the different aspects of and instances in language poetry’s engagement with Stein. Further, he has had a central position in important infrastructural initiatives, like the journal \( L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E \), that have influenced the course of the movement.

What I aspire to accomplish with my selection is to outline the development from the intermedial sensibility manifested by Bernstein in \#4 – with its immediate continuity towards the art scene of the 1960s – towards an increasingly mono-medial poetic practice focused on poetry as the medium of the written word. Even if this textual formalism\(^{61}\) is challenged by various quarters of the movement, not least by Lyn Hejinian’s (b. 1941) sustained collaboration with Stein, I will claim that a relative medial purification of the Stein figure of language poetry is taking place as Stein, through some of the collaborative engagements with her work that I will address, is gradually turned into a poetic predecessor for the language poets. As I will discuss in the latter part of the chapter, this formalist refashioning of Stein becomes crucial for the academic scholarship that starts making progress with reading Stein on the verge of the 1980s, but it also implies problematic reductions of the transmedia range so vivid in the media ecology of the 1960s which in turn makes important aspects of Stein’s contemporary relevance more difficult to grasp. In accordance with the media ecological framework that establishes connections across disciplines, I will trace the close connection between the academic Stein reception and the aesthetic reception in which the two, in spite of their differences, continuously intermingle with and reinforce one another. I will conclude the chapter with a discussion of some of the consequences a too formalist approach entails for discussions of Stein’s work that involve politically complex questions.

\(^{61}\) In the following I use the term formalism, not as an essentialist label referring to a rigidly defined reading practice of a specific school within literary scholarship (such as New Criticism or Russian Formalism), but as a relative, and therefore somewhat fluid term that describes the increased focus on textuality and matters of linguistic form that I determine in the poetic as well as academic reception of Stein that I will be discussing in this chapter. Thus, addressing a reader or a reading practice as “formalist” in the following, does not imply claiming that the reader or practice should be indifferent to content, or to politics, nor claiming that a final separation of content and form should be possible.
I. GERTRUDE STEIN IN LANGUAGE POETRY

From the early 1970s and continuing up through the 1980s and 1990s, a strong poetic reception of Gertrude Stein’s oeuvre emerged in various more or less linked poetry communities in the USA and Canada, a number of which are today frequently referred to with labels such as “language poetry,” “language writing,” “radical poetics,” and so on. There are almost as many specific labels for this poetic movement as there are accounts of its poetics and history. Some poets of the movement, as well as critics and scholars considering it, attempt to make clear distinctions between the terms or to consolidate one term (be it “language poetry,” “language writing,” “language centered writing,” “radical poetics,” “poethics,” “politics of poetry” or “politics of form”) as privileged, but the general impression when approaching the field as a whole in 2018 is that names and labels are multiple and are attributed mixed meanings by various writers. As I would like to avoid favoring one particular account or auto-history of the movement over others, I have deliberately chosen to play along with the heterogeneity of the field’s critical terms – using in particular, but not exclusively, language writing and language poetry as approximate labels of the literary movements I am addressing in this chapter. I make no effort to set up or maintain strict terminological distinctions that I consider futile due to the complexity of the critical corpus. In the following, I will use the terms to refer to the groups of poets primarily situated on the US West coast (centered around the San Francisco Bay Area) and on the East coast (around New York City), some, but not all of them, publishing work in the pages of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, as well as to poets of the same generation, that is, born between roughly 1940 and 1950, who are more loosely associated with the movement through mutual interests and similar poetic aspirations.

As illustrated by the example above, this new strain in the Stein reception picked up after the broader artistic reception that had taken place in the 1950s and 1960s in a range of artistic fields, but because it was shaped by different, more specifically poetic agendas, it soon started emphasizing strictly literary aspects of Stein’s work over the intermedial ones promoted by Stein collaborators such as Dick Higgins and John Cage. In this respect, language poetry is following the path within the Stein reception first suggested by John Ashbery’s essays. Like Ashbery, the language poets had reasons to be dissatisfied with the official version of the history of American poetry, which allowed

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62 Notably, the movement had other important channels both prior to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* (such as *This* 1971-1974, edited by Robert Grenier and Barret Watten), contemporary with it and following on from it (such as *Poetics Journal*, which appeared 1982-1998, edited by Lyn Hejinian and Watten). Due to the necessary limitations of my investigation, the poetic reception of Stein in Canadian poetry, which unfolded in parallel with American language poetry and shares many of its preoccupations, will only appear briefly at the outskirts of the following discussion. Exceptions are made when direct exchanges took place, or when Canadian poets were active on the American scene as in the case of Steve McCaffery (born in England, but commenced his career as a poet in Canada), whose “homolinguistic translations” of *Tender Buttons* will be addressed. However, other interesting Stein readers and collaborators such as B.P. Nichol and Bill Bissett will not be included.
little space for the sort of poetry they were set on producing, and needed Stein and other modernist poets who were previously neglected, or even mocked, as historical reference points legitimating another approach to poetry. For this reason, the way Stein is read and used in language poetry has come to constitute a crucial node in the process towards including her in literary and scholarly institutions. Since the majority of Stein’s writings were not widely available in the early 1970s, the series of reprints by the Something Else Press and various briefer introductions and selections became quite influential in determining which parts of Stein’s oeuvre became the center of the poetic reception of her work that began to take shape.63 The word poetic here describes at least two aspects of this reception: first, that it was conducted by poets working collaboratively with the work of Stein, most dominantly in the genres of poetry and poetics, and second, that it essentially helped establish the figure of Gertrude Stein the poet. As I will describe in the latter part of this chapter, this poetic reception was elaborated via the language poetry community’s alliances with important formalist and neo-philological scholarship that paved the way for the academic readership initiated around 1980 and picking up pace from the early 1990s onwards – in theoretical traditions such as formalism, structuralism, poststructuralism and écriture féminine that all had their advocates in the language poetry community.

Robert Grenier, the Stein lectures and the end of “comment”

Numerous accounts of the language movement front Robert Grenier’s (b. 1941) essay “On Speech,” published in the first issue of the journal This in 1971, as an initiating text for its West Coast framing (Silliman 1986, Perelman 1996, Watten 2003). At the end of this short essay, in which Grenier is trying to cut American poetry loose from its fetish of the spoken word, he quotes poetry by Stein and Louis Zukofsky to suggest this new path. In the issue’s previous essay, a review of Robert Creeley’s collected notes and essays, A Quick Graph, Grenier is also trying to encircle this new path, predicting that poetics and critical writing as produced since Pound and Eliot has come to an end with Creeley’s book. Following from Creeley’s material insight that “words are things too” poems become the most immediately real occurrences, and thus, poetry no longer needs explanation. Instead, Grenier envisions a poetics that will reinvent itself as a formally attentive poetic practice in its own right, via the example of Gertrude Stein:

Either poets/writers will no longer give themselves with such energy and devotion to the serious articulation of what writing is for their time,

63 Most notably Selected Writings of Gertrude Stein edited by Carl Van Vechten, which was first published in 1946 and reprinted in 1950, 1962, 1972, 1990 and the also widely circulated Writings and Lectures 1911-1945, edited by Patricia Meyerowitz, first published by Peter Owen 1967, but reissued by Penguin Books in 1971 renamed as Look at Me Now and Here I Am. Writings and Lectures 1909-45 and reprinted on several occasions, most recently in 2004. The Yale Edition of the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein that came out in eight volumes during the 1950s was not widely available in the 1970s.
or a kind of critical writing which does not now much exist will have to be made dominant: one in which the intention to say something is accomplished by a form possessed, first, of all the self-sufficient factness of the actual poems/prose being discussed, and here as in relation to writing generally Gertrude Stein, of all our ‘fathers’ still points the way (viz. her Lectures in America, Beacon Press, first pub. 1935) (Grenier 1971b: not paginated, p. 83 by count).

After this point, according to Grenier, criticism will go on as “literary indulgence”, but “comment is finished”. A few pages further into the issue, Grenier presents a “review” of Stein’s Lectures in America,⁶⁴ which literally demonstrates the end of comment as it consists of a three-page selection of concise quotes from Stein’s lectures followed by a poem by Creeley and a brief end note by Grenier. It is interesting to go through Grenier’s selections of quotes with the writing on Stein by poets associated with the movement in the 1970s and 1980s in mind. One could no doubt trace a significantly high frequency of these particular sentences from Stein’s lengthy talks in these writings. Grenier’s take on Stein has, thus, very likely shaped more than is recognized – also due to the low availability of some of Stein’s lectures that had been out of print for decades. It is above all Stein’s practice in these lectures that Grenier is suggesting as an example of the morphing of poetic writing and criticism that he is arguing for, “a writing being what it is saying”, as he phrases it in the end note to the selection (Grenier 1971c).

Evidently, Stein’s name was in the air that the language poets were breathing from the very beginning. And in effect, Grenier also establishes the dominant Stein poetry canon here: Lectures in America and Tender Buttons are at its center. One last detail to note is Grenier’s hailing of Stein as the one “of all “our ‘fathers’ [who] points the way.” With this phrasing, Grenier is certainly making a canonizing gesture towards Stein, a lot less hesitant than Ashbery’s somewhat unresolved attitude towards her (stressing both her “profound originality” and her “lack of seriousness”) but, arguably, in naming her a ‘father’ he is also deöminizing her. Although the quotation marks do take the edge off his gesture, this choice of words can be conceived as pushing her towards an ungendered – or implicitly male-gendered – category of the progressive experimental poetry, which, as I shall return to, is a repeated accusation against the Stein figure constructed by parts of language poetry from scholars with a background in feminism and cultural studies. Yet, the fathering of Stein here works at least as much as a queering of the category of the father per se, in line with the attack on the patriarch we just saw in Bernstein’s audio piece, and a questioning of the implied maleness of the figure of the poet role model. If Grenier is not directly performing a gesture of disidentification with Stein, he is taking note of the disidentification process of Stein herself, in her conscious pose as a male genius.

⁶⁴ The genre indication “review” does not appear in the header for this piece, (nor does it for the Creeley review), but is listed in the completed index of This that is compiled by editor Barret Watten and available at eclipsesarchive.org <http://eclipsesarchive.org/projects/THIS/html/contents.html> (last accessed 15.03.2018)
Yet, in 1985 Susan Howe could still, without hesitation, write in *My Emily Dickinson*:

Emily Dickinson and Gertrude Stein are clearly among the most innovative precursors of modernist poetry and prose, yet to this day canonical criticism from Harold Bloom to Hugh Kenner persists in dropping their names and ignoring their work (Howe 1985: 11).

This neglect of Stein’s writing in the context of literary criticism was, as Marjorie Perloff has stressed, tied to the fact that for many years, Stein was not foremost considered a poet, due to both her spreading of her work in so many genres and her highly experimental handling of these genres (Perloff 2007). But, as Howe implies in her pairing of Stein and Dickinson, gender bias definitely also plays a part in the image of Stein established in mainstream cultural discourse in the decades after her death that was outlined in the previous chapter. Here, she was known as a colorful modernist society hostess, if not directly as a hoax, who cultivated weird formats of writing and nonsense talk exclusively for the sake of attention. As Perloff and many others have suggested, a relative aesthetic conservatism in regard to experimental practices challenging immediate coherence and semantic transparency in language has dominated literary institutions as compared to the attitude towards abstraction, conceptualism and materiality in visual arts exhibited by its institutions. This imbalance is illustrated, for instance, by the lack of literary appreciation for numerous authors of concrete poetry and other forms of conceptual, visual or sound-based poetry that are fairly canonized in the histories of other artistic media (Kotz 2007).

Thus, even if the rich interdisciplinary remediations of Stein’s work in the media ecologies of the 1960s studied in the previous chapter will seem impressive from a contemporary point of view, they generally had little immediate influence on her literary canonization – with the possible exception of John Ashbery’s essays. Rather, this reception constituted her as a figure moving across media that was much too blurry for the literary institutions to pin down until she was taken up by the language poets. There
are of course other explanations for Stein’s increased presence in literary scholarship. Theoretical currents such as poststructuralism and deconstruction introduced into academia the potential appreciation of writing not presenting itself as fully coherent and sensible, and such an attitude would certainly appear to be essential for anyone reading Stein. However, without downplaying the importance of these theoretical currents at the time they were introduced, I follow Astrid Lorange in considering the language poetry reception a crucial – and hitherto not sufficiently recognized – turning point for the acknowledgement of Stein’s actual readability (Lorange 2016: 11-14). The long-running contributions of the poets included in this chapter have been decisive for the inclusion of Stein in both academic and non-academic literary institutions, as they both work with her works in a collaborative vein but also in some senses streamline her to become more of a language-centered poet, which has made her more accessible for formalist scrutiny.

Temporally dispersed and popping up in different shapes and contexts, this reception challenges the immediate causality suggested by most scholarly accounts of the field of Stein scholarship and suggests the non-linear, multiple and erratic history of Stein’s readership, in the spirit of media archeology as suggested by Lori Emerson, Zielinski and others. Yet, if the poetic reception of the language poets challenges linear histories of influence and cause-effect, it also suggests that non-linearity does not imply that no connection exists or that connections are not important to trace.

As stressed in Grenier’s essays discussed above, the language poets promoted an undermining of the frontiers between critical and poetical writing, and some of them, as we shall see, also approached the argumentative forms of more conventional academia in some of their writings. Further, the media ecological approach to the field of Stein’s reception implies that spheres such as “poetry” and “academia” will always interact, but this does not mean that they collapse indiscernibly into each other. As John Durham Peters suggested, in media ecology “ontology is not flat; it is wrinkly, cloudy, and bunched” (Peters 2015: 30), and accordingly, distinctions can still be maintained in relation to a more “purely” academic scholarship performed by non-poets. But through the very different collaborative readings and rewritings of Stein that I will examine in this chapter, the language poets revitalized a poetic oeuvre that was widely neglected in the context of North American poetry when they started out, and, equally importantly, in this process, they helped establish a “Gertrude Stein” that was much more available to academic research in the context of literary scholarship than she had previously been. In order to show this important consequence, I will extend my account of the aesthetic and poetic reception to also include a discussion of its academic development, particularly in the work of Marjorie Perloff, who becomes an unavoidable figure in connecting the language poets with academia.
The collaborative communities of language poetry

One immediate complication to the discourse about language writing is that, as is the case is with a number of avant-garde art and poetry movements in the 20th century, the auto-history written by the participants involved in the movements has played a dominant role in their conceptualization. That is, many critical tracings and attempts at definitions of language poetry were conducted by poets and scholars who are themselves associated with the movement (i.e. Davidson, Silliman, Watten, Perelman, Hejinian, and Bernstein) and there is no established hierarchy between these – often strongly deviating – accounts.

Yet, even if language poetry is not immediately as straightforward as older historical art movements like futurism or dada, which were more directly centered around manifestos and dominant leader figures, it is permeated by a strong sense of collectivity that remains a valid argument for using the term to refer to a particular movement within American poetry. This communal spirit is expressed incessantly, both in its members’ auto-historical accounts and by the significant production of co-authored works, published exchanges and collaborative writing projects that have poured from the movement. As Lyn Hejinian has suggested, addressing the circle of Bay Area poets she herself was a part of, this communal spirit was more a point of departure than a quality that arose along the way. From the beginning, the aesthetic community was solidly “grounded in sociopolitical contexts” (Hejinian 2000: 171) because

all of us had been involved in some degree of political activism during the Vietnam War, and we came to poetry with political, or social, goals in mind. And once we became aware of strong mutual curiosities and commitments, we began consciously to create an environment for ourselves – a “workplace,” so to speak. Variously, we began reading series, talk series, a radio program, magazines, presses (Hejinian 2000: 171-172).

The Grand Piano series of readings that took place in San Francisco 1976-7965 and the Tuumba Press initiated and edited by Hejinian, which published many of the language poets from the mid-1970s until it closed down in 1984, are examples of such “environments” addressed by Hejinian. On the east coast, parallel initiatives appeared, including the establishment of independent presses such as Douglas Messerli’s influential Sun & Moon Press founded in College Park Maryland in 1976 and numerous smaller presses like Bernstein and Susan Bee’s Asylum’s Press. Another important “workplace” in the early years was the series of workshops held by the poet Bernadette Mayer as part of the St. Marks Church Poetry Project (running 1971-1974), featuring co-authored experiments that became an important creative source for the East Coast parts of the movement

65 Documentation of program see <http://www.thegrandpiano.org/gpchronology.html> (last accessed 15.03.2018)
as well as a crucial source for the dissemination of Gertrude Stein’s poetry to a new generation (Vickery 2000: 150).

Other important institutions emanating from New York were the journal \(L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E\), edited between 1979 and 1981 by Bruce Andrew and Charles Bernstein, who originally conceived the journal in terms of a newsletter that would tie together the communities of language writers across the American continent, and later the feminist poetry journal \(HOW(\text{ever})\) (1983-1992), edited by Rachel Blau duPlessis. Andrews and Bernstein also tried to establish a distribution service that would circulate photocopies of out-of-print chapbooks and work published by small presses without national distribution (Vickery 2000: 27-29). Even if the environment that Hejinian lines up is certainly diverse in terms of the different physical infrastructures established, these infrastructures are all, however, more or less specifically literary or at least language-centered. Even though there have been many examples of exchanges with visual and performing arts in the language community all along, this relative mono-mediality still stands in clear contrast to the much more diverse – or intermedial – media ecology of the 1960s that was visited in the previous chapter.

As Hejinian stresses, the sense of group identity was also connected to a political awareness. The previously mentioned Vietnam protests and other political agendas of the so-called New Left in the 1960s and 1970s (student riots, civil rights movements, and so on) had a formative influence on this generation of poets, many of whom also attended university in the decade when student protests and political engagement were at their highest. This political awareness also emerges in a politicized understanding of the institution of poetry or literature as infected by ideology, or as Charles Bernstein suggests in his book of essays from the 1970s and the early 1980s, *Content’s Dream*:

> Official verse culture is not mainstream, nor is it monolithic, nor uniformly bad or good. Rather, like all literary culture, it is constituted by particular values that are as heterodox, within the broad context of multicultural American writing, as any other type of writing. What makes official verse culture official is that it denies the ideological nature of its practice while maintaining hegemony in terms of media exposure and academic legitimation and funding (Bernstein 1986: 248-249).

The politically activist point of departure of many of the associated poets fed a strong conviction that this ideological institution could in turn be criticized, attacked and even undermined through acts of language; and the communal focus on building alternative infrastructures stressed by Hejinian in practice allowed the language poets to address the political and aesthetic agendas that they felt were being silenced in mainstream literary discourse.

It is tempting to propose a connection between this political sense of purpose tied to language and the move away from the outspread and multimodal media ecology of the
1960s towards a more focused media ecology of literature, strategically concerned with establishing channels of distribution that had an outreach beyond limited artistic and poetic communities, even if such a causality is difficult to verify.

An important supplement to the analogue infrastructures of the earliest years is the gradual establishment of various digital infrastructures for the distribution of poetry, poetics and criticism that members of the language community undertook from the early 1990s, thus being among the first to actively use the internet for disseminating and discussing poetry. Language poets started some of the earliest poetry blogs in America, several active chat fora and electronic mailing list systems (‘listservs’) devoted to experimental poetry and larger internet portals and digital archives such as Electronic Poetry Center and Penn Sound. The language poets started using the internet as a dissident platform, a way of communicating below and outside the official, print-borne channels that promoted a conservative poetics (the “official verse culture” described by Bernstein). But in time, the extreme success of the internet as a public infrastructure of information has also played its part in advancing the language poets’ transition from “outlaws” to “classics” as they had a crucial head start upon this platform (Golding 1995). What the electronic resources created by the language poets have in common is that they reflect the textual focus of the movement. Consistent with the technology of the early days of internet, all the platforms are extensively text-borne with low visual complexity. Naturally, a site like Penn Sound includes extensive sonic resources, but experiments with other digital modalities or with the interactive or game-like potentials of the web are second to none.

As indicated by Grenier’s establishment of her as the “father” of a new poetics, Gertrude Stein’s name was tied up with the very definition of the language poetry community. This is also evident from its almost ubiquitous emergence in the many co-authored essays on poetics produced in the movement’s name. A representative example is the 1988 manifesto “Aesthetic Tendency and the Politics of Poetry” co-written by six poets and exhibiting an early instance of the movement’s inclination towards producing auto-history, as it starts out by stating what the authors consider the general public image of their “school of writing”:

Around 1970, a number of writers, following the work of such experimenters as Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky, began writing in ways that questioned the norms of persona-centered, “expressive” poetry (Silliman et al. 1988: 261).

The group identity in the language movement displayed by the many communal initiatives of creating alternative poetic infrastructures as well as by multi-authored manifestos such as this one implies a collaborative impulse in the movement’s conception of poetics that connects well with the collaborative poetics I have described in Stein’s work, and consequently the Stein reception by language poetry represents a crucial point in the development of Stein’s reception as collaboration that is the focus of this study. In
the language poetry reception, the space of appearance that occurs when engaging with Stein’s writing corresponds to the sense of being grounded in sociopolitical contexts, and producing poetry in a conscious exchange with these contexts.

In this centering of the collaborative agenda, the Stein reception of the language poets takes a slightly different course than the intermedia reception of the 1960s that departed from a media poetic sensibility of making the interfaces of the different artistic media as tangible as possible, which in turn created the intermedia effects suggested by Higgins, where words could become images and even performance. In the previous chapter, we frequently saw a smooth transition between this media poetics and an ambient poetics, for instance in the practices of Cage or Fluxus, where there was an inclination towards letting the artwork – the artifact – dissolve into ambient space, for instance in the case of Allison Knowles or Arthur Købcke reducing the artwork to a social or collaborative impulse leaving few material traces.

As I will address shortly, the Stein reception of language poetry is also very much concerned with making the material interfaces of writing tangible, but is generally more focused on the language-specific aspects of this materiality and much less inclined to let the materiality of the (written) artifact dissolve into some sort of “situation.” Via their social conception of language, the political agenda of the language poets become closely tied to their collaborative aspirations towards their readers and each other, as well as towards Stein. Their immediate concern with the infrastructural aspects of literature’s media ecology is not as tied to a dissolution of the poetic artifact as we saw in the 1960s and as we will see again in the two last chapters when approaching the present day. In the spirit of Marxism, the language poets’ concern with material structures is politicized. As we shall see in the final part of this chapter, this political factor also occasionally complicates their collaborative engagement with Stein, not to mention the way this engagement is received by critics with a skeptical attitude towards their politics.

It is worth keeping in mind, though, that the general sense of language writing as a unified poetic movement did not appear instantly when poets associated with the movement first started writing and building poetic communities around readings, discussion groups, workshops, journals and publishing ventures. A significant point in the canonization of language writing as a historically specific literary movement came when the first anthologies appeared, notably Ron Silliman’s massive *In the American Tree* (1986) and Douglas Messerli’s more selective *Language Poetries* (1987). After this point, more scholarly work on published language writing began taking shape, both from the poet-critics of the movement like Silliman (1987), Davidson (1989), Watten (1985) and Bernstein (1986) and from academic scholars not directly associated with the poetic communities. The many essay collections by language poets that came out in the course of just a few years also indicate a move from the experimental conception of poetics as a new amalgamation of poetry and criticism as suggested by Grenier towards more recognizable academic forms of arguing from parts of the movement (Vickery 2000: 103).
Thus, when discussing language poetry as a “movement” in literary history, it is important to keep the specific historical contexts in mind, where, in the early 1970s the fringes of the movement were much looser than in the late 1980s and 1990s when the reputation of language poetry as a movement had begun its institutionalization. As Ann Vickery has described it:

As Language writing became anthologized during the mid-eighties, its existence in terms of community was already dissolving. It was becoming institutionally accepted, gaining the support of influential critics such as Marjorie Perloff, Jerome McGann, and Andrew Ross. As the use of the term Language poetry or Language writing gained currency, it, in turn, inevitably began to subsume difference and marginalize other innovative poetries. At the same time, Language writers began to explore other community formations. Some writers took up academic positions; others took on professional roles in publishing, and communications. Many would turn to family life. In the late eighties and nineties, a proliferation of critical articles and books appeared that focused specifically on Language writing. Most characterized Language writing as a literary movement, complete with leading representatives and manifestoes” (Vickery 2000: 11).

Significantly, with such initial solidification of what started out as more of a fluid field of related literary enterprises also came clearer expressions of the tensions in the field, as Vickery points out, and debates around the marginalization of writers who were not included in the first anthologies and surveys of the movement gained momentum (Vickery 2000: 134-149). In recent years, there has been increasing criticism of the language poetry movement for exhibiting signs of male white heterosexual bias and blindness to their own privilege. Although my purpose lies elsewhere, I have benefitted from insights produced in this strain of criticism, as articulated by scholars like Amy Robbins and Elizabeth Frost, to catch sight of some of the reductions that are at play in the “Gertrude Stein” constructed by language poetry.

Starting out in direct opposition to a dominant “official verse culture” represented by the established platforms of American poetry that were experienced as being tremendously unified around specific literary values such as the lyric tradition and the strong assertion of individual subjectivity, the lyric I, language poetry managed to build alternative platforms from which they eventually, much more convincingly than any previous movements in American poetry, gained access to major academic institutions. From this position, they have established alliances with aesthetically progressive representatives of literary scholarship in traditional academia, who had related quarrels with “official verse culture,” and their overall influence on the valorizations in the history of American poetry has been substantial. Thus, their strong appreciation for Stein’s poetry has had enormous importance for her elevated position in the general poetry canon by American universities
in later years.

As I will develop in further detail, the Stein reading of language poets agrees not only with that performed simultaneously by formalist readers such as Marjorie Perloff and subsequently younger critics following her lead (such as Brian Reed and Craig Dworkin), but also with some important assumptions, of the dominant Stein research that came out of the new philological research tradition established by scholars such as Jerome McGann, and in a Stein context most prominently represented by Ulla Dydo and Edward Burns. As this indicates, the presence of the particular Stein figure promoted by the language poets can be recognized broadly, beyond the discourses within the movement’s obvious scope, and the strong position that this figure has gained since the 1970s, both in research on American modernism and in the domain of experimental poetics, has continued well into recent scholarship on Stein.

However, as clear as the significant value of this contribution is, it also involves a reshaping of Stein that, from the point of view of this study, it is important to call attention to. The complex and highly contradictory figure of Stein as hostess and media persona, art collector, stage writer and modernist oracle to some extent becomes medially purified by language poetry into the much more coherent figure of the “experimental poet.” This tendency has been reinforced in academic scholarship that also highlights textual aspects at the risk of neglecting Stein’s intermedia potential as described in the previous chapter, as well as the performative and affective aspects of her oeuvre connected to cultural identities and bodily investments, that I will address in this and the next chapter. Because of the continued importance of this academic reshaping of the language poetry Stein gestalt, it will be necessary to discuss in some detail how this Stein figure is realized in formalist and philological scholarship.

While the inclusion of Stein into the poetry canon has definitely widened the scope of American poetry, both in terms of its history and in terms of the possibilities available in contemporary verse culture, and has strengthened the literary status of Stein, it has not always benefitted the understanding of the complexity of her work and the transgressive nature of her influence. The readings, collaborative rewritings and appreciations of the language poets have made Stein more readable in a poetic context, securing her a place in a literary historical infrastructure. But continuing from there, a need arises to reconnect her to other relevant contexts that this framing has downscaled. As we shall see, the outspoken importance of her persona and the performative dimensions of her oeuvre represent a context that can challenge the poetic conception of Stein and highlight new parts of the ecology. At the end of the chapter, I will also discuss the issues arising from the association of Stein with the “radical poetics” or “politics of form” of language poetry that from the beginning was closely tied to a left-wing, anti-capitalist agenda, when confronted with more recent, politically complex discussions such as the controversy surrounding Stein’s life and writing during World War II.
Ron Silliman's *The New Sentence*

In addition to the 1930s lectures at the center of Robert Grenier’s presentation of Stein as the “father” of the new poetry’s critique of the dominant speech fetish, another highlight of the language poetry Stein canon is her practice-based anti-grammar *How to Write.*66 Along with the later lectures, it became an important source for Ron Silliman (b. 1946) in his 1979 theorization of “The New Sentence” – a poetical unit or method that achieved a central position in language poetry.67

In *How to Write*, Stein works on an expanded grammar that departs from the written rather than the spoken word. Stein’s attention to the sentence and the paragraph as central discourse units that are specific to written rather than spoken language has important convergences with language poetry’s strong preoccupation with releasing American poetry from its ties to speech and forwarding the materiality of written language in concord with increasingly influential theoretical insights from French linguistics and philosophy. In “The New Sentence,” Silliman raises a critique of linguistics for not formulating a satisfactory concept of the sentence, because of its giving precedence to speech (and thus focusing instead on other linguistic units such as utterances, turns, and so on) over writing, and turns to Stein’s paradox of emotional sentences and unemotional paragraphs that she reformulated numerous times in *How to Write* and in her later lectures (“A sentence is not emotional a paragraph is” HTW: 23).

What Stein means about paragraphs being emotional and sentences not is precisely the point made by Emile Benveniste: that linguistic units integrate only up to the level of the sentence, but higher orders of meaning – such as emotion – integrate at higher levels than the sentence and occur only in the presence of certain complex sentences in which dependent clauses integrate with independent ones. *The sentence is the horizon*, the border between these two distinct types of integration. (Silliman 2003: 87, italics in original)

In her anarchistic grammar treaty, Stein goes on to create sentences that have the emotional balance of the paragraph in them. And, as Sianne Ngai has suggested, in *The Making of Americans* Stein turns the essential difference between a sentence and a paragraph into a modular one by creating long, complex sentences from paratactic clauses that approximate the length and balance of the paragraph (Ngai 2005: 251). She builds upon the praxis of parataxis – of placing each sentence next to other sentences (or clauses) that resist any hierarchical subordination to each other – both in her early style and in the later

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66 All of the included pieces are authored between 1927 and 1930. *How to Write* was originally published in The Plain Edition in 1931 and was reissued by the Something Else Press in 1973.

grammar works, as a way of challenging the “emotional” paragraph, and this technique becomes crucial to the conception of the new sentence.

The ideal of the new sentence in Silliman’s conception becomes torqued sentences that connect with each other tangentially but do not subordinate to a single idea. Nor do they organize in hierarchies of dependent and independent clauses or depend on a single subjectivity, but progress via controlled syllogistic movement on sentence level.68 To language poetry, the paratactic method of composition, the way of making “grammar into prosody”, as Silliman suggests, quoting Roland Barthes (Silliman 2003: 88), or using “grammar as meter” as he suggests with reference to Stein (ibid: 86), is a way of composing without identity in the narrative sense, yet not an example of sentences “in free-standing isolation” (Jameson 1991: 28). The aim is to create a work unit that is not authenticated by a psychological subject, an expressive, authentic unit – the individual speaker. Marjorie Perloff has summed it up as follows:

The ‘new sentence’ is conceived as an independent unit, neither causally nor temporally related to the sentences that precede and follow it. Like a line in poetry, its length is operative, and its meaning depends on the larger paragraph as an organizing system (Perloff 1999: 414–5).

According to Silliman’s essay, by departing from the sentence as a unit of writing, not speech, the materiality of the written language is fronted, and “the new sentence” as a writing practice thus rejects the subject as a unifying factor using parataxis to challenge the “emotional paragraphs” of traditional prose writing. This is also evident in Silliman’s critique of scholarly traditions like that of new criticism, which he finds unable to address the materiality of literature as writing and print even if it claims to be a theory of literature (Silliman 2003: 71-74).

As suggested, Silliman’s insistent focus on textual materiality is motivated by a critique of the primacy of speech that corresponds with Jacques Derrida’s well-known main argument in Of Grammatology (French 1967, English translation 1976), to which he also refers, even if he chooses his own point of attack against the Swiss father of linguistics, Saussure, namely his lack of a consistent notion of the sentence. There are obvious overlaps between this concept of textuality and the media poetics I have addressed in Stein’s writing and in the Stein collaborations performed in the media ecology of the 1960s. Both concepts are aimed at disturbing the illusory semantic transparency of writing and drawing attention to its material base. However, there are also important points upon which they differ. As has been exemplified richly in the previous chapter, the media poetics of Stein is almost constantly on the verge of extending into an ambient poetics

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68 After deriving the principles from Stein, Silliman specifies through the reading of sentences by Gre- nier, Coolidge, Perelman among others, and sums up the practice of the new sentence in eight qualities (such as: “The paragraph is a unity of quantity, not logic or argument” and “Sentence structure is altered for torqued or increased polysemy/ambiguity”), finally demonstrated analytically in the reading of a poem by Carla Harryman (Silliman 2003: 87-93). See also Perelman 1996: 61-63.
that opens up towards the space surrounding and the channels disseminating the work in question. Compared to this movement, Silliman’s idea of textual materiality in “The New Sentence” appears more strictly textual:

The new sentence is the first prose technique to identify the signifier (even that of the blank space) as the locus of literary meaning […] it is the first method capable of incorporating all the levels of language, both below the horizon of the sentence and above (Silliman 2003: 93).

Nils Olsson has established the concept of “text-centricity” to criticize the idea of textuality at the base of literary scholarship from new criticism and hermeneutics to popularized versions of structuralism and post-structuralism. The text-centric approach in literary scholarship will tend to equate an abstract “text” independent of its concrete material realization with the literary “work,” a gesture that will often appear reasonable enough at first, but as Olsson demonstrates in his study on Stein’s practice of letting the textual content of several separate works overlap into “clusters of texts” with porous borders, this text-centric approach severely restricts a reading of Stein’s work that “spreads literature outwards towards its adjoining spaces, rooms, media and discourses” (Olsson 2012: 131, my translation). Likewise, Silliman’s concept of the new sentence seems to imply a neutralization of writing as a somewhat more stable and unmixed medium – able to “incorporate all the levels of language” – than is implied in the work of Derrida and Barthes to which he refers.

Lyn Hejinian’s Gertrude Stein

Several other language poets have made even more detailed and explicit explorations of the connections between Stein’s principle of composing without hierarchy and the paratactic practice of the new sentence, cementing the linking of important strains in language-centered poetics to Stein. Lyn Hejinian’s essays on Stein constitute one of the most prominent examples in this regard, as she unpacks how the horizontal method of composition as paratactic technique developed by Silliman leans heavily on the concept of composition that Stein derived from her contemplation of the French painter Paul Cézanne’s technique. Stein explained her idea of composition in “A Transatlantic Interview” as quoted by Hejinian in her essay “Three Lives”:

Up to that time composition had consisted of a central idea, to which everything else was an accompaniment and separate but was not an end in itself, and Cézanne conceived the idea that in composition one thing was as important as another thing. Each part is as important as the whole (Hejinian 2000: 287).
What Hejinian picks from Stein is exactly the compositional method, which in its horizontal, non-hierarchical structuration resembles Silliman’s new sentence, but she furthermore tries to integrate it with an attempt to rethink the idea of literary realism which is a point in which she seems to deviate from a number of the other language poets in her reading of Stein. She also finds this integration in Stein, who in “A Transatlantic Interview” continues:

The realism of the people who made realism before was a realism of trying to make people real. I was not interested in making people real but in the essence or, as a painter would call it, value. One cannot live without the other (Hejinian 2000: 285).

In Hejinain’s poetics, the paratactic method of composition becomes tied up with a phenomenological understanding of realism. In her general conception of realism, Hejinian is influenced by both Émile Zola and the Russian formalists, combining an empiricist scientific ambition with a literary one. She reads Stein’s method in Tender Buttons as a continuation of the realist tradition described by Zola, where realist literature is understood as experimental in the sense of natural science – as conducting experiments to uncover laws and principles structuring our social reality. But whereas the naturalism of Zola is concerned with ideology and concrete political questions of social justice, Hejinian is using Stein to push in a more phenomenological direction concerned with how the perceptions that constitute the foundation of such ideas are constructed. In this type of realism, Stein’s experiments are structured around a number of tensions in an attempt to uncover the nature of reality and our perception of it; in a sense, the very realness of realism.

As such, Stein’s realism becomes a political issue for Hejinian: Realist art is both an analysis and a perception of the real world. It addresses both the metaphysical issue concerning the relationship between the real and the apparent, and an ethical dimension concerning the truthfulness, or even usefulness of realist art. What is important to note is that Hejinian appreciates the almost scientific feel to Stein’s engagement with social reality, as indicated in Stein’s declared preoccupation with exactitude. As the narrator “Alice” phrases it in her Autobiography: “Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality” (ABT 865). In this sense, Hejinian reads Tender Buttons as an example of a rigorous realism that included the process of perception, the nature of the realness, or how the real comes to be perceived as real. As will become clearer in the following, there is a contrast between several of the Stein readers in language poetry stressing the non-referentiality and linguistic materiality in Stein’s more playful works (such as Bernstein, Silliman, Steve McCaffery, and Lee Ann Brown) and this “scientific realism” and sense of exactitude that Hejinian suggests. In part, Hejinian’s approach is preceded by Ashbery’s and can to a degree be retrieved in academic readings of Stein by Perloff and Dydo, who both exhibit careful attention to reference when reading Stein. The approach has been
even more explicitly developed in the tradition of philosophically and scientifically illu-
minated Stein readings, that address her in the context of influences from empiricist and
processual thinkers, such as William James and Alfred North Whitehead, both of whom
Stein knew well and exchanged ideas with at different points in her life (Meyer 2001;
Lorange 2014; Posman 2015, 2018).

The realist approach to Stein’s poetry that Hejinian establishes in her essays be-
comes an introduction to broader philosophical discussions of time, space, perception
and language in literature. Due to its phenomenological vein, Hejinian’s poetics has an
attention towards the affective potential in literature and its ties to aspects of reader iden-
tification. Thus, the question of the authorial “person,” not necessarily as a narrative unit,
but still as present, becomes central to her poetics. As in the case of Ron Silliman dis-
cussed above, the language poetry discourse on poetics has frequently formulated a heavy
skepticism towards the presence of an authorial person, and when attention is paid to the
issue of reader agency and reader participation in the realization of the poem, the related
questions of reader identification and authorial agency are played down (Altieri 1996).
In Hejinian’s poetics, the self or person is far from banished, but taking a more open,
situated shape than in the traditional lyric. In her essay “The Person and Description,”
Hejinian describes how this person is to be understood as situated and thus tied up with
description:

I have no experience of being except in position. All my observations
are made from the matrix of possibly infinite contingencies and con-
textualities.
This sense of contingency is intrinsic to my experience of the self as a
relationship rather than an essence [...] the sense of being, of selfhood,
can only be reached after one is in place and surrounded by possibil-
ities. That comes first: the perceiving of something, not in parts but
whole, as a situation and with the projection of possibilities (Hejinian

Furthermore, she sums up that “the exercise of possibilities (including that of conscious-
ness) amid conditions and occasions constitutes a person” (ibid: 203). Thus, to Lyn He-
jinian, a person is always already an assemblage and never an isolated object that predates
the concrete situation – or, as Stein said in “A Transatlantic Interview”: “one cannot
live without the other.” The derived definition of subjectivity Hejinian is outlining here
aligns with the affect theory formulated by Brian Massumi, as it involves consciousness
and affects as phenomena that are always already relational. A person is always already
engorged in a situation that is an assemblage of forces, but does not exist in isolation.
Engaging in the collaborative poetics of Stein could easily be an example of the establish-
ment of such a relational situation essential to the production of a subject, since Hejinian’s
emphasis on the delayed temporality of selfhood, that one has a sense of being only after
one is “in place and surrounded by possibilities,” opens up the possibility for collabora-

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tive encounters to happen across time lapses.

In this sense, Hejinian’s thoughts support my extension of Hannah Arendt’s space of appearance to include mediated encounters. As I will return to in chapter four, this orientation has affinities with ideas of distributed agency and cultural techniques as forms of anthropotechnics, as Hejinian opens up the encounter:

The idea of the person enters poetics where art and reality, or intentionality and circumstance, meet. It is on the improvised boundary between art and reality, between construction and experience, that the person (or my person) in writing exists (Hejinian 2000: 207).

As such, Hejinian’s thoughts about a person, not as identity, but as relation, are tied to her phenomenological interest in “the experience of experience,” and in her poetry this idea is developed through the paratactic method of writing able to present as coordinate numerous perspectives and experiences, equivalent to what Silliman called the new sentence. As Hejinian continues: “With these considerations in mind, I attempted to write a work which would not be about a person but which would be like a person” (ibid. 203). This formulation recalls Ashbery’s comment about Stein’s sentences in Stanzas in Meditation, that reading them is “like living with a houseful of people” (Ashbery 1958). In Hejinian’s poetic collaboration with Stein, every person – the poet included – is already a plurality, or a “houseful of people.” Thus, the social point of departure for the language poets as described by Hejinian above corresponds to her poetic response to Stein’s sentences as people chatting.

As several readers, the poet herself included, have stressed, Hejinian’s famous, thrice rewritten and republished poetical autobiography My Life is a work that draws upon Stein in numerous ways. Asked by the Kelly Writer’s House to read her own work through a
modernist poet of her choice, Hejinian chose Stein and read from *My Life*, making her poetic autobiography sound almost like a personal Gertrude Stein equivalent to Susan Howe’s *My Emily Dickinson* (1985). The very first words in the book – “A pause, a rose, something on paper”, which constitutes an epigraph for the first text and reoccurs throughout the whole work – resonate with Stein’s vignette “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose” and recall her famous stationery on which the rose sentence is printed as a ring, and of which Hejinian herself, as I will return to, owns a specimen inherited from her father.

In *My Life*, Hejinian constructs a memoir that does not depend on narrative, but proceeds via parataxis. She does not, in the traditional manner of autobiography, tell the story of her life, nor does she dwell upon spectacular or traumatic events. Instead, the work is constructed from carefully phrased sentences, all subjective, yet decontextualized memories from a life. Every sentence is a description or effect of the I’s attentive, sensuous engagement with the varying surroundings she is exposed to throughout an average, middle class, American upbringing and adult life. Some sentences recur like the rose and the paper, others appear just once, and the sentences are never subordinate to a unifying theme or idea, nor one to the other. The first version was published in 1980 when the poet was thirty-seven years old, and thus contained thirty-seven prose poems each made from thirty-seven sentences. When the first revision appeared seven years later in 1987, seven sentences had been added to each piece and seven new pieces had been added, thus matching the poet’s age of forty-five. A third revision under the title *My Life in the Nineties* appeared in 2003.

This processual and open-ended structure corresponds in important ways to the complex temporality inherent in the media ecological framework of Gertrude Stein’s aesthetic reception. Just like the collaborative situation between Stein and her later collaborators (as I sketched in the introduction) defies the progressive logic of time and distributes agency between both agents, *My Life* demonstrates with great simplicity how the present and the past constantly affect and change each other. Just as, for instance, the fifth poem corresponding to Hejinian’s fifth year of life, will change with each revision, (the recollection of) her five-year old self will be different to her when she is ten, thirty-seven or sixty-five. The beauty of the open-endedness is that it illustrates the entanglement of different temporalities without reducing attention towards the different points in time as *different*. Without making all times collapse into one, it also proposes an ambient poetic challenge towards the artificial status of the poetic artwork as it defies closure – it is always an ongoing project, every published version necessarily just a freezing of an arbitrary point in the textual life process. Hejinian’s description of Stein’s composition as landscape is precise, even in the case of her own autobiographical prose:

69 The event “Nine contemporary poets read themselves through modernism” occurred on October 12, 2000. A sound recording of Hejinian’s reading can be retrieved from the Kelly Writer’s House website (Hejinian 2000a).
Key elements coexist with their alternatives in the work. Nothing is superseded. A phrase or sentence is not obliterated when an altered or even contradictory version of it appears [...] A sentence is never displaced (Hejinian 2000: 117).

In this way, *My Life* can be said to be, exactly as Hejinian wished, a work that is “not about a person but [...] like a person” – if a person is regarded as an assemblage of situated moments of being, a situated entity that is always in relation. Several scholars, including Juliana Spahr, have developed further connections between *My Life* and Hejinian’s reading of Stein. To Spahr, *My Life* in a sense becomes Hejinian’s version of Stein’s *Everybody’s Autobiography*, in which Stein wrote the autobiography of herself as a literary genius, which she – based on her relational conception of identity – in the same breath claimed to be the autobiography of “everybody” in a gesture that was at the same time radically self-promoting and radically democratic.

Spahr connects both Stein’s and Hejinian’s special takes on autobiography to the possibility of a more autonomous type of reader identification, or, in Spahr’s terms, their “connective writing”. In Spahr’s analysis, “*My Life* explores the ramifications of reader autonomy within autobiography, a genre of the personal with a tendency to self-aggrandize” (Spahr 2001: 68). Because it consists purely of arch-typical, uneventful events, *My Life* could, as Marjorie Perloff has written, be “anybody’s autobiography” and it is thus importantly “avoiding the significant events that make autobiography into one of the more narcissistic genres [...] The twist of *My Life* is to show how even the most narcissistic of all genres, the most self-privileging, has possibilities for outward connection” (ibid. 69). As Spahr concludes:

> The genius of this work is how it manages to use the self of autobiography and yet avoid the self-prioritizing rhetoric of identity, all the while keeping open possibly intimate connections. This attention to the collective definition of self is not to demonize or trivialize identity’s more essentialist moments, but rather points to how the personal can also be a way of cohabitating with others (Spahr 2001: 70-71).

This point is very important for Hejinian’s key position in the Stein reception by the language poets. It suggests, in Hejinian’s work, an open approach to the potential of autobiography, to the way a personal or individualistic memory can be re-construed as a collective, social, productive one. And thus, the affective aspects of identification and autobiography can be exploited without including the hierarchical ones. What at first sight may appear to be self-magnification of the authorial person in a later node becomes a productive, collaborative impulse that future readers can connect to, just as it happens with the performative persona of Stein as I shall return to, both later in this chapter and in the subsequent ones. Hejinian shares Silliman’s skepticism towards the self or identity as a narrative unit, but in her take on poetics, this impulse remains more open, not just
to the free running affective potential in literature but also to aspects of identification, an area in which Silliman and other language poets have been subjected to severe criticism in later years.

The restrictive identity politics of the new sentence

In his contribution to the online journal Jacket2’s Ron Silliman feature, Timothy Yu has argued that the new sentence in Silliman’s conception, as well as in its further theorization by Bob Perelman and others, has more direct political implications than just an attack on the heartfelt lyrical I (Yu 2010). In Yu’s reading, the parataxis central to the new sentence – in Silliman’s poetry as well as his theoretical poetics – is a grammatical materialization of an egalitarian ideal that was prevalent in the “new left” of which the language poets were a part. Yu bases his argument on readings of Silliman’s Ketjap, Tjanting, The Chinese Note Book, and The New Sentence, as well as extensive amounts of correspondence and other material from the Archive for New Poetry in La Jolla (UC San Diego). Throughout this material, he finds that Silliman is responding to the challenge of fragmentation into specific identity political interest groups determined by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and so on that the new left had been facing since the late 1960s. Many of these groups also “produced new literary formations” (Yu 2010: 29). In reaction to the threat of atomization and the loss of a universal position for the politics of the avant-garde, Silliman is establishing the “language poet” as something that becomes almost an equivalent to an identity category (Yu 2010:1). The new sentence is involved in carrying out this maneuver, as it is a method of writing that allows for numerous coordinated perspectives to enter, without being subordinated to a single perspective, and thus it contains the egalitarian vision that all the different perspectives can coexist without one being subordinated to the other.

Yu shows how this is part of a pluralist vision for the socialist project, but he also establishes how this vision, in Silliman’s essayistic writings such as “The Political Economy of Poetry,”⁷⁰ becomes weighed down by a tendency to privilege the perspective of the predominantly straight, male, white and educated “language poet” as exclusively holding the critical-analytical capacity to deconstruct convention and thus supply the meta-perspective that allows all the disparate voices and perspectives to coexist in the same work unit. In this essay, Silliman establishes the question of audience as primary for the political potential of poetry, as “the social composition of its audience is the primary context of any writing” (Silliman 2003: 25) and opts explicitly for the objectivity and formal attention of an “appreciative and polite” university audience over the affective and empathetic, but “limited” response of an all-gay audience to a text by Robert Glück about be-

ing “queer-bashed.” A complex discussion follows in which Yu shows how Silliman sets up “gays and academics as different nationalities speaking mutually incomprehensible languages” and finally, in regard to Silliman’s position, asks if the new sentence can be “understood as the writing of a particular community, one defined not only as an aesthetic group (the “language poets”) but often as white and male?” (Yu 2010: 30) In this critique, Yu refers to several accounts of the experiences of marginalization of female writers with connections to the language community (Armantrout 1986, Vickery 2000, Mackey 2000).

Yu is neither the first nor the only critic to stress this strain in Silliman’s poetics. As he also remarks, this position of Silliman’s has to some degree overshadowed the language movement as a whole, “especially in regard to its male white core,” in a number of literary discussions in recent years. This is not always fair, as closer acquaintance with the theoretical writings of some of Silliman’s peers (for example, Charles Bernstein) will show. A likely explanation for this diffusion effect is found in the position Silliman has held within the language poetry movement, due to both his productiveness in terms of theoretical and political writings like the essays collected in *The New Sentence*, and to his strong engagement in key network activities such as his co-curation of the Grand Piano readings, his close involvement in editorial negotiations around the journal $L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E$, and his service as executive editor of *Socialist Review* (1986-1989) and sole editor of the anthology *In the American Tree*. What is probably just as important is that his influence on the experimental poetry discourse has continued over the course of more than thirty years, for instance via his blog <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.dk/>, started in 2002 and among the longest running and most influential poetry blogs in the US. Clearly, this is a position that has provided him with influence but also one that has made him enemies in recent years.

By basing his argument on essays, poems and correspondence dating from the 1970s and 1980s, Yu demonstrates that this “ethnification” of the figure of the avant-garde poet is a tendency that was present in Silliman’s poetics from the early years. In combination with the experiences of relative marginalization that played a part in the careers of many women poets associated with the language communities from the early 1970s onwards, as documented by Ann Vickery and others, its long running relevance seems undeniable. Even if it is essential to understand that this problem arises from Silliman’s preoccupation with including, on equal terms, the stories and perspectives of minority writers in the political economy of poetry and into the socialist political project that, from a present-day perspective it ends on a patronizing note.

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71 Even if the journal ended up being edited by Andrews and Bernstein alone, and thus editorially based on the East Coast, Silliman remained a crucial connection to the Bay Area poetic community who helped secure the journal’s importance as a channel connecting the geographically separate poetic communities (Vickery 2000: 27-28).

72 For example, Craig Santos Perez writes in a critical entry on the Poetry Foundation website: “I blame Ron Silliman. For many things, but most of all for propagating the simplistic binary reading of poetic history into quietude & avant garde. Let’s face it, it’s Silliman’s poetry world and we just blog in it” (Santos 2010).
Yet, it is also important to stress that the more explicit unfolding of the potentially discriminative implications of this poetics (something Yu himself handles with exemplary caution) took a serious leap around 1990. A turning point often accentuated in this respect is the debate between Ron Silliman and feminist language poet Leslie Scalapino about the role of personal experience in writing titled “What/Person: From an Exchange” and published in Poetics Journal in 1988-89 (Perelman 1996; Robbins 2010, 2014, 2015; Hejinian and Watten 2013). Because it takes the form of a debate (consisting of five letters from Scalapino to Silliman and four from Silliman to Scalapino), this text is exemplarily clear in outlining the frontiers of the discussion.

Scalapino criticizes Silliman for implying in his introduction to a poetry section in Socialist Review (1988), in which her work was included, that a lower formal complexity and more “conventional” form characterized the included poetry written by poets who were not privileged, white, male heterosexuals (and members of the language poetry community). In Silliman’s reply, he explains that the poetry of those who have “been the subject of history” – that is, the “privileged” white, male – is likely to exhibit a greater formal complexity, as it is able to “explode the conventions of narrative, persona and even reference” (Silliman and Scalapino [1988-89] 2013:1361) through linguistic experimentation. In comparison, those who have been “history’s objects”, that is “women, people of color, sexual minorities, the entire spectrum of the ‘marginal’ – have a manifest need to have their stories told” (ibid. 1361) and thus their writing will “often appear much more conventional, with the notable difference as to who is the subject of these conventions” (ibid.). With this argument, Silliman suggests that poets of marginalized origins do in fact criticize the fixed lyrical I simply by being of marginalized origin and still using that same word, I.

Hence, poetry that is “merely experiential” and could accordingly be associated with the heartfelt, speech-fetishizing stream of “official verse culture” that the language poets originally fought on all fronts, can in this way be critical and progressive anyway, simply because it is produced by history’s “others.” But, as Scalapino’s response reveals, even if this attitude follows from Silliman’s strong preoccupation with actually including the poetry written by “history’s objects” in a canon of politically progressive poetry, it leaves quite a narrow space for formal innovation for these “othered” poets, who, to the extent that they consider themselves formally innovative (as Scalapino herself evidently does), are bound to experience such an interest in their poetry as somewhat patronizing. The editors of Poetics Journal sum up the changing situation in a retrospective introduction to the piece from 2013:

While black, gay, and feminist liberationist movements demanded the recognition of identity, a new generation of minority writers consider identity not as a given but as a site for exploration. Poets like Harryette Mullen, Renee Gladman, Pamela Tu, Lisa Bryant, Tan Lin and Rodrigo Toscano took full advantage of the contradictions disclosed in this provocative debate (Hejinian and Watten 2013: 378).
I will return to parts of this new generation in chapters three and four. In her following responses, Scalapino resists the contradiction implied by Silliman between a concept of bodily experience (tied to the “marginal”) and the linguistic experimentalism of the “free mind” (tied to the “language poetry”) and attempts to develop a more complex and potentially subversive position for marginalized poets to occupy. In his discussion of the Silliman-Scalapino exchange in *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Bob Perelman compares the neo-narrative poetics suggested by Scalapino to “the meditative style that Gertrude Stein developed in works such as the *Geographical History of America*” in contrast to the “paratactic restrain” of Silliman’s new sentence (Perelman 1996: 173), and thus strikingly, both sides of this discussion on style and identity can be traced back to Stein.

As suggested, Silliman’s new sentence gained huge impact. To the extent that he derives it from Stein, it probably constitutes the strongest single formal influence of Stein’s on the language poets as a group, as repetition can be said to be Stein’s most important single formal influence on the 1960s avant-garde. Yet, to Scalapino and other critics from within the community, the massive influence of Silliman’s new sentence at some points turned it into dogma. In a retrospective essay, summing up her own previous dispute with Silliman, Scalapino polemically suggests that “there is no way in which women can apprehend conservative social articulation if they write uniform syntax (dictated by men) that excises the erotic” (Scalapino 1999: 25). As Amy Robbins summarizes it, Scalapino’s essay suggests that “poets following the movement’s dicta of the 1980s would necessarily write in Silliman’s paratactic New Sentence and would defer to Bob Perelman in eschewing the erotic as that which is of the ego and therefore not relevant to Marxian poetics” (Robbins 2015: 151).

Interestingly, Scalapino begins her 1999 essay with an anecdote from a public reading she gave, in which a member of the audience compared her writing to Gertrude Stein’s, only to be corrected by her (in her text unnamed) male co-panelist, who assured the commentator that Scalapino wrote nothing like Stein, as Stein was “the human mind” and Scalapino merely “human nature,” because her writing was preoccupied with the trivialities of identity and everyday life (Scalapino 1999: 15). As I will develop below, this patronizing use of Stein as a policing tool against a certain type of writing – one that has elsewhere been associated with the meditative style of Stein – suggests some problematic points in the Stein figure established by language poetry. But so does Scalapino’s harsh phrasing that a type of writing – the new sentence, that was originally derived from Stein’s practice by Silliman, Hejinian and others – should by necessity be “excising the erotic” from poetry.

A point of attention is that Stein herself – woman, lesbian, Jewish – could hardly be said to belong to the essential identity group “language poet” in the form suggested by Silliman. This could either be held as a challenge to the accuracy of the “ethnicization of the avant-garde poet” that Yu diagnoses in Silliman’s poetics and that Scalapino is implicitly complaining about, or it could be seen in the light of Grenier’s comment from *This,*
calling out Stein as “one of our fathers.” In the latter case, it contributes to the abstracting of the Gertrude Stein figure established by language poetry, which I have already touched upon and shall return to shortly in greater detail. In this line of argument, Stein’s paratactic method becomes available to the language movement by implicitly turning her into a quasi-male poet which in turn – if we follow the logic of Scalapino and Robbins – gives her the function of a token to justify or veil the implicit “ethnicization” of the avant-garde poet. If Stein is treated as a proper avant-garde/language-centered poet, then the category is obviously not ethnicized as male, white, etcetera but open in terms of gender, sexual orientation and religious ethnicity. In many examples of writing associated with the new sentence, as in the case of Lyn Hejinian, the connections to the affective and meditative layers in the poetics of Gertrude Stein evidently flourish with a diversity that puts such accusations to shame, but to others, like Ron Silliman, they may stick a little longer.

Steve McCaffery, Stein and homolinguistic translations

Canadian poet Steve McCaffery’s experiments with “homolinguistic translations” from Tender Buttons testify to the strong appreciation of Stein’s early experimental texts, above all Tender Buttons, that constitutes the last pillar in the “language poetry Stein canon” next to How to Write and the later lectures and meditations. McCaffery’s project was developed in collaboration with Dick Higgins in the context of an experimental poetry translation course McCaffery gave at the University of Alberta in the early 1970s and was published in the chapbook Every Way Oakly (1975, reprint 2008). In the translations, McCaffery executes various linguistic reconstructions of the poems in the “Objects” section of Tender Buttons. He occasionally draws upon media poetic tools from concrete poetry and related practices, and is generally spreading out the words on the page – breaking loose from Stein’s more uniform prose poetry format. He even attempts a more direct visual mimesis that can be associated with pattern poetry, for instance in “A Long Dress”, when making the letters of the phrase “what blew it away” fly around the page. This phrase is probably a translation of “What is the wind, what is it” in Stein’s original, and at the same time visually illustrates not what the wind is, but the effects it might have. Sometimes homonymic or punning translations occur, but mostly a semantic associative leap is applied that departs from synonymic constructions, then takes associative leaps and applies various linguistic approaches, yet always reenters the source text via new synonymic constructions emerging directly from Stein’s words. As McCaffery puts it in a note dated 1975:

From the original texts emerged points of replacement – viz. certain words which would be capable of replacement by synonyms or synonymously inspired associations ... these points constitute the translated nuclei, the connecting verbal material being freely supplied by the translator (McCaffery 2008: x).
Excerpt from *Tender Buttons*, page 17 + Excerpt from *Every Way Oakly*, page 50.

Testifying to the denseness of Stein’s language in *Tender Buttons* (that is, its suggestiveness, the way it produces surplus meaning on many levels), most of McCaffery’s buttons are a lot longer than the texts they translate, and several of Stein’s buttons have received more than one translation in the collection, but a quick comparison between Stein’s “Eye Glasses.” and McCaffery’s translation of it, which is one of the shortest pieces from *Every Way Oakly*, can illustrate the technique:

Excerpt of page 21 from *Tender Buttons*.

Page 21 of *Every Way Oakly*. 
Obviously, blood on a chin is a possible way that a color (red, that is) can emerge from shaving, and this synonymous replacement can be considered the translated nucleus of this poem. Yet Stein’s poem strangely speaks of “a color in shaving”, and McCaffery freely decides to preserve this word via an echo effect, “chin in.” He is also fairly free in his introduction of a subject via the male pronoun (following the traditional gendering of a shaving situation), and by keeping the subject in the next line, he establishes a continuity or connection between the two parts of the poem, much more specific than in Stein’s original. In the second line McCaffery associates straightforwardly from Stein’s “saloon” to “beer”, but Stein’s “well placed”-ness more surprisingly translates into a situation of unavailability, preserving only merely the sense of topography in Stein’s line (also including “the center of an alley”) as the beer seems to be rolling (from the center towards the gutter of the alley, perhaps) away from the poor guy with the bloody chin, but by playing on the grammatical ambiguity of “can,” McCaffery at the same time makes the sentence resonate with an incomplete question (“can the beer [have] rolled away from him”), leaving it indeterminable how the situation ends.

As McCaffery puts it in his introduction – much in alignment with the phenomenological effort Hejinian identified in Stein’s work – in Tender Buttons, Stein includes the “peripheralities of her own viewpoint” and tries to describe from within “the subjective perceptual experience” in her encounter with the named objects. Accordingly, he has attempted to make her “method of observation and description [his own] method of reading and translating” (p. ix), thus including peripheral associations and possible recontextualizations to document his own subjective reading and translational path through her poems and creating entirely new texts in the process, yet new texts that follow important leads in the originals in a manner somewhat resembling traditional translational practice, but perhaps more akin to a stage director’s personal staging of a text.

As Ulla Dydo has said, Gertrude Stein is indeed “treating English as a foreign language” (Dydo 2003: 17) in her writing, and the practice of homolinguistic translation in a sense continues along similar lines. By translating Stein’s poems from English into English, McCaffery is evidently working with language as artifice. If the practice of translation in a commonsense understanding is treating language as a more or less pure communication channel – the possibility of translation building on a belief that linguistic information is somehow natural, and thus can be transferred from one language to another without being deferred – then the homolinguistic translations make translation a way of projecting the excess of meaning, the multimodal over-productiveness that is inherent in the language, if read attentively.

This constitutes a media poetic element in McCaffery’s practice that recalls Friedrich Kittler’s (ever so brief) Stein collaboration from Discourse Networks 1800/1900, the phrase “a medium is a medium is a medium,” in which he paraphrases Stein’s serial rose repetition to stress the untranslatable quality of the medium: that any transfer from one medium to another involves a distortion – and thus will always be to some degree
arbitrary. In Kittler, the sentence is a reminder of how the medium of language, as it is put to use in literature, has previously been considered something close to an ideal channel – a channel of communication working without friction. With the final “medium” of his sentence, Kittler reminds us, essentially, that a medium is never just a channel or a technology of communication – it is always also something more. The material base of language implies noise when a message is transposed from one point to another (Kittler 1990: 265-266). The practice of homolinguistic translation is not, however, satisfied with pointing out the materiality and arbitrariness of language as a channel in a media poetic vein; it also counters translational practice in its commonsense conception, as the source text is being broadened instead of streamlined, narrowed down, or nailed to a particular content. Rather than denying, removing or attempting to blur the informational potential in language, it addresses a much wider informational potential in the words, and the poetic decontextualization of meaning that is often highlighted in *Tender Buttons* is being recontextualized as translation.

If one considers the homolinguistic translation practice in terms of collaborative poetics, several factors come up. The terms “source language” and “target language,” basic concepts in translation studies, imply a certain hierarchy between the original source language text, and the produced target language text in a translational practice. To a certain extent McCaffery is keeping such a hierarchy active by referring to this poetic practice as a form of translation and to Stein’s poems as “originals,” which consequently turns his own poems into somehow derived text products. Thus, the distribution of agency in the collaboration between Stein and McCaffery would appear less equal than the term collaboration generally suggests, making Stein the creative source and reducing McCaffery to her interpreter. Yet, in this unconventional type of translational practice, McCaffery takes account of Stein’s inclusive approach to perception and language – her including the “peripheralities of her viewpoint” as he phrases it – and lets his translational practice mirror it, which implies letting his own associations shape the output decisively, thus leaving the reader with a text genuinely indeterminable in terms of its authorial source. Are the texts in *Every Way Oakly* by Steve McCaffery or by Gertrude Stein? The only adequate answer is both.

**L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E reading Stein**

When the journal *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E* published its sixth issue in December 1978, it was introduced by a 13 page section on “Reading Gertrude Stein”, which included among its contributions an excerpt from McCaffery’s translations (“A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass”) and three samples of his original associate Dick Higgins’ more punning, chatty and humorous versions of the homolinguistic translation practice as well as a piece by Grenier very much in continuation of his earlier essays from *This*, collaging Robert
Creeley’s poetry with the lectures of Stein. The editors Charles Bernstein and Bruce Andrews wrote:

We asked a number of writers to respond to three short selections from Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons* (1914) quoted below – to give their sense of the ways of reading this text – what it means, how it means, & in what ways it might seem relevant to their own concerns in writing. What follows are the Stein selections and the replies of Michael Davidson, Larry Eigner, Bob Perelman, Steve McCaffery, Peter Seaton, Rae Armantrout, Dick Higgins, Jackson MacLow, Carl Andre, and Robert Grenier (Bernstein and Andrews 1978: 6).

Quite some weight has been attributed to this particular issue in accounts of the reception of Stein (Frost 2003, Lorange 2015, Spahr 2016). I would however – in accordance with Spahr in her afterword to *Tender Buttons* – mildly object to staging it as a major breakthrough, especially taking into account the limited distribution of the journal and the direct continuation of the arguments in earlier writings on Stein in most of the contributions. I merely regard the section as a convenient illustration of the strong presence of Stein in this poetic community, which has had a strong influence on her subsequent canonization – not as an initiating event or turning point in the reception of Stein as such. Also, most of the contributors had come to Stein by their own paths and engaged in her collaborative poetics at earlier points in their writing lives.

The section’s title “Reading Stein” suggests the nature of the endeavor. It is about reading Stein, and thus not directly framed as being about writing her or collaborating with her. The editors’ introduction supports this – the contributors were encouraged to consider “what it [Stein’s writing] means and how it means.” Yet in the ten contributions to the section, writing (or rewriting) her is an equally common response as reading her and writing “about” her. All the readings in the section correspond to some extent to Grenier’s call for an amalgamation of poetry and criticism, and in the case of about half of the contributions, the readings of one or more of Stein’s poems take the shape of actual poetic rewritings or collaborations – that is, new poems or prose texts departing in various ways from the three texts “A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass”, “Glazed Glitter” and “Roastbeef” – and not primarily analytic or argumentative in their structure.

The first essay by Michael Davidson, “On reading Stein”, which is also the most consistently argumentative, describes the starting point of the Stein reading by language poetry that has proved most influential. Davidson gives a clear-sighted summation of the reception history up to this point as torn between two schools: on the one hand, one reading Stein’s work as “all play” (Bernstein and Andrews (ed) 1978: 2), because she was dedicated to a practice of automatic writing she encountered when working with William James and refined via cubist formalism, and, on the other, a reading, that sees her as an extreme symbolist, who is hermetically encoding a controversial meaning. As an alternative to these two antithetical schools of criticism, Davidson suggests reading Stein’s *Tender
Buttons in a way where “each piece points at possibilities of meaning” (ibid. 3) – that is as “a language that no longer needs to contain the world in order to live in it” (ibid.). And thus, stressing again the artifice – or materiality – of the poetry, he claims that to read Stein we must learn how to read anew, “to read writing, not read meanings” (ibid. 4).

Davidson consistently reads Tender Buttons through quotes from Stein’s most detailed account of this book in the lecture “Poetry and Grammar.” His essay completes the splicing between the early poetry, especially Tender Buttons, and the lectures, particularly Lectures in America, that are the central building blocks of language poetry’s Stein image. The “Reading Stein” section in total and Davidson’s essay in particular thus frame the general impression that the Stein oeuvre propagated by the language movement consists mainly of the early poetry of the 1910s supplemented by the meditations of the 1930s explaining this early poetry, but leaves in the distance vast amounts of later writing, such as most of her plays and operas, her conversational-style portraits, the playfully naïve writing style of the children’s books and novels of the late 1930s and her late memoirs and novels.

**Carl Andre “Writing on a theme by Stein”**

One piece that stands out in the section because of its technical execution is Carl Andre’s “Writing on a theme by Stein.” By way of its title, it is the only piece to explicitly name the step from “reading Stein” to “writing Stein” that many of the contributions actually take. Andre’s poem evokes a mild affective state (“In the morning there is /feeling”) by the soft, calm tenderness of gradual metamorphoses or variation, that moves but moves gently (“tender and changing”), preserving “the same,” and actually seems to be in immediate contrast to the more radical breaks identified in Stein’s writing by many of the other contributions, coined by what is probably the most frequently repeated phrase throughout the section, “the difference is spreading.”

A closer look at the text, however, quickly reveals that the poem’s gentle tone is established by a visually based, yet purely mechanical, compositional method. The text is a collage poem made from two Stein poems following a strategy that can be associated with concrete or visual poetry.

The poem is constituted by a simultaneous reading and rewriting of “Roastbeef” and “A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass”, following a simple pattern. Starting from the top left corner of “Roastbeef” and moving diagonally downwards, thus reading (and retyping) between one and four words from one line (starting with “In the”), then jumping to the line below and reading (and rewriting) the following words (“morning there is”), then jumping again, reaching the end of a line, furthest to the right (“feeling”). This inflicts a shift of poem to “A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass”, where the procedure is first repeated (starting from the top left corner and moving down) and then laterally reversed (starting
from the top right corner and moving down) and deferred (starting in the middle of the first line (“glass”) and going down from there until reaching the bottom again (“not resembling”)), in order to finally return to a point in “Roastbeef” (“time that is languid”) and move down through the following four lines of this poem, altogether producing a completely new poem exclusively from the word material of the Stein poems rearranged according to tentatively arbitrary, mechanical principles and minimizing the influence of poetic intentionality. Or, quite literally, cutting a path through Stein’s poems as they appear visually on a printed page.73

The modernist prose poem, including Stein’s contribution to the genre, is often framed as a conscious rupture with the fixed line breaks of lyric poetry by letting the poetic words run freely in prose. By making these situated cuts through the prose poems from Tender Buttons, Andre is in a sense re-concretizing this sense of abstract textuality in Stein’s prose poems. This directional cut-up technique re-fixates what Stein – by her choice of genre – established as fluid and thus revisits the importance of the visual materiality of the poem. “Poetry can be described as language mapped on an extraneous art, and formerly it was language mapped on music, I think it is now language mapped on

73 Stein’s prose poems do not contain fixed line breaks, and the concrete arrangement of the words in lines thus differs in various printings. As I have not retraced the specific printing of Tender Buttons used by Andre, my analysis is therefore subject to some degree of uncertainty. I have tested my theory on the poems as they appear in print in the relevant issue of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, as well as in the Marie Claire first edition (almost exactly the same as the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E reprint in terms of line breaks), and the City Lights Corrected Centennial Edition. In all cases the result approximates to the patterning in Andre’s poem.
some aspect of the visual arts” (Andre 2005: 212), wrote Andre in the 1975 essay “Poetry, Vision, Sound.”

If a visual foundation of poetry is evident in Andre’s poem, it is a sense of the visual related to the material and temporal consciousness of sculptural minimalism more than it is a graphic sense of visual, or one could claim that Andre’s poetry could be mapped on minimalist sculpture rather than on painting. Especially, if minimalist sculpture is regarded as “theatrical” as suggested by Michael Fried in his famous essay “Art and Objecthood,” because it implies the body of the perceiver experiencing the work in space and time (Fried 1967). In this sense, an ambient dimension to Andre’s collaboration can be retrieved. A difference between Andre’s piece and concrete poetry as it is commonly conceived is that the visual constraints followed are not tied to the output text. The poem is not a figural poem, and the visual patterns it follows and reproduces are not situated at the temporal instance of the final reader to whom the pattern is not directly visible unless this reader, like me, compares Andre’s text to Stein’s. Instead, the pattern unfolds in the instance of the combined reading and writing situation. Andre’s diagonal reading movement through Stein’s printed poems is reproduced in his writing, turning his poem into a sort of documentation or reading log. Thus, the collaborative stance in all reading, and particularly the reading of Stein’s opaque works that insistently defy linear reading strategies, is documented rather emblematically in Andre’s “Writing on a theme by Stein” as he traces his jumpy reading movement by retyping a cut through the prose poems.

In this way, Andre is setting up a collaborative situation between himself and Stein’s texts and documenting it, making it available to his readers. The temporal instance around himself reading Stein becomes documented, constituting what Lori Emerson refers to as a blurring of the borderline between reading and writing interfaces which is an important component in the media poetics of Stein (Emerson 2014).

The question of visual materiality

In the reception of both Andre and Stein, Andre’s piece is almost forgotten today, as it was among the three contributions that the editors chose to cut out when reissuing the “Reading Stein” section in The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book in 1984. The editorial intervention appears mildly surprising, especially since all three contributions removed are among the briefest in the section, covering less than two pages between the three of them, and thus length, the most obvious editorial concern when editing a compilation, does not appear to have been a decisive factor.74 Consequently, the gesture leaves the

74 Whereas, in comparison, Grenier’s chatty (yet important) piece covers nearly three pages and never even gets to the poems at hand. In the original journal version, the piece is followed by an editorial comment promising that: “Grenier’s piece will be continued in the next issue with a reading of the Stein text.” (Bernstein and Andrews 1978: 13). As the continuation never appeared, this comment is removed in The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book.
reader wondering what might have changed between 1978 and 1984 that had made the editors less committed to the three removed contributions. In the case of Andre it does seem relevant to consider a persistent criticism directed against parts of language poetry in the past, that their attention to the “material aspects of language” combined with a fundamentally Marxist understanding of “materialism” has often seemed to favor both sonic materiality and the abstract textual (syntactic and grammatical) dimensions as unfolded in Silliman’s new sentence, at the expense of more visual concrete materiality.

Another example could be this highly semiotic characterization of the artifice of poetry from Content’s Dream:

It emphasizes its medium as being constructed, rule governed, everywhere circumscribed by grammar & syntax, chosen vocabulary: designed, manipulated, picked, programmed, organized, & so an artifice (Bernstein 1986: 40-41).

The low visual complexity of the DIY aesthetics of the original issues of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journals, as well as of many books and chapbooks of language-centered writing published by the alternative presses in the community, does, by their minimal graphic design, seem to somewhat neglect or play down the visual dimension of poetry. From a publishing perspective, the periodical L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E is part of the so-called “mimeo revolution” picking up speed in the early 1960s, due to the development of cheap and quick printing and reproduction technologies like the mimeograph and later the Xerox. The journal was remarkably low tech and was actually more of a pamphlet than a journal, basically consisting of 28 stapled pages, typed in IBM Courier on a regular typewriter, featuring a minimum of graphical finesse and manually duplicated on a mimeograph machine which permitted the editors to publish the title themselves inexpensively and independently of the intervention of an organized publishing house (Vickery 2000: 29-30).

Starting with the seventh issue, the number of pages began to increase, but the general design remained unchanged.

If the original invitation of Andre, who belongs to a slightly older generation than...
the editors (b. 1935) and was foremost known as a visual artist with strong contributions to American minimalism of the late 1950s and 1960s, testifies to an initial openness to visual and concrete poetry, and the overlaps between writing and visual arts, then the removal of his contribution could suggest an increased commitment to a more abstract "textualist poetics" not attributing the highest importance to the visual aspects of poetry. A similar argument could be made for the initial inclusion and subsequent editing-out of Dick Higgins, another representative of the amalgamation of visual arts and writing, closely associated with the artist's book genre and the Fluxus movement. Together, Higgins and Andre form a link back to the broader artistic Stein reception of the 1960s that flourished in a more inclusive media ecology and exhibited an intermedial sensibility within the individual works. As Bernstein's early audio piece also indicated, this tradition was evidently an alliance for early language poetry in its attack on "official verse culture," but an alliance that they perhaps no longer depended so strongly upon in 1984.  

A comparison between The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book and the full index of the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal does not unambiguously support nor contest this analysis of a decrease in "intermedial" sensibility in language poetry. Andre only contributed to the journal this one time and Higgins thrice, one included in The Book and two excluded. Further, the Stein reading by Jackson Mac Low ((1922-2004) a Fluxus-associate like Higgins and also belonging to a previous generation) is kept in the book, although Mac Low's number of contributions is generally reduced from journal to book.

The visual sensibility inherent in the understanding of textual materiality of various representatives of language poetry, however, remains a fairly complex issue, and the individual differences between for instance McCaffery’s concrete poetry panels in Carnival (1967-75) or Robert Grenier’s poster format poetry CAMBRIDGE M’ASS (1979)  

Facsimile of front cover/first page of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Number 6 introducing "Reading Stein" + Page 8 with the end of Peter Seaton’s contribution, Rae Armantrout’s in its entirety and the beginning of Dick Higgins’ homolinguistic translations (Source: Eclipse).
and the more traditional poetic designs of, say, Ron Silliman’s *The Alphabet* (1979-2008) appear too large for attempts at generalizations to make any real sense. Yet, it does seem fair to identify in Bernstein and Andrew’s editorial gesture towards Higgins and Andre an inclination towards streamlining the general impression made by the contributions towards a poetics that appears more “textual” and abstract, and less visually attentive or playful.

**Literary feminism, affect and identification**

When taking into consideration the even more surprising omission of Rae Armantrout’s ten-line mini-reading log called “On From Tender Buttons,” another repeated accusation of narrow-mindedness in language poetry comes into mind. The editorial omission of Armantrout, who, unlike Andre and Higgins, had remained closely associated with the language movement, enhances the vulnerability of Bernstein and Andrews’ editorial practice to the feminist critique of language poetry already addressed in relation to Ron Silliman. As remarked, a range of scholars influenced by cultural studies and feminism have, throughout the 1990s, increasingly stressed the limited representation of poets with backgrounds other than white, male, and heterosexual in the canon of language poetry and the general neglect of this disproportion among the poets constituting the movement’s “male, white core” (Yu). Even formalist scholars like Perloff note this tendency:

> Language poetics, let’s remember, had a strong political thrust: it was essentially a Marxist poetics that focused, in important ways, on issues of ideology and class. But it was less attuned to questions of gender and race: indeed, in the case of *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*, although one senses that every effort was made to include “innovative” women poets […] the more overt theorizing itself was left, with rare exceptions, to the men in the movement (Perloff 2001).

Such criticism would already have been justified in 1978, as the original journal contained the lengthy Stein readings and rewritings of ten men, and the very brief piece by Armantrout, as the only woman contributing to this reassessment of a female, lesbian poet. But it is indeed underlined further by the removal of Armantrout’s original contribution, paving the way for the strong claims made by feminist Stein readers in the 1990s and 2000s such as Elizabeth Frost, Amy Robbins and Deborah Mix. In their perception, the Stein figure constructed by language poetry is a Stein partly abstracted from her female, Jewish, and homosexual attributes in order for her to fit the implicitly male white category of the experimental poet – at great cost in terms of a reduction of the bodily materiality and the affective sensibility making Stein’s work attractive to contemporary poets from “marginalized” backgrounds.
In her article “Affective Identification,” Robbins categorizes Silliman’s position in “What/Person” as a glaring example of a cliché aligning of the feminine and the otherwise marginal with “feeling”, “mere experience” and low complexity, and the masculine and dominant with incisive analytical capacities and politically charged experimentalism. Her reading does not appear entirely unjustified, and it does call attention to the need for proper theorizing of such concepts as feeling and affectivity, in order to go beyond the overly simplified connections and short circuits made between identity categories and certain intellectual and emotional attributes.

In the affect theory of Brian Massumi, a non-discursive, subversive quality is attributed to the bodily affect, as it is strictly differentiated from the emotion, which can be verbalized and expressed in discourse. This idea of a subversive potential resembles the logic behind the radical poetics of language poetry as already suggested in the discussions of Grenier, Silliman, Hejinian and Steve McCaffery, and as we shall see when approaching in further detail the writings of Charles Bernstein. For this reason, Robbins’ accusation against “language poetry” per se that it is caught in the eternal clinch between sense and sensibility can seem a little harsh. The idea that by producing art and language that escapes an interpretive paradigm, but fronts the palpable, tactic, material and sensual qualities of language (or any other medium), one is conducting a political action has, to various degrees and with varying intensity over time, been central to almost all of the poets associated with the language movement. It is this quality which essentially constitutes the “attack of the difficult poems” – to use a title by Bernstein – withdrawing from the dominance of meaning in poetry with the desired result of undermining consensus power and authority. This parallelism is stressed by the strong skepticism against the individual voice – the lyrical I – invested with sincere sensibility, which is also at the core of language poetry’s attack on speech and expressivity.

To a large extent, this perspective on affectivity proves fruitful, including when it comes to Stein, whose poetic indeed shares its fundamental sense of mobility with this approach. Yet, if we recall Sara Ahmed’s point about the sticky effects of both affects and emotions, it becomes easier to understand some of the processes at play in the relationship between Stein and the language poets. As I briefly suggested in the introduction to this chapter, the relationship between Stein and some of the poets in the language community has features resembling those of social communities, when they appear to be turning Stein into not just a language-centered poet, but also a personal friend. As I will develop in the following, the affective, non-discursive and non-personal impulses they are praising in Stein’s experimental work and are responding to in their collaborative gestures towards it, are in some cases gradually transformed in accordance with Sianne Ngai’s suggestion that the difference between affect and emotion is modular rather than essential (Ngai 2005). As suggested in the introduction, Ahmed also presents crucial considerations regarding the temporality of the processes of adherence and coherence that can be unpredictable, irregular and dispersed (Ahmed 2004: 120). It is central to get a precise account of sticky
effects entailed by the collaboration between the language poets and Stein and their ability to work according to non-chronological patterns and deferred temporal order.

If my account of the debate between Silliman and Scalapino might lead to the assumption that the controversy regarding affectivity is first and foremost a gender issue of masculine rationalistic vs feminine affective poetics (with male language poets aligning with Silliman and female rebels taking Scalapino’s side), then a brief look at the feminist poetics of Joan Retallack (b. 1941) might suggest the greater complexity of the picture before addressing Charles Bernstein’s critical work on Stein that also bridges this gap in several ways. Retallack’s essay “RE:THINKING: LITERARY FEMINISM:” was first published in 1995 as part of the diverse anthology Feminist Measures, which broke new theoretical ground within the feminist strains of language poetry (Robbins 2015: 145) as it was an early formulation of feminist radical poetics derived from ideas from French feminists like Hélène Cixous and Luce Irigaray that became increasingly dominant in experimental poetry communities in America throughout the following decade. In the essay, which was later included in Retallack’s collection The Poethical Wager (2003), she outlines a position that resembles Scalapino’s in the sense that she also posits the experimental feminist poetics as holding a privileged political position. In Amy Robbins’ paraphrase:

Retallack maps a trajectory of modernist and avant-garde literary practices which exemplify what she terms “the experimental feminine”, a critical/aesthetic sensibility that rejects the passive delivery & reception model of narrative realism and that enacts in its place radical new forms of signification that demand reader collaboration in the making of meaning (Robbins 2015: 143).

Fundamentally critical towards models of representation, what she terms “picture theory,” Retallack builds up part of her argument with direct reference to Stein in the subsequent essay entitled “The Difficulties of Gertrude Stein, I & II” through an analysis of Stein’s Blood on the Dining Room Floor in relation to conventions of crime fiction. Retallack demonstrates the critical potential that is realized formally in Stein’s capricious, open-ended version of the murder mystery, constantly refraining from the satisfaction of generic expectations. In a sense, what Retallack is outlining is a feminist version of the political poetics promoted by Silliman and others in agreement with the subversive potential of pre-individual affectivity suggested by Brian Massumi. According to this type of feminist politics of form, in Amy Robbins’ phrasing,

when writers – male or female – create new forms that interrogate or subvert mainstream conventions, refuse realism in representation, and offer alternative ways of thinking-through-language, these writers are doing work that is either hospitable to or directly generative of radical feminist thought (Robbins 2015: 144).
But quite contrary to Silliman, who in his introduction to *Socialist Review* had the declared intention of including in a progressive canon more experiential and “conventional” work by women and colored people, Retallack’s essay formulates a strong distancing from popular poetry by female poets like Adrienne Rich, that rests upon “immediate experience,” appears “linguistically conventional” and arouses identification and empathy in the (female) reader to promote instead a radical feminist poetry that is non-narrative and disrupted. In the clear-cut opposition she then sets up between empathetic identification and critical production, Retallack is suggesting something equivalent to the formal distinction between subject-independent affects and subject-dependent emotions of Massumian affect theory challenged by Ahmed and Ngai:

The didactic implication embedded in the sort of literature that the current pantheon of received feminist writers represents directs the reader toward the subjectivity of empathetic identification and away from autonomous, critical production (Retallack 2003: 124).

Retallack’s resistance to the didactic claim of established feminist literature resembles, up to a certain point, Leslie Scalapino’s rejection of Ron Silliman’s reading of her poetry as being interesting not because of its formal qualities but simply because she challenged the historically sovereign subject-position by being a woman. Yet, according to Amy Robbins, Retallack’s rhetoric when rejecting these types of poetry makes evident a lack of affective potential in her version of feminist poetics, by maintaining the “fundamental opposition between affective response and analytical response”, where “the two would seem to be exclusive of each other” (Robbins 2015: 144). She further relates this argumentation to the long tradition of opposing thinking to feeling, which, as Robbins points out, may not be beneficial in regard to poetry, where we often think in terms of feeling as knowing and empathy as critical production.

Ironically enough, the opposition between critical analysis and feeling is reminiscent of Enlightenment-era privileging of intellect (coded masculine) over emotion (coded feminine), a model in which the public sphere of men is governed ostensibly by reason while the domestic sphere of women is ruled by the emotions, empathy being key among these. This is a model we in the academy may feel we have sufficiently problematized yet the Language community’s insistence on intellect over feeling in fact repeats and reinforces this centuries-old system in a new discursive context (Robbins 2015: 147).

Objections could be made regarding Robbins’ rather swift generalization towards “the Language community” in this quote, and I should stress that I am not primarily preoccupied with the feminist stance that is central to her argument here – consequently tying
the “feminine” to the affective/emotional, though at the same time it problematizes this link – but what I am concerned with is the dubious position Retallack undeniably assigns in this crucial essay to affect and emotion as such and most explicitly to aspects of identification and/or empathy and narrative. In her critique of Retallack, Robbins is pointing to a weak link in theoretical discourse surrounding radical poetics and language poetry regarding the conceptualization of the affective potentials of poetry, which might call for interventions from theoretical discourses such as Ahmed’s revision of affect theory. As already suggested, this weak link became increasingly actualized during the 1990s, when the reign of “official verse culture,” with its valorizing sincerity of emotion and intensity, had already been severely shaken in line with some of the language poets gaining stronger institutional positions in and outside of academia.

The affective and identificational strains of poetry, often by women and non-white poets who had existed on the outskirts of language poetry and related poetic communities, obviously attracted more attention as the need to repress such strains (to point fingers at feelings) no longer had the legitimacy it had in the 1970s and 1980s when the “official verse culture” addressed by Bernstein still appeared fairly sovereign. By the 1990s, the consolidation of language poetry had made the anti-subjective poetry produced in the movement’s name seem equally dominant to poets with other aspirations. Via a critical discussion of Marjorie Perloff’s formalist and not so affective reading of Leslie Scalapino’s “Hmmm”, followed by her own rereading of Scalapino’s poem, Robbins hits upon the important continuities of the affective towards questions of identification, or towards what in the Massumi-strain of affect theory is called “emotion.” These questions are sometimes dismissed in the discourse of radical poetics, resulting in insufficient readings of the work of certain poets.

Because readers read for identification revealing the precise moment and processes of their identification carries the potential for open critical reflection upon one’s own narration of events (Robbins 2015: 155).

What Robbins is suggesting in her article is that the process of identification through reading can be a question to examine critically, rather than something to avoid, for instance by applying formal techniques such as the new sentence that defy narrative progress and stable identity. In regard to recent American poetry, this practice has been developed with multiple references to Gertrude Stein’s work both by Juliana Spahr in *Everybody’s Autonomy* (2001), by Elizabeth Frost in *The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry* (2003) and by Robbins herself in *American Hybrid Poetics* (2014).
Stein and the radical poetics of Charles Bernstein

In his establishment of a new hybrid between poetry and criticism Robert Grenier promoted the Stein talks and late meditations. As already suggested, these texts came to be important references for many language poets, who highly valued Stein’s own explication and execution of her poetics in the later part of her career, which became a model for their own writing fusing poetry and poetics. On the other hand, these poets treated with skepticism a lot of the academic discourse on Stein that was being produced during the 1980s and early 1990s. This was scholarship that to an increasing extent drew upon structuralist and semiotic (Steiner 1979, Dubnick 1984), poststructuralist (DeKoven 1983, Walker 1984, Palatini Bowers 1991), feminist (Stimpson 1977, 1985, Ruddick 1990) and post-colonial theory (Nielsen 1988). As addressed, Charles Bernstein had written his final thesis at Harvard on Stein and Wittgenstein in the early seventies. In 1975 he had produced #4 in reference to Stein, and as an editor of L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E he had been co-initiator of the “Reading Stein” section. But even if reading Stein apparently had a formative influence on Bernstein’s thoughts about writing and poetics early on, quite a few years passed before he took to in-depth critical writing about Stein again. In the essay “Professing Stein/Stein Professing” (1989-90), reprinted in A Poetics, Bernstein hints at an explanation for this:

I’ve never managed to think what to say about Stein that was anywhere near as engaging as what she says about herself and of course what she does herself. Stein’s own “Composition as Explanation” is a hard act to follow because it seems to rule out the sort of explanations that we’ve grown used to making, because it shows that explanations of the usual sort won’t work, have nothing to hold on to (Bernstein 1992: 142).

He goes on to stress the material pleasures of reading Stein:

Reading a Stein poem I feel an enormous satisfaction in the words coming to mean in their moment of enfolding outward and a correlative falling away of my need to explain, to figure out. I find the work satisfying, self-sufficient. It makes me want to savor its words more than account for them (ibid. 143).

Continuing this line of thought, Bernstein goes more or less directly against the warning proposed by Robert Grenier in “Reading Stein”, i.e.:

I think it’s at best a ‘creative misreading’ of Stein to take her work as a whole as a primary instance of ‘language-oriented writing.’ [...] [her works] all are intent to make new ways to say something – show her thinking language not as an object in itself, but as a composition functioning in the composition of the world (Bernstein and Andrews (ed) 1978: 13).
Instead, Bernstein incorporates Stein’s writing more or less smoothly into his own conception of the “Artifice of Absorption,” the title of another central essay in A Poetics. Here, Bernstein starts off from a concept of artifice that does not imply a rejection of meaning in writing per se, but suggests a way of reading and writing that stands back from the symbolic use of language – addressing instead the aspect of non-utility in language art, drawing upon conceptions of excess, noise, waste, focusing on the qualities in poetic writing that exceed the general economy of writing. Among many other references, Bernstein refers repeatedly to Steve McCaffery’s work in this text, and the condition he is addressing does have close affinities with the sense of linguistic excess discussed in relation to McCaffery’s homolinguistic translations. In regard to Stein, Bernstein names this utopian quality her “bounteousness.” Bernstein’s appreciation of the materially satisfying words of Stein’s poetry is a perfect example of this, and also reveals the family resemblance between his artifice of absorption and the Massumian conception of affects as autonomous intensities that are able to escape discursive control and thus undermine power in various forms. In “Professing Stein”, Bernstein, following this line of thought, expresses a general fatigue with academic discourse on Stein, and more specifically he is troubled by critical attempts to re-contextualize Stein’s writing in regard to questions of race, gender and identity politics, dismissing or rescuing parts of her work on political grounds (Nielsen 1988, Walker 1984). In the first instance of Bernstein’s Stein reading, Stein is – so to speak – all play and no work, as indicated by his desire to “savor” her words. In the terminology of Massumi, it includes pure affect and no emotion.

Bernstein’s fatigue with the Stein reception may be understandable when it comes to many more or less dismissive accounts of Stein produced through the 1960s, 1970s and 1980s. Even the more enthusiastic feminist attempts at explaining the “code” of Stein’s experiments from the same period (for example Stimpson 1977, Ruddick 1990) none of which, however, he mentions directly, are in some respects very far from his position. But his choice of Jayne L. Walker’s 1984 Stein monograph, The Making of a Modernist, as a primary target text seems fairly unconstructive. Walker’s book is a pioneer in the sense that it takes Stein seriously in a context of contemporary literary scholarship (in a poststructuralist vein), and as such it represents a frail new beginning in serious literary scholarship on Stein. Breaking new ground, as it does, it is far from faultless and Bernstein’s critical discussion of assumptions held by Walker is never preposterous, but Walker does seem an odd choice for demonstrating the general skepticism against explanatory discourse on Stein that Bernstein sets as his frame at the beginning of the essay. His opposition towards Aldon Nielsen’s more controversial and (identity-) politically charged reading of Stein in Reading Race. White American Poets and Racial Discourse in the Twentieth Century (1988) is less surprising in the light of Bernstein’s poetic agenda of

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79 If some of his standpoints on strict textual autonomy in regard to Stein as well as poetry in general are modified over the course of his career, it is worth stressing that Bernstein maintains this understanding of Stein’s practice as fundamentally “language-centered”, even in his most recent writings on Stein, such as the Stein survey “Gertrude Stein. The Difference is Spreading” in Pitch of Poetry (Bernstein 2016: 83).
rejecting “various utilitarian & essentialists ideas about meaning” (ibid. 18), as Nielsen – in his reading of Stein as a formative model case for the racism articulated by white modernist writers of the early 20th century – becomes at times rather literal and preoccupied with authorial intention. But rhetorically, Bernstein’s repudiation of Nielsen’s and Walker’s two very different attempts at reading Stein academically throws suspicion on all Stein re-contextualizers lumped together by claiming his own sensuous approach of “savoring” over their alleged attempts at fixating meaning.

Feminist criticism of Bernstein’s Stein reading

I have already paid some attention to the criticism of representatives of language poety from scholars working within a feminist or post-colonial framework in regard to the structural biases at work in the figure of the experimental poet, who as a rule was not one of history’s “objects” (Silliman and Scalapino [1988-89] 2013), and the related suspicions in parts of the language community towards writing that would appear to depart from (emotional) experience, identification and reference, or “picture theory” (Retallack 2003). Following these critical readings, scholars working on Stein in a cultural studies vein have devoted some attention to concrete examples of the Stein reception by language poets, and repeatedly suggested that a somewhat patronizing attitude towards attempts at contextualization and popularization of Stein’s writing has occurred here (Spahr 2001, Frost 2003, Mix 2007, Robbins 2014).

It is beyond doubt that the lopsided gender balance of “Reading Stein” in general, and the exclusion of Rae Armantrout’s contribution from the reprint in particular, has contributed to this understanding, even if the poetic and critical practice of Charles Bernstein, one of the responsible editors, is not among the most vulnerable to this line of criticism. Over the course of forty years, Bernstein’s own practice has become comparatively more open towards a popular and performative dimension (compared to for instance Silliman’s), and the poetic canon he has promoted in his critical work has been both diverse and inclusive. Yet Elizabeth Frost’s quarrel with what she sees as Bernstein’s purist Stein reading in The Feminist Avant-Garde in American Poetry deserves some attention. In this context, it is worth noting that A Poetics, which is the publication addressed by Frost, in several ways marks a turning point in Bernstein’s career in particular and in the

80 Yet, in a sense, Nielsen’s book is also more of a pioneer achievement in academic Stein scholarship than Bernstein acknowledges. Even if Nielsen generally interprets Stein’s influence in negative terms of formulating modernist versions of known racial stereotypes, he does take her writing seriously and contextualizes her work to position her as a central and influential figure in Anglo-American modernism, something not many broad accounts of modernist literary history had done before him when his book was published in 1988.

81 As is indicated, for instance, by his writing introductions to and critical work on four very different poets whose work I will be touching upon in subsequent chapters: Haryette Mullen, Tracie Morris, Tan Lin, and Danny Snelson.
voyage “from outlaw to classic” (Golding 1995) of the language poetry community in general. In *The Marginalization of Poetry*, Bob Perelman uses this collection to substantiate his claim that:

Bernstein [...] became the language writer best known to the academy [...] One could say that the publication of his latest book of essays, *A Poetics*, by a major university press marks a significant acknowledgment of language writing by institutionalized literary criticism. (Perelman 1996: 79).

*A Poetics* came out in 1992 on Harvard University Press, which had had a fairly conservative profile in terms of poetry and poetics, and thus the general discontent with Stein scholarship it formulates is not uttered in a narrow subcultural poetics milieu, but spoken with some authority in a fairly institutionalized academic discourse (Golding 1995), which is an important context for understanding the way Frost interprets it. According to Frost, in *A Poetics* Bernstein is assigning a complete object status to Stein’s language by focusing on the impermeable text, where “the desire to decode [...] merely reflects the reader’s urge to ‘make sense’ of the poetry, an impulse that counters the most significant aspects of Stein’s experiment” (Frost 2003: 140). Acknowledging the importance of Bernstein’s critical work, Frost insists that the image he creates of Stein’s writing is abstract and decontextualized, and severely overstresses her writing’s tendency to break down the process of signification altogether. In contrast, Frost is highly skeptical towards the assertion that it should somehow “counter the most significant aspects of Stein’s experiment” to follow one’s “urge to ‘make sense.’” According to Frost, this is a gesture that allows Stein to enter the narrow (in Timothy Yu’s phrasing “ethnicized”) category of “the experimental poet.” But in Frost’s account, this inclusion of Stein in “experimental poetry” happens at the cost of dealing with important parts of her work. The “desire to embrace the radical nonmeaning” of Stein’s experiments with language affects the reading so that for this approach, “Stein’s experiment remains relatively far from the social and political realms that other avant-garde artists of her day addressed” (Frost 2003: 141).

If one turns to Bernstein’s essay again, however, it quickly becomes clear that Bernstein’s own reading of Stein does not stop at “savoring” either. Throughout *A Poetics*, he is addressing the utopian potential of the non-utility quality of poetic language, something that Frost may be brushing off a little too easily. As Brian Reed has put it, “the paradox” of Bernstein’s “Artifice of Absorption” “is that anti-absorptive texts can become so fascinating in their complex construction and sensuous materiality that they end up ‘absorbing’ readers into a different kind of textual world” (Reed 2013: 98-99). And this is where Bernstein sees the political implications – the possibility of turning poetry into what Bob Perelman has called a “Counter-State” (Perelman 1996:81-83). By making strange, fronting language materiality and artifice, it is possible to go against the colonization that is inherent in conformist referential language, and to attempt to break loose
to something new. As noted, the point for Bernstein is to “destroy […] not meaning but various utilitarian & essentialist ideas about meaning” (Bernstein 1992: 18) in order for this effect to take place. This utopian dimension, in his reading, also becomes applicable to Stein’s writing.

This political extension of Stein’s experimental language may appear counterintuitive to someone familiar with the fairly conservative nature of Stein’s own political convictions, especially as she phrased them in the latter part of her career, such as in *Paris France* (1939), where she famously stressed “I cannot write too much upon how necessary it is to be completely conservative that is particularly traditional in order to be free” (PF 38). However, it is well substantiated that Stein’s conservatism was hardly this outspoken in her earlier work, where the radicalness of her non-conventionality appears stronger on all fronts. Further, it agrees well with the collaborative aspects of her poetics, and no matter what her own convictions were, the effects of her poetics can certainly be progressive, including in a political sense: “Writers only think they are interested in politics, they are not really, it gives them a chance to talk and writers like to talk but really no real writer is really interested in politics” (APR, no paging) Stein declared in 1939, giving her audience a hint as to how seriously they should take her occasional political comments – but also suggesting that the spheres of politics and art are separated flawlessly.

Yet, in Stein’s case there is an inevitable infiltration between her poetics and her politics at work that, as shown by Barbara Will, becomes deeper and more explicit throughout the interwar years (Will 2011). As I will return to in further detail at the end of this chapter, Bernstein and other language poets have had difficulties in dealing with this infiltration. Bernstein is aware of the call to proceed from savoring, as he puts it, “a purely formalist approach will never exhaust all there is to say about Stein. But acknowledging by recognizing the terms of this work is, at present, prerequisite for informed socio-historical or bibliographic interrogation” (Bernstein 1992: 145-6). Yet, as this quote reveals, he insists this attitude remains the prerequisite for moving on to other interrogations, and the question of how this premise is to be ensured remains only partially answered.

Frost might have gone deeper into Bernstein’s political argument, which in my opinion calls for even more objections than his formalist argument, and as we shall see, the two work closely together in Bernstein’s reading practice to protect (his) Stein from her own bad politics. But further, Frost’s rhetoric from time to time appears slightly treacherous. For instance, the words “that the reader’s urge to ‘make sense’ of the poetry

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82 Will is able to document the influence of Stein’s conservative friend Bernard Faÿ in her writings from the early 1930s, showing how formulations travel from Faÿ’s writings, for instance on George Washington and Franco-American politics, and into Stein’s, thus making it probable that Stein’s political beliefs were changing during these years (Will 2011: 55-60). She also follows Faÿ’s influence on Stein’s later wartime writings (ibid. 105) I would however add, that elements of this ambiguity can be found, including in her earlier writings, where she, for instance, has always had a fascination with generals and military leaders (Napoleon, Ulysses Grant) and a preoccupation with questions regarding nationality, even if scholarly investigations of these strains in her writings remain sparse.
[..] counters the most significant aspects of Stein’s experiment” (Frost 2003: 140) are her own, and not a quote from Bernstein, as the reader might mistakenly assume from the unreferenced quotation marks around the phrase ‘make sense’. It is not obvious from the essays in A Poetics that Bernstein himself would phrase his request to read Stein anti-referentially as strongly as this. Yet, I have to agree with Frost that the “enjoyment” quality of Stein’s language so dear to Bernstein is a quality that can be overstressed, especially when used as a weapon in policing other readings, as Bernstein does in “Professing Stein.” If Frost’s conclusion that “in Bernstein’s view of the radical nonsignifying [...] the reader is kept at a deliberate, perhaps infuriating, distance – prevented, in Bernstein’s terms, from ‘absorbing’ Stein’s resistant words” (Frost 2003: 140) is phrased somewhat stridently, her point that aspects of reference, social context and identification are far from irrelevant if one is to conceive the full potential of Stein’s most experimental work, remains a strong one. She shares this position with Stein readers of the language generation such as Lyn Hejinian and Marjorie Perloff, the latter of whom poses a similar critique of a too abstract Stein reading conducted by members of the language community that I will return to shortly.

To me, Bernstein’s opposition towards the instrumentalizing of Stein through various forms of academic identity politics is heroic enough, and even his inclusion of her in a version of the radical poetics, his turning her into a “language poet,” is in itself not problematic. Rather, what in my approach becomes a serious impediment in Bernstein’s Stein reading is his polemical inclination towards making this the only legitimate way of going beyond the “savoring” of Stein’s writing. By starting out with a very material, intuitive and appreciative stance that is almost impossible to argue with (the “affective” aspect), only to jump straight to a highly speculative and politically charged stance, Bernstein’s position becomes paradoxically purist, with its emphasis on enjoyment as a weapon against meaning becoming a safeguarding of Stein’s work, potentially against all other reterritorializations than his own (i.e. those that are emotional or concerned with questions of identity). If we recall for a moment Leslie Scalapino’s anecdote from “The Cannon” of being policed by a male colleague via a reference to Stein, the problematic potential of such a position, if not administered with a good portion of self-scrutiny, becomes concrete.

By extension, I am inclined to agree with Juliana Spahr, who in her afterword to Tender Buttons – The Corrected Centennial Edition indirectly polemicizes against a narrow ideal for the appreciation of Stein like that promoted by Bernstein: “One aspect of the many possible pleasures that might arise from reading Stein is reading how others read her” (Spahr 2014: 113). I bring out Spahr’s remark here, not just because reading what other people make of Stein’s experimental writing also constitutes an immense pleasure

83 Having attended the post-graduate Poetics program at the University of Buffalo when Bernstein was its head, it seems fair to assume that Spahr is familiar with Bernstein’s position, even if no reference is made in this text. References to Bernstein’s writings are extensive in other works by Spahr, see for instance Everybody’s Autonomy 2001.
to me, but because the pleasure that arises from interacting with Stein’s words – and experiencing the fruits of other readers’ interaction with Stein’s words – is actually decisive for my understanding of her collaborative poetics. “To note the opacity or materiality of this language is to note an ineffability that is a banquet of delight rather than a sign of lack” (Bernstein 1992: 145), as Bernstein states, is a sympathetic point of departure when it comes to some of Stein’s writings, yet this approach only accounts for parts of the work – as it does not, for instance, address its occasional tediousness. Moreover, because it sticks to a defensive position, treating Stein’s writing as a material object or an artifact having specific qualities (that it is “delightful”, not “lacking”), it does not touch upon the collaborative invitation that rests at its core, and thus cannot begin to positively account for all the places Stein’s writing can go when this invitation is taken up. Therefore, I see no reason for such piety, as long as every reader maintains that each reading of Stein’s work is relational, if not directly collaborative. No engaging with Stein’s actual words, be it academic, poetical or otherwise affective, needs to stand as a final interpretation and force the text to a stop, which of course no reading ever does (except perhaps dogmatic biblical exegesis). In my view, the productiveness and imaginative diversity of – more or less far out – readings of Stein’s work is in itself evidence that, in Stein’s case in particular, there is no point in abstaining from this activity.

Collaboration by impersonation

If Frost’s accusation seems reasonably fair in the context of Bernstein’s somewhat provocative ironic posture towards Stein scholarship in “Professing Stein,” it has a paradoxical ring for readers familiar with Bernstein’s own poetic re-workings of Stein, such as #4, as well as with the performative usurpation of her voice and persona that is evident in “Professing Stein/Stein Professing” and particularly unfolds in the later piece “Stein’s Identity.” In fact, in all these cases Bernstein is demonstrating an approach to Stein very similar to the one that Frost is promoting in her book via readings of the hybrid feminist poetries of Susan Howe and Harryette Mullen. In Bernstein’s own practice, he is indeed absorbing Stein’s words, only to spit them out again with a new intonation. In this context, the most striking fact about Bernstein’s approach in “Professing Stein” is that although he rhetorically opposes the “savoring” of Stein’s words to “accounting for” them, what he himself does is neither of these options. To quote Elizabeth Frost, who is quoting Stein, this approach could more appropriately be designated “using by abusing” or, in my own terminology, collaborative engagement. Clearly, Frost is not interested in Bernstein’s poetic practice per se or in the poetic strategies applied in his critical practice, which is in part a fair case of limiting her scope (she does not, after all have to write in depth about Bernstein). Yet, I would suggest that taking these factors into consideration draws a fuller picture of what is at stake, even if it may tone down the feminist edge in the poetics that
Frost is putting forward in her book.

Stein’s 1905 novella “Melanchta” is a key text in the two scholarly accounts of Stein that Bernstein problematizes in his essay, both of which discuss its relation to an African-American idiom or black vernacular that was evidently on Stein’s mind when she wrote the story. In his own discussion of the novella and its prose style that is up for debate, proclaimed respectively as racist, colonialist or progressive, Bernstein interprets Stein’s early interest in the black idiom as a strategy of opposition against the colonial power implication that is implicit in the Anglo-American English language. This reading resonates with other parts of Stein’s oeuvre. The exchange between Stein and the novelist Richard Wright is one example that supports Bernstein’s suggestion. Another is Virgil Thomson’s decision to use an all-black cast in the staging of their joint opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* that has tied Stein’s name to the rising empowerment of African-American artists in the 1920s. There are, however, complex questions of appropriation, power/dominance, and racialization at work here, and it remains crucial to keep the historical context in mind when considering the potential exoticizing of African Americans that is at play in work like this.\(^{84}\) Thus, addressing this strategy of Stein’s on a meta level has delicate implications and unresolved power issues, and instead of going head on into the discussion, Bernstein follows Stein’s lead, and simply lets his own style of prose be contaminated, not by the black vernacular, but by the characteristic repetitive and elaborate prose style that Stein develops in “Melanchta”, most obviously in this quote:

> For truly it is hard for anyone of us to know just what we are meaning by what we are saying. I mean it’s hard since all we have is our dialects, our ways with words and the rhythms of our saying; sometimes when we think we don’t know what we mean we find out what we do mean, language is like that. The meaning is saying (Bernstein 1992: 149).

Bernstein has an incredible ear for Stein and repeatedly uses it in a convincing critical impersonation of her – he writes like Stein when writing about her. But, crucially, the context in which this appears is not a decentered poetic collage of juxtaposed sentences, but an argumentative essay with a fairly strong, centered “I” engendered by investing bodily experiences (the affective reading as enjoyment) and at the same time arguing from an intellectually sovereign position, strongly reprimanding other readings of Stein (Walker, Nielsen) for their attention towards issues of identity that collide with his own political framing of a radical poetics. Thus, as Bernstein’s rhetorical self-assertion is at its strongest – and as the discussion is becoming most complex – he retreats to the disarming linguistic strategy of dressing up in Stein’s language. With this gesture, Bernstein is proceeding yet another step towards turning Stein into a “father” or personal role model, as he is using her linguistic identity to effectuate his own. As Bernstein is putting on his linguistic Stein costume and using it to make his own points, he is no longer exclusively

\(^{84}\) I will return in further detail to racial issues in regard to Stein’s poetics in chapter three.
feasting on the pre-individual affectivity and abstract sensuality of Stein. His response to Stein’s collaborative poetics is also playing out at the level of Stein’s persona that he inhabits by letting “Stein” speak into his own text, thus giving her a voice in a contemporary discussion, in a way that for an instant collapses historical distance between Stein and the now.

In the essay “Stein’s Identity”, continuing some of the arguments in “Professing Stein,” this strategy is applied with even stronger conviction as Bernstein builds up the whole essay around Stein’s puppet play *Identity A Poem* (1935) and continues the playful wordplay of this generic hybrid to elegantly mix in other adapted quotes and appropriations from Stein’s oeuvre, thus creating a discourse that stylistically mimics an ideal amalgamation of Stein’s writing practice from the early poetry to her lectures and mediations of the 1930s, which, as I have discussed, remains the principal texts in the Stein oeuvre as they are appropriated by language poetry. “Stein’s Identity” is a perfect demonstration of language poetry’s ideal of fusing poetic and critical writing, but even if it is thus less academic in style and more experimental and meditation-like, again, Bernstein is using the linguistic Stein disguise to make a clear point against identity political reterritorializations of Stein’s work.

“What is identity and why is there so much of it?” (Bernstein 1996: 485), Bernstein initially asks, starting in (Stein) character. The excess of identity he implicitly refers to would be the texts he criticized in “Professing Stein” and several other readings informed by feminist, queer and post-colonial theory criticizing Stein’s relationship to her Jewish heritage, to racism and colonialism, and to a range of feminist, gay and lesbian issues, that had appeared through the 1990s, as Stein’s unorthodox ways are rarely able to match any fixed system of beliefs.

Bernstein establishes an essentially performative connection between the experimental form and issues of identity politics in Stein’s body of work, as he connects her word play to her play with identity markers:

Stein’s triple distance from the ascendant culture (gender, sexual orientation, ethnicity) is related to her radical breaks from traditional notions of meaning, literary tradition, explanation, and linearity (Bernstein 1996: 485).

When Stein diverges from and plays with identity markers, she is not denying her identity as a woman, lesbian, Jewish – she is putting those markers into literary play: “In literature genre, with its etymological roots of both genealogy and gender, is a fundamental site of identity politics” (ibid: 485-6), Bernstein suggests, in line with Jacques Derrida’s prominent argument from “The Law of Genre” (1980). This is also why Stein’s puppet play of identity has the generic subtitle *A Poem*, consists mainly of word material cut from her

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85 The sentence paraphrases the title of Stein’s well-known lecture “What Are Master-pieces and Why Are There So Few of Them” (1935).
meditation *The Geographical History of America* and reads at times like an essay, at times like a story, a play or a poem and why the transgressing poetics connects to a liberating politics, not tied down to hardened categories of identity, but moving freely – what Stein calls “the human mind at play.” Thus, Stein’s bodily investments in identity dissolve in linguistic play. Bernstein demonstrates this, again via sophisticated play with Stein impersonation:

> My doggie knows my name, my smell, but not the thought that cleaves my nature, making me part of its world, part next. Beside myself is that being that belongs neither to my past nor to my self. This is language’s tale and identity’s possibility. Here a rose arises and is read (Bernstein 1996: 486).

In this quote, Bernstein takes up some of the characteristic diminutive elements in Stein’s poetry, from the little dog of *Identity A Poem* to her notorious rose. As I will return to in the coming chapters, Sianne Ngai has elaborated upon these occurrences in Stein’s work, what she refers to as Stein’s cuteness, and links to both the appreciative reception of her and the detractory reception framing her as childlike and stupid. By renaming Stein’s “little dog” a “doggie”, Bernstein is also taking measure of – and enhancing – her childlike qualities. As Ngai suggests, “the cute object seems to have the power to infantilize the language of its infantilizer” (Ngai 2012: 87). The cute object, in Ngai’s analysis, invites us to mirror ourselves in it, thus cuteness “cutifies the language of the aesthetic response it compels, a verbal mimesis underscoring the judging subject’s empathetic desire to reduce the distance between herself and the object” (ibid.), which perfectly frames how Bernstein’s move is collapsing the distance between Stein and himself.

But even if Bernstein has a reasonable point that “the Human mind represents for Stein a freedom from history for which one well might have longed in Europe in 1935” (Bernstein 1996: 487), this point hardly excludes a scholarly obligation to recontextualize it once again, and let its socio-historical circumstances be heard. Yet, in this argument Bernstein – in prolongation of his impersonation gestures – is making an empathic move, situating Stein in her historical context, and sympathizing with her there, while in the same breath honoring her desire to be free from history – to substitute for identity her timeless, cute logo, the rose that “arises and is read.” In identity’s puppet play, words make, shape and reflect experience, but the material, historical situation also shapes back. It is in his necessary acknowledgement of this that Bernstein is tying his collaboration with Stein to identification, as his own strong self-assertion in his essayistic writings rubs off on the Stein puppet he produces.

In “Stein’s Identity,” Bernstein frames Stein’s disidentification – her performing as a male genius without identifying explicitly with her femininity, her queerness and her Jewishness – as an escape from identity and reads it as an important part of her total poetics, stressing the playfulness with which she attacks stiffened identity categories.
Stein, according to Bernstein, celebrates suspension of identity, “a willed unknowing-ness” where labels or names are held off, for identity to be forming rather than final, which is a very precise phrasing of the identity flux Stein’s writing establishes. And in his own appropriation of Stein’s voice, Bernstein is at the same time playfully consuming Stein’s cultural persona as it is acted out performatively. But, as evoked earlier, implicit in Muñoz’s concept of disidentification are the bodily bindings and limited circumstances for free movement that trigger such strategies. Undeniably, such were part of Stein’s socio-historical situation, making the performance of disidentification her only passage to the literary pantheon she aspired to be a part of, and these are the bindings that Bernstein seems to be underplaying in his account.

An aspect worth considering in this context is what Bob Perelman addresses in his chapter on Stein in *The Trouble with Genius*. Here, Perelman confronts himself with some of the paradoxes of Stein that would seem most uncomfortable to the language poets in their battle against the “lyric I” as he deals with her strong authorial person, what he calls Stein’s “basic and unaestheticized presence” in her writing (Perelman 1994). He points out how the unusually “literal self-assertion” in Stein gives him the experience that, when reading her, it is “Stein” talking to “him” without literary distance. There are several theoretical problems involved in Perelman’s position here, yet I suspect the effect he describes is important in order to understand the special relationship between Stein and her engaged readers in general – and quite relevant to Bernstein’s reading of Stein in particular, since it contributes to his choice of method in writing about her, the friendly impersonation. Perelman describes a feeling of direct address when reading Stein:

> There is a literalism and self-assertion to her work that is not easy to assimilate to aesthetic or literary-historical categories of judgment. ‘I cannot tell you how often like and alike are not alike’ […] is something Stein is telling me: there is no literary distance involved (Perelman 1994: 130).

This feeling tends to create a friend-like, affective connection between Stein and her reader that works from a distance of half a century and is felt strongly in Bernstein’s essays when he starts identifying linguistically with Stein instead of frontally addressing difficult questions such as her complex relationship to race. Perelman observes that the insistence upon the emphatic “I” and the body of the artist are relevant to the effect of direct address, and he importantly connects this effect to the persistent importance, throughout Stein’s various styles, of emphasis, force or energy (as opposed to clarity or information) to her practice. More than transmitting substantial information, he locates the point of her poetry in its insistence, its force.

Bernstein’s assertion at the beginning of “Professing Stein” that it is hard to write about Stein in a way as “engaging” as her own recalls this point. Instead of merely savoring – or merely explaining – Stein’s words, he is attempting to reproduce the “engaging”
force or quality of her writing in his writing about this same writing, especially when he is confronted with the aspects of it that challenge the political argument implied in his own radical poetics. This is a collaborative gesture that involves not just a specifically textual level of the media ecology, as for example Steve McCaffery’s monolingual translations do, but also a contextual one as it opens an affective space towards Stein’s own author performance of disidentification. Via its affective intensity it is actualizing the ambient aspects of Stein’s poetics, pushing towards the limits of the writing itself. It also rhymes beautifully with Bernstein’s own ideal about identity’s free play that he should for a moment play Stein, but the direct identification with her that this strategy entails appears somewhat stronger and “stickier” than is implied by the conception of affectivity in his own poetics, as he unfolds it in his essays.

As Sianne Ngai stresses there are “passages whereby affects acquire the semantic density and narrative complexity of emotions” (Ngai 2005: 27) and I would suggest that in the gesture of impersonation initiating from Bernstein’s strong appreciation of the material, “affective” qualities in Stein’s words, he is commencing a transition from an affective pole to a more emotional pole (following the concepts of Ngai) in his relationship to Stein. Or, like Sara Ahmed one could stress, that the “adhesive” mechanisms of emotion are at work, creating a “cohesion” between Bernstein and Stein that in turn makes him a loyal defender of Stein in the face of identity political attacks on her, but also, as we shall see in the final section of this chapter, suggests the limits of his aesthetic Stein reception when it is confronted with the difficult question of the entanglements of Stein’s poetic and political aspirations in the context of World War II.

The preoccupation with the free enjoyable affects slides into the field of sticky emotions as the renounced movement of identification is forcing its way in through the rear door. In fact, the impulse in Bernstein’s gesture of identification is emotional, including in the Massumian sense of the word, because it establishes a connection between Bernstein and Stein as a person (even if not in a way that is as explicitly naïve as Perelman’s account of her “literal self-assertion”), and the adhesive forces help extend the collective cohesion, that is, the sense of poetic community generally strong in language poetry, across the century to include Gertrude Stein. This convenes the pseudo-friend-like reception that starts interfering with the aesthetic reception when the applicability of the radical poetics to Stein’s work is challenged.

**Ambient poetics as community formation**

In the essay “Who is speaking”, Lyn Hejinian addresses the social context that is implied in being a writer and deals specifically with some of the structural power distributions regarding experimental poetry that connect to gender and other factors. She is acutely conscious of the intermingling of public and private issues implied in this:
At stake in the public life of a writer are the invention of a writing community; the invention of the writer (as writer or person) in that community; and the invention of the meanings and meaningfulness of his or her writing.

Almost every writer is faced with the relentless necessity of inventing him or herself as a writer every day, and the task of considering the terms in which this can be accomplished is an ongoing one (Hejinian 2000: 33).

Here, Hejinian is addressing writing as implying something more than just what is printed on paper in books and journals, yet in quite a different form than the playful performance of the poet as a public figure that Bernstein develops. She is interested in how the writing will enter into a relation – how it becomes meaningful in a social sense, or what she calls “the necessity of inventing that community”. There is no use in pretending we do not need to build a community, because all our actions imply “summoning one” or submitting to one, governed by principles we do not control. What Hejinian is calling out here, is the social aspect of the infrastructure that inevitably transgresses the media ecology of literature. In the case of experimental writing, such a community constitutes the infrastructure for publication – for taking the poetic act into a public space (Hejinian 2000: 35). The community creates the infrastructure in which the work’s happening happens. A crucial point, according to Hejinian, in this community formation is the communicative silence, that is “the necessary silence of the listener” (ibid. 37), such a silence being “a ready silence, a contextualization.” Stein’s dialogic ideal that a genius is someone who is “at the same time talking and listening” (LIA 290) is obviously echoed in Hejinian’s account, yet her argument also recalls the concept of ambient poetics as lifted from Timothy Morton that marks out the margins and empty spaces around an artwork that make this artwork resonate. In Hejinian’s account, problems arise if this silence is wanting, and thus the question “Who is speaking” crucially implies another question, “Who is listening?":

The refusal of listening resulting in the experience of not-being-listened-to, is a problem which has always vexed women and other “others.”

Our speech is regarded as trivial, second class, since it is held to originate not in the public world, but in the private and domestic sphere (ibid. 38).

Precisely for this reason, the formation of other communities that are sensitive, for instance to issues concerning gender or ethnicity, has a strong political as well as poetical importance to Hejinian.

Listening accords power to speech. It grants it its logic by discovering logic in it. In listening as in speaking both meaningfulness and meaning are at stake. To trace lines of reciprocity through which they are established is to map a social space, a community (ibid.).
In this essay, she is addressing the degree of entanglement between writing and the public community this writing is received by and created in relation to, and with this gesture she challenges the autonomy of literature from a social standpoint and integrates into the infrastructure the ambient poetics not so evident in other parts of the Stein collaboration of the language community.

As in Bernstein’s case, Hejinian is also in a sense including Stein in the community she is imagining, in part through a direct identification with Stein as a woman. This is significant, even as it becomes articulated on a seemingly banal level. All of the essays in *The Language of Inquiry* are provided with brief introductions that generally situate the essays in the context in which they were first written, the style of which is lighter, more loose and anecdotal and not as governed by theoretical rigor and tight poetic economy as the essays themselves.

In the introduction to the “Two Stein Talks”, Hejinian situates her appreciation for Stein’s oeuvre in an affective, yet at the same time far more personally situated frame than that generated by the talks themselves. Hejinian inherited, the introduction reveals, her appreciation for Stein’s work from her father, who was also a writer, and had a genuine admiration for Stein whom he considered a literary genius. He even wrote to tell her so in 1934 and received a polite reply from Toklas on Stein’s behalf on a piece of their rose-adorned stationery. In the introduction, Hejinian reflects on the motivational value of her father’s belief in Gertrude Stein for her as a young girl growing up with aspirations to become a writer:

Gertrude Stein was a canonical figure in the culture of my father. And in a profound sense, I credit him not only with the origin of my own interest in Gertrude Stein, but also with a sense of my own artistic possibilities. Thanks to my father’s crediting Gertrude Stein, a woman, with genius, I took it that gender would not be a bar to my own attempts to be a writer (Hejinian 2000: 84).

Tucked away in the introduction like this, some readers would consider this account of Stein as a gendered role model for the young Hejinian to be a more or less circumstantial, biographical detail, without decisive importance to Hejinian’s own poetics or her reading of Stein’s. Yet I want to stress it here, because it deviates in important ways from the un-gendered image of Stein that I have found elsewhere in language poetry. To the young Hejinian, Stein was not just another one of “our ‘fathers’”, but a woman who succeeded in making a father, Hejinian’s own, listen to her. And this straightforward identification with Stein as a woman (in a man’s world) is a concrete example of the community formation Hejinian is suggesting in “Who is speaking?”

Thus, like Bernstein, even if in a less theatrical or performative vein, Hejinian is performing an identification with Stein, drawing the affective, as Ngai would have it, toward the emotional pole, where it is more “sociolinguistically fixed,” and more “orga-
nized in response to our interpretations of situations,” (Ngai 2005: 27) as it becomes tied up with the most commonplace conception of Stein as a corporeal person (i.e. that she was a woman who dazzled in a man’s world) and herself as equally embodied, living in another time but facing similar challenges and sharing bodily circumstances with Stein. The emotional bonds of such a community can be awfully sticky in spite of the temporal and spatial dispersion of its members since, as Sara Ahmed claims in her theory of affective economies:

> emotions do not positively inhabit any-body as well as any-thing, meaning that “the subject” is simply one nodal point in the economy, rather than its origin and destination. This is extremely important: it suggests that the sideways and backwards movement of emotions […] is not contained within the contours of a subject (Ahmed 2004: 46).

In the case of Bernstein, there seems to be a liaison between on the one hand his being charmed by Stein and appropriating her voice in his essays that grows stronger over the course of the 1990s, and on the other his attentive exploration of his own public persona as a performative supplement to or remediation of his written works. His essayistic impersonations of Stein are very much in agreement with the performative aspects of his own work. Over the years, Bernstein has cultivated an increased interest in the oral performance of poetry culminating in the crucial anthology *Close Listening. Poetry and the Performed Word* he edited in 1998. Here, Bernstein explored ways to think of the performed poem tied to the physical, performing body not as a supplement or a distorted copy of the printed poem, but as an integral part of the poetic practice that exists on the same ontological level as a printed poem. Since the beginning of his career, he had worked extensively with radio and audio collage that was not tied to the written word on the page. But perhaps more importantly, he had exhibited a sensibility towards the potential in the performative public persona of the poet and the relationship between this and a more strictly mass cultural ecology of celebrity related to that I described in Andy Warhol’s work and to the popular media ecologies I will develop further in chapter five.

Bernstein’s poet performance is perhaps not staged quite to the degree that Stein’s was, but to some extent he exhibits an ambition to step beyond the theoretically advanced community of radical poetics and communicate by deliberately using his poet persona and experimenting with the playful ways this can be put to use in modalities other than the merely textual. Perhaps the most concrete manifestation of this inclination is his humorous appearance in a 1998 TV commercial for the Yellow Pages in which he talks about the phone book as a work of literature and ironically anticipates ideas that have since been distributed by conceptual poetry. This also points to the continuities between Bernstein’s author performance and the even more flamboyant one exhibited by a conceptual poet like Kenneth Goldsmith, whose relationship to Stein I will also return to. But even the title of a publication like *My Way* (1999), obviously playing on referen-
ces to popular culture (Frank Sinatra) while at the same time proposing a provocatively strong authorial persona or presence (in contrast to the low key author subject of language poetry classic), and the cover of Pitch of Poetry (2016), which recalls Bernstein’s “male heterosexual plaint” (Reed 2013) in #4 as it features a photograph of the aging poet, crucified onto a wall print of MoMA’s rhizomatic map of the early 20th century avant-gardes, suggests how this aspect of his practice has evolved over the years.

In these respects, Bernstein does indeed hold a special position within language poetry, which also explains why he has been much more receptive towards conceptual poetry and other movements that exploit the public figure of the poet as iconic, than has a poet like Silliman, who holds a more strictly modernist position (Silliman 2006). Bernstein’s conception that “identity is a puppet play” in a sense makes him a natural advocate for the conceptual movement. But it is also an account where he – and Kenneth Goldsmith as I shall return to in chapter five – partly misreads Stein by easing out some of the more troubled aspects of her poet performance. These aspects of Stein’s practice are enhanced by Harryette Mullen’s collaboration with her, as I will address in chapter three.

II. ACADEMIA’S REINFORCEMENT OF FORMALISM AND ITS CONSEQUENCES

In the context of academic discourse on Anglo-American poetic modernism, it is only in recent years that Stein’s position in the canon has become a given in terms of her inclusion in anthologies and overviews covering the period (Perloff 2007). If Stein’s name did enter into academia in the 1970s via new feminist trends causing a rise in biographical interest in the women of cultural history, it was apparently more due to her position as a salon hostess and patron of the visual arts than to her writing, which was still scarcely read. At least up until the early 1990s, Stein could safely be considered a marginal figure in the history of American poetry in an academic context, even though the language po-
ets had been treating her as one of their most important literary ancestors since the early 1970s. An important exception to this trend is the work of Marjorie Perloff. As already suggested in the introduction to this chapter, Perloff is one of the academic critics who has been closely associated with both the project and the community of language poetry, and she has played a key role in the canonization of Stein’s poetry along lines suggested by the aesthetic reception of the movement. As I will now describe, the formalist reading practice developed by Perloff and other influential Stein readers appears to a certain extent to reinforce the mono-medial purification of Stein implied by the language poetry reception as it builds on the figure of Gertrude Stein the poet and levels Stein into the discourse of literary scholarship. Yet in other aspects, particularly in its relationship to politics, this academic refinement of the language poetry Stein figure deviates strongly from the figure constructed in radical poetics. However, there is a continuous interplay between the aesthetic and the academic reception taking place.

**Marjorie Perloff – including Stein in the poetry canon**

Marjorie Perloff has authored at least dozen essays and book chapters on Stein, often reading her work alongside other artists, most notably Marcel Duchamp. Her contextually attentive and bold close readings of Stein’s most “difficult” experimental poetry were highly innovative when they first appeared and still feel fresh today, even though the field of research on Stein has expanded exponentially since then. In her readings, Perloff continuously insists that Stein is committed to everyday language and everyday objects. Via a convenient distinction between reference and representation, she is able to follow the various referential paths suggested by Stein’s poetry, without closing down its multiple meanings, and she is thus among the first academic readers to truly transgress the dichotomy of Stein criticism between meaninglessness and coded communication suggested by Michael Davidson in his contribution to *L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E*’s “Reading Stein.” As a contextually attentive formalist, Perloff follows the dictum of Ezra Pound: “Poetry is language charged with meaning to the utmost possible degree” (Perloff 2002: 126), even when it comes to Stein’s most opaque writings.

The very key to Perloff’s importance in Stein scholarship is her diversity of interests in an expanded poetic field. Perloff has had a game-changing influence on the conception of American history of art and poetry in the 20th century, as she was among the first to attempt to diversify the dominance of the symbolist heritage from Yeats, Eliot and Wallace Stevens – and therefore in sync with the language poets. In addition, she has marked out an alternative tradition in American poetry, what she has called “a poetics of indeterminacy,” the title of her important 1981 book, which included “Poetry as Word-System: The Art of Gertrude Stein,” her first landmark essay on Stein (1979), and thus established Stein as one of the founding figures of this other tradition. It is thus due
to her broader perspective on American and European modernism that her impact on the Stein reception is felt. Being a scholar of poetic modernism and the avant-garde, with a vivid interest in recent trends in art and poetry that she has kept up for almost four decades, Perloff’s work has been crucial both for the inclusion of Stein’s name and work in historical accounts of American modernist poetry and for the increased attention towards reading the work of later experimental poets, especially the language poets, in the light of Stein’s work. In many ways, Perloff has paved the way both for careful reading of Stein’s poetry in academic scholarship and for making Stein a habitual reference in the discourse about American poetry, past and present.

As witnessed for instance by the journal Jacket2’s 2012 celebration of Perloff’s contribution to American criticism where central figures in language poetry such as Charles Bernstein and Joan Retallack are among the contributors, personal friendships and alliances have supplemented the professional community between Perloff and the language movement (Filreis and Faylor (eds.) 2012). It is evident that Perloff’s critical project has important convergences with the quarrel early language poetry had with “official verse culture” and that the role attributed to Stein as a crucial figure in an alternative poetic tradition, hitherto underappreciated, is strikingly similar. And, as Bernstein’s tribute to Perloff also conveys, Perloff played a major part in the early institutionalization of language poetry, as she was one of the first academics outside the inner circles to start addressing their work in serious detail (Bernstein 2012c). In his essay, Bernstein also praises Perloff’s self-confident yet contextually attentive close reading practice towards “difficult poetry.” In a somewhat self-scrutinizing retrospective gesture, Bernstein singles out her ability to demystify the poem at hand through readings not shying away from strong aesthetic judgments and interpretive gestures as opposed to the approach often advanced in the essayistic and critical writings of the language poetry community, at least in its formative years, that is often much less specific about what actually takes place when reading experimental texts, thus obscuring them more than necessary. In this argument, Bernstein indirectly calls attention to the apparently strongest divergence between his own readings of Stein, dwelling on its unabsorbable qualities, and Perloff’s that in some respects seem closer to Hejinian’s, due to their shared attention to the realism and reference present in Stein’s work.

In one essay, Perloff directly deviates from the reading of Stein suggested in the Bernstein essays, as she responds to an episode of the podcast “Poem Talk” with Al Filreis in which the poets Lee Ann Brown, Bob Perelman and Jerome Rothenberg, all of whom have been affiliated with the language community, participated (Perloff 2009). Here, Perloff objects to the non-referential reading of Stein’s “Portrait of Christian Bérard” that is being conducted on the show, where all three poets agree upon a reading that denies any importance to the subject of the portrait, instead focusing entirely on the materiality of Stein’s language – her treating words as objects and turning the portrait into a piece of music or, at best, meta poetry that addresses general issues of naming and linguistic
pleasure, but has absolutely nothing to do with Stein’s evaluation of her young friend Bérard. The mode of reading conducted by the three poets on the show is very much in line with the first part of “Professing Stein”, in which Bernstein objects to explanatory discourse on Stein, stressing instead the tight connection between eating and poetry in Stein — it is all about tasting, savoring, enjoying the words; as Lee Ann Brown says on the show “Language is the subject she is eating.” This angle appears particularly relevant in “Portrait of Christian Bérard” because the text directly addresses eating, opening with the line “Eating is her subject.”

Yet in her essay, Perloff stresses how this way of reading Stein is in no way helpful in defending her against the vast number of critics who write her off as a ninety percent nonsense writer. This argument is put forward in reference to The New Yorker journalist Janet Malcolm, who was of current interest, due to the fuss surrounding her controversial and bestselling Stein and Toklas biography, Two Lives, which exhibits a very limited appreciation of Stein’s experimental writing combined with a strong moral judgment of her political views and personal life, particularly in relation to her quiet life in occupied France during World War II (Malcolm 2007). In Perloff’s argument, the practice of reading conducted in “Poem Talk” is in fact an appreciative way of saying almost the same as Malcolm, i.e. that “experimental Stein is mumbo-jumbo.” Even if Bernstein, as we saw, does move on after this first material appreciation of Stein, as the poets on the show also do (and probably would have done even more, if they had been discussing Stein in format other than the fast genre of the radio talk show), his insistence on this physicality combined with his depreciation of much academic Stein discourse does represent a rather different practice than the much more straightforward, yet playful, reading of reference that Perloff conducts. Thus, Perloff is problematizing the impotence of appreciative readings when confronted with the devastating criticism of Stein fueled by political correctness and simplistic historical consciousness, which she experiences as being on the rise.

It is worth noting, however, that the more open approach to reference in Stein’s work that Perloff demonstrates in her own reading of the Bérard portrait is closely connected to the more depoliticized nature of her own take on poetry, when compared to the politically informed “radical poetics” of someone like Bernstein. It seems likely that the political implications he attributes to experimental or “language-centered” poetics are part of what makes him dwell on the materiality of Stein’s poetry for longer than Perloff does. Because she is not as preoccupied with the subversive potential that is so important in Bernstein’s reading, she can enter into the obvious referential aspects in Stein’s writing much more directly. As a result, the quality of excess, the “bounteousness” of Stein’s words, that to Bernstein as well as to the guests of “Poem Talk” becomes a foundational quality of poetry as an anti-capitalist counter-language, is simply not as decisive in Perloff’s way of reading.
Politicizing or depoliticizing Stein and the predominance of “meaning” in Perloff and Dydo

Even if there is no compelling reason why Stein’s writing could not have progressive political implications very different from the rather dilettante political analyses that she produced herself, it is probably worth taking seriously the fact that the anti-capitalist and in some cases even strictly Marxist poetics of Language poetry does tend to jar in the ears of some critics when put forward in connection with Stein’s name, as her political views are known to be at the other end of the spectrum. Justified or not, it seems reasonable to assume that this sense of political inconvertibility between the politics of language poetry and that of their most favored modernist “father” Gertrude Stein has contributed to the build-up of anger against Stein, which in turn has led to some of the stronger attacks on her work and person in the past ten years. Indirectly, Perloff seems concerned with just this problem when she criticizes the seemingly harmless appreciative reading practice conducted on “Poem Talk” with such urgency in her article, suggesting that it is ultimately harmful to Stein’s good name because it paves the way for the mumbo jumbo charges of Malcolm and likeminded critics, while simultaneously implying that a reading like her own, which directly addresses Stein’s sense of realism and reference, would constitute a more suitable defense. Yet, as we shall see, Perloff’s approach does not “save” Stein from her detractors any more than Bernstein’s does, as it only depoliticizes her work further.

The contextually attentive formalism practiced by Perloff is an approach also propagated by Ulla Dydo, who in her monograph on Stein’s work in the 1920s and the 1930s, Gertrude Stein: The Language That Rises, formulates as an ideal for the reading of Stein Northrop Frye’s balance between the centripetal movement of attention to the design and composition and the centrifugal call of the outside world, of the reference in her words (Dydo 2008: 19). Dydo coins the word “decontextuate” (ibid. 17) to describe Stein’s practice of abstracting the immediate or automatic reference in her writing, evidenced for instance in her notebooks, where concrete words and names evoking straightforward associations are repeatedly substituted for more open, ambiguous or abstract alternatives or alternative spellings and puns, pushing immediate reference further off.

Dydo is bred in the new philological research tradition, and has made the single most lasting philological effort in terms of making Stein’s oeuvre physically available for scholarly work. Her readings of Stein’s writing are always informed by her intimate knowledge of Stein’s daily living as documented in her writing and the massive archival material. Yet she insists on following Stein’s decontextuating effort conscientiously, making the ambition to read the “stripped”, “naked” or “disembodied words” in their full plural suggestion the guiding star of her approach to Stein’s experimental writing. In How Reading is Written, Astrid Lorange suggests a connection between the scholarship of Perloff and Dydo, and claims that the joined dominance of those two in Stein reception has maintained a certain preoccupation with the concept of “meaning” – be it none, one
or many:

Perloff and Dydo are two of the most important and influential scholars whose writings on Stein have brought her into contemporary relief. It is not my intention to devalue their critical responses to Stein but, rather, to point to the problems of reading Stein’s work as concerned primarily with the possibilities of its own meanings. Such a reading, which takes Stein’s work as a meta poetic exercise in demonstrating the plasticity of the relation between signifier and signified, relies on the very structural logics of meaning that it aims to radicalize: whether the aim is to declare Stein meaningless, to find the hidden meaning, or to claim that the meanings are manifold, the emphasis remains on “meaning” (Lorange 2014:10).

That the focus on meaning remains strong, even in the readings that celebrate its absence, is also noted by Perloff who in Wittgenstein’s Ladder polemicizes against the poststructuralist-feminist take on Stein:

Why is it not enough to say of the passage in question that it represents Stein’s refusal to “mean,” her dislocation or disruption of patriarchal language by means of what Marianne DeKoven and others have described as an “irreducible multiple, fragmented, open-ended articulation of lexical meaning” whose “primary modes are dissonance, surprise, and play.” Why violate the jouissance of Stein’s pre-Oedipal language? Because, I would suggest, not all dislocations are of equal value (Perloff 1996: 105).

What Perloff, and with her Ulla Dydo, insists upon is that Stein is by no means choosing her words randomly just to be playful. In that case, any reading could end in emptiness. What Perloff and Dydo both do is play along with Stein’s play, drawing upon their immense knowledge – Dydo of Stein’s daily living and Perloff on the art history and poetry of Stein’s time – they both make an open reconstruction of Stein’s words focused on “meaning,” as Lorange has it. Clearly, their work has consolidated the readability of Stein’s writings in an academic context.

In the present study, I examine the productiveness of Stein’s work when its collaborative invitation is taken up by other artists, that is, when it is no longer decontextualized but reconnected to other contexts. For this approach, tracing the effects of the work in the broader media ecology, Lorange’s suggestion to let go of the emphasis on meaning is important. What Lorange proposes is a constructivist approach focused on the futurity of reading enlightened by Stein’s acquaintance, the British mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and indebted to the Stein reception of language poets like Lyn Hejinian and Joan Retallack, as well as more recent voices like Tan Lin. I would, at least to a certain extent, include the Stein reception of language poetry in the “mean-
ing-centric” approach of Dydo and Perloff that has made Stein’s writing readable but, in some respects, must stop at the border of the text. Even if Dydo has a strong biographical attention, her interest is not in its performative dimension, and following her practice of decontextualizing, she insists in end on separating the “voice of Stein’s endless publicized personality” (Dydo 2008: 22) from the voice of her writing. But when turning towards the effects of the work that, as we have seen, can very well can be affective, they will often depend upon the way in which Stein’s persona is included into the oeuvre. In regard to this last aspect, the approaches of both Dydo and Perloff have similar shortcomings.

The sentimentality of the persona

In one of her earlier essays on Stein, “(Im)Personating Gertrude Stein,” Perloff contributes to a rebuilding of the reputation of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas that had up until this point been generally depreciated as more or less speculation in publicity or “audience writing” among both the language poets and in poststructuralist feminism valuing linguistic opaqueness (Dekoven 1984, Dydo 1985). Rhetorically, the esteem for The Autobiography is established via the contrast to its popularizations that were already flourishing in the late 1970s in the wake of the biographical cult of Stein that Perloff criticizes fiercely. As biographical interest in Stein was on the rise, various simulations, appropriations, adaptions and distortions of her autobiographical writings appeared. Perloff’s example is Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein, a popular biographical monologue written in 1979 by Marty Martin in collaboration with the actress Pat Carroll, for whom the part of Stein was created. Perloff’s reading of Martin’s popular – and undeniably sentimental play – is devastating:

The reduction ad absurdum is perfect. Gertrude Stein sanitized, made appropriately ‘jolly’ or ‘touching’, as the case may be, and filling our hearts with an ‘aching nostalgia’ for la belle époque and its Parisian aftermath – this is the feat evidently achieved by Carroll and Martin. For those of us who care about Stein’s work rather than her life, the play would not be especially interesting, were it not that Martin’s vulgarized and trivialized pseudo-portrait of the artist is made up of what are often only slight variations on Stein’s own lexicon and syntax (Perloff 1988: 64).

Sarcastically, Perloff concludes: “Soon, no doubt, someone will write a play or make a film in which Gertrude and Alice will appear in Harry’s Bar, singing the native songs of the red indians” (ibid. 78). As a textual analysist, Perloff is highly convincing, and she has no trouble showing how Martin’s attempts at impersonating Stein’s voice drastically reduce the complexity that can be found in The Autobiography – they are certainly far from reaching the linguistic sophistication of Bernstein’s essayistic Stein impersonations. Yet,
I would claim, with a piece like this, Martin, like Bernstein, hooks on to some of the elements that today make Stein’s influence felt in a wider media ecology where book-bound experimental poetry connects to performative dimensions of a more popular appearance. And in the course of her reading, convincing as it may be, Perloff is delimiting us from understanding something that is in fact crucial to grasping the ways in which Stein’s actuality is increasing today exactly through its ability to draw on both these dimensions.

In line with the concept of decontextuating described by Dydo, Perloff quotes from Stein’s *How to Write*: “A sentence should not have a name. A name is familiar. A sentence should not be familiar […] if there is a name in a sentence a name which is familiar makes a data and therefore there is no equilibrium” (HTW 166-167). In Perloff’s reading, the names are “tags that leave nothing to the reader’s imagination” and she goes on to equal the publicity to “a name” and thus to “mere data” (Perloff 1988: 76) and by latching on to the publicized persona, Marty’s monologue is doing just that – producing “mere data” (and aesthetically poor data at that), and the rising cult of biographical interest in Stein seen in this light is not just harmless popular entertainment that has no real connection to Stein as a serious artist, but is in fact severely harmful and contrary to her own poetics.

The shortcomings of Perloff’s approach in this essay become clear when she quotes the famous passage from *Everybody’s Autobiography* dealing with Stein’s brother Leo and his dismissal of her writing, already discussed in chapter one, to support her claim against the interference of the persona:

> He said it was not it was I. If I was not there to be there with what I did then what I did would not be what it was. In other words if no one knew me actually then the things I did would not be what they were (EA 79).

It is symptomatic of Perloff’s approach that she quotes this particular passage and does not reflect on the grains of explanatory potential in Leo Stein’s alleged comment. In the context of *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Leo’s claim is being dismissed as it is placed in a passage about the inexplicable caprices that make some people (Gertrude) become geniuses while others (Leo) are not, and consequently suggested to be motivated by jealousy. To Perloff, the function of bringing in the passage is to write off the biographical cult, claiming on the contrary an autonomy for Stein’s work. But to me, the quote addresses in a striking manner the relational quality of Stein’s writing that I have suggested to see in the light of her partly manual distribution situation in the early years of her career, where her salon constituted a frame for the personal exchange of her portraits and other writings that at the same time functioned as social relational gestures. Later, Stein substituted other relational or collaborative gestures and invitations for the salon context. The interference of Toklas as reader and typist of practically all that Stein wrote, the indispensable part played by other friends in becoming agents, publishers, and advocates of her work, and the explicit demand for collaborative interaction in the staging of her plays are all exam-
amples of such relational or collaborative claims made by Stein’s writing.

Leo’s point that familiarity with Gertrude’s personality had a crucial impact on her contemporary readers is not all wrong, but neither does it disqualify her writing in any way. It is only one example among many others of the fundamentally collaborative quality of this writing. As I have stressed a number of times, I see the artistic reception of Stein that constitutes the material of this study as a the most stupendous product of this collaborative impulse. Stein’s writing demands concrete interaction and engagement, and therefore it has produced so many responses that become artworks in their own right. When, in the 1930s Stein rose to her sudden status of popular fame, I would suggest that this relational effect was to a wide extent generated via the public persona, which is the factor that Perloff in her article is writing off.

To be fair, Perloff addresses the importance of gender aspects of the artist persona in her discussion of Stein and Martin’s dissimilar depictions of the painter Marie Laurencin, but fails to see its relevance in relation to Stein herself. As I will come back to, just as Stein’s plays were composed to be open for intervention and appropriation, the aestheticized and performative Stein persona is also a composition, and it is open for intervention and appropriation. It is this connection that Barbara Will makes in her first monograph on Stein, and language writing associate Michael Davidson touches upon it in his *Ghostlier Demarcations*, but it is a connection that Perloff appears insensitive to (or uninterested in) in “(Im)Personating Stein.”

Fame was not easy for Stein, who had the unpleasant experience of being lost in the doubling into private and public persona, as is a dominant theme in a number of her writings from the late 1930s and early 1940s. As I have also discussed more extensively in chapter two, in the years after her death, the myths surrounding her life and personality did have a tendency to overcloud the reading of her works. Yet, as we shall see, this is no hindrance to her being a more liberating figure in the early 21st century than she was to herself and to her immediate successors. What makes Stein particularly relevant now is the way she ties the two things together. The performance of her public person and the restaging of her own earlier work in her newer work is not opposed to what she does in her early experimental writing. Rather, it is closely connected to it in a media ecology that transgresses the platform of the printed word to include the performative dimensions in its intermedia aesthetic composition.

In the light of Marjorie Perloff’s fierce criticism of the persona-based Stein cult, what is striking when reading Perloff’s Stein essays in sequence is that she pays such sustained attention to a number of the Stein texts that are most preoccupied with the role of the artist and the complex relationship between the artist’s person and the art they produce, as well as their social conduct in private and in public. Examples are legion among her early portraits of painters, sculptors and dancers, but later pieces like “Marry Nettie. Allright Make It a Series and Call in Marry Nettie,” “Next. Life and Letters of Marcel Duchamp” and “Christian Bérard,” which are all read thoroughly by Perloff, are also
permeated by these themes. Perloff is surprisingly interested in the avant-garde artist as a figure in Stein’s writing – and even in the “genius” – despite her being so uninterested in it as a performative phenomenon.

One could make an interesting case for how the performative conception of the relationship between artist and artwork that I am addressing in Stein’s oeuvre is mirrored in her own preoccupation with portraiture. All of their abstract and relational qualities aside, the majority of her portraits do feature artists as their subjects and in content practically always involve these artists’ ways of playing out their artist persona while creating their artworks – as well as how they relate to audience or “following.” The “death of the author”, or the artist, to paraphrase Roland Barthes’ notorious essay, does not immediately feel pressing in Stein’s practice of portraiture. However, neither is Stein’s artist portraiture a return to the old intentional author that existed before the “death” was pronounced. Stein’s specific interest in the artist/author is different from new criticism’s illusion of reading an autonomous text with no author in sight, and it also deviates from Barthes’ dead author who is reborn as a sovereign, playful reader. Rather, her concern with the interplay between artist persona and artist practice in these texts mirrors the medially complex assemblage where artist, artwork and audience become agents in cybernetic feedback loops of mutual exchange. In Stein’s (artist-)portraiture, the author is an important but decentered part of an assemblage.86

**Contextual Gertrude Stein, celebrity culture and the genius business**

As mentioned, the exclusively biographical interest in Stein that was initiated during the last decade of her career was never really extinguished. Biographically based studies have been produced throughout the years since her death, and went hand in hand with the aforementioned tradition of appreciative Stein criticism that was strong from her own time and continued well into the 1950s with representatives like Mabel Dodge, Sherwood Anderson, Carl Van Vechten, Janet Flanner, Alice B. Toklas, Donald Sutherland, Thornton Wilder and Leon Katz. As already discussed in the previous chapter, this is a line of Stein criticism that was produced by friends and associates who knew her well or at

86 The position of Barthes himself on this matter is a complex issue, as the rhetorically sharp, essayistic style of “The Death of The Author” [1968] (1977) has led to reductive readings of his position. In “From Work to Text” [1971] (1977) he sets up an image that could, at least in part, correlate with the cybernetic model I am suggesting: “It is not that the Author may not ‘come back’ in the Text, in his text, but he then does so as a ‘guest.’ If he is a novelist, he is inscribed in the novel like one of his characters, figured in the carpet; no longer privileged, paternal, aletheological, his inscription is ludic. He becomes, as it were, a paper-author: his life is no longer the origin of his fictions but a fiction contributing to his work; there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary); it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text” (Barthes 1977: 161). Thus, as in the artist portraiture of Stein, the author returning as guest may affect the meaning of her text but does not completely determine it.
least met her (or Toklas), personally and it is generally enthusiastic but not always very specific. It is easy to dismiss this line of work as the product of a “charmed circle” – to paraphrase the title of James Mellow’s 1974 Stein biography – which is why it has been vulnerable to the type of skepticism towards Stein’s work that Leo acts as an exponent for in *Everybody’s Autobiography*.

There were definitely many good reasons for the change of scene that Perloff’s much soberer (yet, also enthusiastic) readings constitute, but perhaps the time to reevaluate this line of criticism is now approaching. If we are to fully understand the current status of Stein in culture at large, which remains the ambition of this study, we will need to start including the less stringent and more affective or even emotional readings of her work, not just for the sake of breadth, but also specifically for reasons of media diversity. Precisely because these readings are already sensitive to the relational or collaborative aspect, they can grasp the way Stein’s work takes off from the printed page, to include the performative persona and other aspects of ambient or non-textual materiality, even if this is not always articulated in a completely consistent and deliberate manner. To various extents, these readings contain an affective dimension that is in line with my own points about the fundamentally relational character of Stein’s work. That it should be conceived, less as art objects designed to be consumed, than as art gestures designed to include or activate their audience as I have discussed above. Yet, an assembled rereading of this biographically “charmed” reception of Stein’s writings as well as the awakened biographical interest in Stein’s life from the 1970s onwards (that to varying degrees also considers her less transparent writing) falls outside the scope of this study.87

What I will supply in the following pages is a discussion of key points in the reception by language poets and the academic formalist tradition that has followed its lead, with a concern for how Stein’s persona functions in relation to her experimental writings. In the course of this discussion, some of the shortcomings of these perspectives in regard to media ecological as well as political contexts will become clearer. In a final excursus, I will unfold the heated debate that has taken place on the topic of Stein’s politics during World War II to demonstrate the damaging effects that these shortcomings can give rise to.

Bob Perelman’s 1994 study *The Trouble with Genius: Reading Pound, Joyce, Stein and Zukofsky* points out new directions in the study of Stein in the language poetry tradition, addressing the strong presence of Stein’s persona, her alleged megalomania and ambiguous discourse of genius, as well as the insistently present “I” that appears especially strong in her writings from the 1930s. These are all phenomena that to many have seemed to clash with the image of her writing as in some sense language-centered – or at least a precursor for language-centered writing. Perelman’s account is far from unprob-

87 With the scope of this study, I am referring to my focus on the reception in arts and poetry, performed by artists and poets. I realize that the current chapter is already straying from this scope with its inclusion of the formalist strain in academic reception. I include this because it works closely together with the language poetry reception as the two have reinforced and shaped each other.
lematic, but importantly it indicates the points where the collaborative reading practice of language poetry is interrupted in its engagement with Stein, and where other strategies take over. At times, Perelman appears to be working with an ontological category of genius that he is measuring his subjects against – a venture bound to become normative. In regard to Stein, he seems honestly preoccupied with answering the question that in my opinion makes little sense: “Was Stein a literary genius and a sincere writer, or was she a publicity stunt?” Even if he, in the end, does let her have it both ways, he entirely fails to see the two sides as relationally dependent on each other and to analyze the discourse of genius as a pose that is also included in a performative strategy of disidentification. The approach that Perelman uses here, as I also mentioned in relation to Bernstein’s Stein essays, is one bonding more directly with Stein as a person. He continues to make a dubious case for Stein as a “sloppy writer,” claiming “that Stein’s writing represents an expression of herself and her body that is basic and unaestheticized” (Perelman 1994: 133), and as mentioned he argues that this has the effect of her speaking directly to her reader, without literary distance. This indeed sounds like a new exoticizing of her as someone of particularly immediate or indigenous disposition, and the fact that Perelman completely misses the connection between this quality in her writing and the highly aestheticized, controlled persona only makes it worse.

A more adequate point that he does address is how Stein’s frequent assertion of “excitement” in her lectures and meditations implies a position of genius that is very different from for example that of Ezra Pound, which he has examined in a previous chapter. According to Perelman, Stein, by her concept of genius, is not trying to impose final phallic truth upon a passive reader who can in turn get suitably excited about this. Instead, she herself is carried away and repeats this again and again – and the reader can get carried away with her as she repeats questions like “do you see what I mean”, which “emphasize Stein’s submersion in her writing process and focus not on her superiority or estrangement but on her excitement, which, to some extent at least, she seems to be inviting the audience to share” (Perelman 1994: 138). This aspect points in the direction of the inclusive and democratic aspect of Stein’s concept of genius, which is formulated in more consistent terms by Barbara Will, as it suggests a collaborative impulse installed within Stein’s concept of genius.

Michael Davidson’s chapter on Stein in *Ghostlier Demarcations. Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (1997) makes the integration that Perelman refrains from, as it competently traces the connections between her experimental poetry and her public persona. Davidson gives an account of the complex relationship between modernist autonomy and capitalist commodity – and of Stein’s special comprehension of this relationship – being both a “proud collector” of art who bought and sold paintings and at the same time “a proud creator” of art, that was practically unsellable for almost three decades (Davidson 1997: 41).

Davidson addresses the Stein persona and the material words of her poetry as com-
modities, starting with a short analysis of three artifacts that constitute popular appropriations of Stein’s persona: a Stein-Toklas porcelain mug, a newspaper clipping addressing a 1986 mock tribunal held in Oakland over the meaning of Stein’s famous remark upon revisiting her native city (“there is no there there”), and finally, a Stein parody in a piece by W.C. Fields. Davidson observes that the interest in Stein as a public figure is stronger than in any other poet of her generation. He initially asserts what was Perelman’s conclusion, that this is often seen to be at expense of her writing, since “turning the author into an icon is a way of domesticating her difficult writing” (Davidson 1997: 37). This matter is often explained away with reference to her self-fabrication, her craving for publicity, and the public craving for personality, as also seen in Perloff, Dydo and Perelman. Davidson does not directly contest this, but in his perspective, there are other issues at stake in the objectification of Gertrude Stein involving “modernism and its problematic relationship to its romantic roots” (ibid. 36). In criticizing a host of feminist/poststructuralist readings of Stein (such as Stimpson and DeKoven) as “reading Stein’s obscurity as a compensation for something else,” as if “the only thing Stein’s difficult writing can say is jouissance over and over again”, Davidson formulates his own position:

I see Stein’s obscurity in less compensatory terms and more as a problematic located in the textual object itself and its claim to be an artifact of a fundamentally distinct sort. This claim, which we identify with aestheticism, has implications not only for the work of art but for its producer as well, a fact about which Stein was acutely conscious. Stein’s transformation into a mass culture object, far from representing a vulgarization of her more “serious” artistic side, is a logical component of it, an inevitable result of developing an aesthetics that rejects the world by creating another to replace it. It is this claim to autonomy and Stein’s dialectical manipulation of it that will occupy my attention […] (Davidson 1997: 37).

Davidson takes these insights far, by also taking into account Stein’s own appreciation for consumer and mass culture as manifested in her pieces on window shopping such as “Flirting at the Bon Marché,” and demonstrating her “materialization of herself as plural subject in her autobiographical writings”, to go on to her more opaque writings in which he finds “a more complex version of this same tendency […]”, resembling the conclusions suggested by Charles Bernstein in “Stein’s Identity”. As Davidson writes: “Here, Stein’s materialization of language coincides with a critique of identity as it is normalized in conventional discourse” (ibid. 49). In addition, Davidson goes further than Bernstein in reflecting upon what I have called the sticky effects of Stein’s persona.

Davidson’s account of the relationship between modernist autonomy and capitalist commodity in Stein is unique in the language Stein reception, and his clear recognition that she is treating her own life as a “series of signs” (“a story to be told by Alice Toklas, for example”), and thus it is “only logical that this story can be extended and refashioned
by others” (ibid. 40), will become crucial to my own central argument regarding the collaborative invitation that I see as also inherent in her self-fashioning, as explored in further depth in the final chapters. Yet, in the end, Davidson still seeks to keep up a hierarchy between the cultural spheres of high art and mass culture, which Stein herself does not always seem to maintain. He ascribes a critical effect to her opaque writing while speaking of the persona as something that is eventually consumed. In treating the autonomous lyrical artwork as complex and possessing a critical potential and the mass cultural object – be it Stein’s own various publicity appearances or the remediations, rewritings and extensions done by others – as purely consumable and empty, he is maintaining the strong avant-garde currency of Stein’s cultural capital, which, as we shall see, is something the language community in general seems very reluctant to let devalue. As I will develop in further detail in chapter five, the connection between these two spheres in Stein can be seen as dissolving the idea of the autonomous artwork as a category of final truth, dissolving it into a type of convergence culture, where the value of art and poetry is situated in its use. If Davidson suggests that “Stein diagnoses a flaw in the aesthetic insofar as that category is thought to exist beyond the social” (ibid. 40), then as a response, as I will develop in further detail in the chapters to come, she is trying to install the social into the heart of the autonomous artwork.

In *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of “Genius”*, Barbara Will takes up the important problem of the modernist genius that Perelman also addressed, but she avoids the pitfalls as she abstains from asking the normative question about whether or not Gertrude Stein was a “genius” and instead asks a much more viable one: “What did the notion of ‘genius’ enable Stein to do or undo?” (Will 2000: 2) Will examines in depth the romantic roots of the concept of genius and its complex modernist rephrasing that she relates to Stein’s fluid and changing use of the concept through the course of her career.

“Genius,” then, seems to name for Stein a contradictory, heterogeneous mode of being: at once the essential autonomous authorial subject creating absolutely new and original works of art, and at the same time a way of existing and relating in language that is open ended, processual, collaborative, and resistant to any final symbolic or authorial containments (Will 2000: 1).

Where Will breaks new ground in her first book on Stein is in her consistent and philosophically profound understanding of the Steinian genius as a combination of an entirely megalomaniac and an entirely humble position. The genius as “talking and listening at the same time” is what separates Stein from her readers and at the same time what ties her to them.

In this sense, Will in fact comes closer than the language poets to presenting a credible democratic vision in Stein’s writing, and thus to turning her into a politically legitimate figure from a contemporary point of view. This, of course, is an absurd thing.
to do and is never Will’s purpose. Stein is by no means part of our contemporary political context but was engorged in a very different historical one, as Will (in this book) certainly recognizes. But nevertheless, many Stein readers have tended towards politicizing her poetics, as we have seen Bernstein do in “Stein’s Identity” and as Joan Retallack does when using Stein in formulating her “poethics.” It seems that the tendency I have traced through language poetry of Stein to “befriend” her posthumous collaborators – due to the affective potential of writing and persona combined – intensifies when this politicizing is challenged by other Stein readers (or even Stein haters, as we shall see) pointing to the possible relevance of her opposing political standpoints. In this situation, a movement from a poetic community that embraces the historical distance between Stein and her language collaborators (framing Stein as a predecessor, “a father” historically legitimizing a certain poetics) towards a (pseudo-)social community in which the difference of historical situation is in danger of collapsing (framing Stein as somehow “immediately present”, or empathically, as a woman enduring hardship) has made the tendency to politicize Stein against the grain more critical.

Other pitfalls appear with the close connection of the work and the persona that Will establishes. This becomes evident in Unlikely Collaboration (2011), her next scholarly engagement with Stein, in which she undertakes a close scrutiny of Stein’s life and writing from the interwar years and during World War II, informed by her political statements and controversial sympathies. The many qualities of this book untold, it bears the mark of indignation, of a felt moral obligation to speak out, and an almost personal disappointment when Stein turns out to express positions and sympathies that have proved historically and politically wrong. In comparison, the theoretical killing off of the author, which still resonates in both language poetry and formalist reading practice, seems to serve better as a protection against this level of agitation, even if it cannot be consistently maintained.

Excursus: The war on Gertrude Stein’s war years

In “Gertrude and Alice in Vichyland,” a piece based on his plenary for the inaugural meeting of the European Gertrude Stein Society, Charles Bernstein engages with the politics of Stein and her survival of World War II in the south of France that has been subject of much debate in recent years (Bernstein 2017). The debate is a continuation of that already suggested by Perloff in the wake of New Yorker journalist Janet Malcolm’s controversial 2007 biography on Stein and Toklas (Perloff 2009). It has intensified since the summer of 2011 – what Renate Stendahl has referred to as “the summer of Stein” due to the openings of two major exhibitions devoted to Stein’s cultural impact: the San Francisco Jewish Museum’s Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories (March 2011), focusing on Stein’s life, friendships, persona and cultural importance and the San Francisco MoMA’s The Steins
Collect (May 2011), showing an impressive selection of the modern art that had been included in the art collections of the Stein siblings. This summer also saw a major restaging of Stein and Virgil Thomson’s Broadway opera Four Saints in Three Acts, and numerous other events celebrating Stein—all topped by the sympathetic appearance of Stein as a character in Woody Allen’s comedy Midnight in Paris that premiered at the Cannes film festival the same year (Stendahl 2012).

Bernstein’s article published in Jacket2 in 2017 convincingly demonstrates how the discussion about Stein’s politics has developed into an extremely heated and emotional debate, characterized by false rumors, bad fact checking, and fake news. The piece is a follow-up to the dossier of essays and philological texts that Bernstein edited, also for Jacket2, in May 2012. The constitution of the dossier’s authors reflects the alliance in Stein reception between the language poets and the academic reception of formalism and philology, as the texts are all written by prominent Stein scholars and lovers such as Marjorie Perloff, Ulla Dydo, Edward Burns, Bernstein himself and Joan Retallack. Some contributions were written recently and others in the past, up to thirty years ago. Together, they were meant to “set the record straight” in the debate that had intensified further after the publication of Barbara Will’s controversial second monograph about Stein, Unlikely Collaboration: Gertrude Stein, Bernard Faÿ and the Vichy Dilemma, published in September 2011 at the end of “the summer of Stein.” Increased general attention on Stein had stirred popular interest in “the other Stein”—the pro-fascist Pétain collaborator—and Will’s book was received with immense interest for a work of literary scholarship, becoming highly debated among both detractors and defenders of Stein.

By the summer of 2012, when Bernstein put together the dossier, the debate about Stein’s politics had led to the White House removing her name from a list celebrating outstanding achievements in American culture by citizens of Jewish origins, and a group of journalists and agitators led an aggressive smear campaign from influential platforms such as The New Yorker, The Huffington Post and The New York Review of Books pressuring the Metropolitan Museum in New York to include warnings about Stein’s degenerate political views into the hanging of the Steins Collect exhibition that had moved there in February (Dershowitch 2012; Stendahl 2012; Bernstein 2017).

This controversy has been the most dominant overall in the media ecology of Stein’s reception in recent years. It has torn the field apart and has to some extent worked as a blocker for the rising popular and academic recognition of Stein that was starting to gain momentum when the debate broke out. Although it may at first sight appear only tangentially related to my focus on the aesthetic reception of Stein, I devote a good deal of attention to it in concluding this chapter because it plays out in full bloom the consequences of the Gertrude Stein figure that is constructed by the joint effort of the radical poetics of the language poets and formalist scholarship, when this figure is confronted with complex political aspects that immediately collide with the implicit politics of the language poets.
The Stein bashing is still happening. Photomontage of Life photographer Carl Mydans’ iconic shot of Stein and Toklas with their dog Basket, here disguised as Donald Trump, accompanying the Huffington Post satirical entry “Gertrude Stein Could Be Trump’s Friend” (March 2017), drawing a fairly unimaginative comparison between Stein and Donald Trump (Oelbaum 2017). Alan Dershowitch’s agitated “Suppressing Ugly Truth for Beautiful Art” was also featured in the Huffington Post (Dershowitch 2012).

As we have seen, the aesthetic reception of language poetry has taken Stein far in terms of her canonization as an indispensable poet and helped provide access to her experimental writing for academic readership. But when confronted with the difficult question of Stein’s political conservatism and how it relates to her formal radicalism, the aesthetic reception of language poetry is often awkwardly unable to cope, which, as indicated by Perelman’s theoretically dubious assessment of Stein’s “personal immediacy” and Bernstein’s Stein impersonations, pushes the language poets towards another type of reception that appears more identificational and more emotionally fixed. Responding to Stein’s “cuteness”, we have seen the distance between Stein and her language poetry collaborators diminish. Here, the Stein figure moves from being a poetic predecessor towards being a fellow language poet and friend, and as we shall see in the following, is defended as such.

As Ngai has shown, “attraction and repulsion lie very close together in cuteness” (Ngai 2012: 92). Sara Ahmed also points to the often short span between positive and negative sentiments, and addresses how the stickiness of hatred can be every bit as powerful as the stickiness of friendly affection (Ahmed 2004: 119). Accordingly, as much affection and friendship as Stein’s collaborative poetics and persona have generated within
a poetic community such as the language poets and the formalist avant-garde scholarship following their lead, they seem able to arouse just as much hatred and contempt with readers who resent her lifestyle or feel they are somehow not in on the joke of her writing (Malcolm 2007: 96-97).

The question of Stein’s political sympathies and how they do or do not relate to her poetic writings remains at least as complex as the “problem of genius.” Within the course of only a few years, Stein made both of the following, truly incompatible statements. In *Everybody’s Autobiography* she wrote, in reference to the world leaders dominating the political landscape in the interwar years:

There is too much fathering going on just now and there is no doubt about it fathers are depressing. Everybody nowadays is a father, there is father Mussolini and father Hitler and father Roosevelt and father Stalin and father Lewis and father Blum and father Francois just commencing and there are ever so many more ready to be one (EA 137).

In 1942, in the unpublished sketch of a foreword to her translations of the speeches of Philippe Pétain, the French Chief of State in the Vichy government and certainly one of the “many more ready to be” a father, Stein wrote:

I must say little by little the most critical and the most violent of us have come gradually to do what the Maréchal asks all french people to do, to have faith in him and in the fact that France will live (Burns et al. 1996: 408).

Even though it is well known that Stein preferred to think of other paradoxes in her practice as a “combination and not a contradiction” (LIA 244), the historical valorizations in this particular case make the paradox more than just difficult to handle. As a result, within the debate about Stein’s war years that has raged in the field of Stein studies, the tendency has been that the reception shaped by language poetry and formalism prefers to talk about the first quote, whereas Barbara Will, after her full realization of Stein’s Pétain connections (and other Stein detractors like Janet Malcolm and Alan Dershowitch), prefers to talk about the second one.

The World War II question has been addressed several times in Stein scholarship through the years. It has appeared remarkable to many readers that Stein, an American citizen as well as a Jewish lesbian and a modernist artist, stayed in her country home in Southern France during the entire war, and was not arrested and sent to concentration camp as was the fate of so many European Jews. Likewise, it appeared an almost miraculous stroke of luck that her, by Nazi standards highly “degenerate,” art collection, locked up in her Paris studio, survived the war untouched. The short explanation is that Bernhard Faï, faithful friend of Stein and Toklas and high-ranking Vichy official, managed to protect Stein, Toklas and their paintings. This far most scholars agree, but on the question
of Stein’s own political views the picture gets muddier. Stein was a strong political conservative and did, up to a certain point, share the support for Pétain that dominated the French countryside, where she was living. In 1942, she undertook the task of translating a selection of the general’s political speeches into English. In her critical treatment of Stein’s World War II, Barbara Will establishes a plausible relationship between the agrarian nationalism of Philippe Pétain and the agrarian pacifism anchored in daily country life, which Stein demonstrates in a number of works from the 1930s onwards.

I will return to the important question of the relationship between Stein’s politics and her poetics in chapter four, where I will also develop why I find Stein’s pacifism more complex than Will lets on. Such matters are also covered in the previously published material included in Bernstein’s dossier, like the “Stein and History” section of Joan Retallack’s 2008 introduction to the Gertrude Stein Selections and older pieces by Dydo and Burns. They consist mainly of thorough investigations of historical facts about Stein’s translation project and her correspondence with Faÿ and other friends as well as government officials in regard to the safety of herself and Toklas and their final decision to stay put in the small rural village of Belley instead of fleeing to Switzerland. All essays elaborate on the historical context to Stein’s judgments and decisions, all maintain a pragmatic approach that stays fundamentally sympathetic towards – and strangely preoccupied with – Stein as a person, and all wisely refrain from jumping to conclusions about the motives of the participants, when the facts do not provide sufficient grounds for doing so. But even if Will, contrary to the essayists from the dossier, occasionally pushes her argument, especially when it comes to questions of Stein’s Jewishness and her alleged nomination of Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize (excavating the shady sources of this claim is the major scoop of Bernstein’s essay, as I shall return to shortly), it remains strikingly relevant to read Stein’s wartime writings into a political context the way she does. This is a discussion that is difficult to spot in the Jacket2 defense of Stein.

In the case of many major writers, a connection can been established between modernist and avant-garde aesthetics and totalitarian (Pound, Marinetti, Céline) as well as revolutionary (Mayakovsky, Artaud, Breton) political ideologies. The modernist idea of “making it new” could agree very well with utopian ideas and visions of wiping the
slate clean to instantiate absolute change in the organization of societies, on either side of
the political spectrum. The case with Stein is a little different, though, as she was hardly
a political revolutionary of any kind. Barbara Will stresses Stein’s rupture with the tele-
ological philosophy of history of the 19th century, as an important factor for establishing
a passive reactionary space in her late writings where, in Will’s reading, a quasi-fascist idyll can emerge. But what Will does not appreciate is that in many works written in the
1930s, such as *The Geographical History of America* or *The Relation of Human Nature
to the Human Mind* and *Ida*, Stein is letting a movement in space replace the anchoring
of origin and memory. Instead of tying identity to family and history, she tried to reach a
sense of entity, a strong being that is always moving and always in relation.

This relates closely to Stein’s ambient poetics as the concept is conceived via Mor-
ton and Marranca, and it charges the geographical space with new meaning for her, as it
becomes the surroundings rather than the origins that express themselves through a per-
son – as she puts it in *Everybody’s Autobiography*, “everybody is as their air and land is”
(EA 205). In these ideas, one also finds the grounds for Stein’s strong insistence – that
runs through her work from her earliest writings (group portraits such as “Italians”(1909)
and “Americans”(1913)) – on the specific characteristics of various nationalities. This is
an inclination that has bewitched many sympathetic readers and made more critical ones
point out that Stein’s stressing of nationality, “this native land business” (WIHS 165),
over genealogical origin offered her a convenient escape from identifying with her Jewish
descent in times where the persecution of Jews reached its peak, and thus judging her as
a denier of race, a so-called “bad Jew,” a discourse critically unraveled by Maria Damon
(Damon 1996; 2011). If it remains fundamentally difficult to see the point of judging the
secularly raised Stein for her attitude towards her Jewish ethnicity at a safe distance of
almost 100 years, there are interesting connections between Stein’s critique of the con-
cept of history in the 19th century tied to her rejection of memory and origin as a positive
source of identity on the one side, and her political views on the other, and what becomes
increasingly frustrating for the reader attempting to follow the debate concerning Stein’s
alleged collaborative activities is the contestants’ unwillingness to enter into a substantial
discussion by simply facing all of the facts of the case with sufficient care.

Before going deeper into the actual debate, it may be helpful to stress the always
delicate nature of historical debates concerning World War II. The last war to have been
played out over most of the European continent, it remains a uniquely mythologized
historical period, and when considering its events and participants from a contemporary
point of view, there is an overriding tendency towards demonization of the German, Ital-
ian, Spanish and Vichy regimes, and thus a tendency to pass merciless retroactive judg-
ments upon the people living through the war if they somehow fail to confirm this image.
For one thing, it is apparently most difficult for contemporary observers to contend that

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90 Note also the immediate affinity with this spatial sense of identity and the relational concept of “per-
son” developed by Lyn Hejinian as discussed above (“I have no experience of being except in position”
(Hejinian 2000. 102))
the full information about the atrocities of this war, not least the scale of Holocaust’s crimes against humanity available to us today, was not established public fact during the war, not to mention substantiated by horrifying testimonies and publicly analyzed the way it has been extensively after the Eichmann trial in 1961. This tendency towards simplification can seem particularly articulate in an American cultural context, where the sense of clarity concerning the ideologies and actions of World War II is more dominant, due to the much more straightforward geo-political situation of America in the war. The American combatants fighting a war far away from home were rarely concerned with the same muddiness of interests and investments that the Europeans faced. Not sharing land, cities and institutions with the opposite side makes it easier to stay clear of the “Nazis” and confirm the clear dichotomy between good and evil of the Hollywood war movies.

As I have already suggested, in the case of Stein it is crucial to consider the performative and affective effects of the persona as part of the work’s extended media ecology, and the debate about Stein’s politics as it is illuminated in Bernstein’s essay profoundly substantiates the importance of this. Bernstein convincingly documents the irrational and agitated way of arguing that marks Stein’s detractors, both Barbara Will (specifically in regard to the “Nazi question”) and debaters like Malcolm and Dershowitch with significantly less scholarly credibility. But in this process, he also demonstrates the affective investments he and other posthumous Stein friends have in the matter, both through his animated and engaged discussions and through the matters he refrains from discussing. Again, this calls for an approach that can address both the sticky love and the sticky hate that permeate the media ecology of Stein’s reception.

Bernstein starts out with an enlightening comparison between Stein’s political stances and those of her close friend – especially in the last 15 years of her life – the French painter Francis Picabia, who also stayed in France during the entire war and whose attitude towards Maréchal Petain was every bit as “murky” as Stein’s, but who has never been denounced or made the subject of a witch hunt, although the large retrospective of his work at the MoMA in 2016 would have been a perfect occasion. Clearly, the moral standards that these two modernist artists are being judged by are not the same.

Bernstein hints at some likely explanations for this difference. The simplest is money. There are strong economic interests tied up in Picabia’s paintings – they are large investment objects and as such are likely to be protected by wealthy investors. Whereas Stein’s poetry – or any modernist poetry – never entailed money on a comparable scale. Other likely explanations concern the identity attributes of the artist: nationality (French vs American), ethnicity (gentile vs Jewish) and gender and sexuality (monogamous lesbian woman vs straight man with a playboy reputation). The nationality issue I have already touched upon. The much simpler historical situation of the American people in regard to the war played out on the European continent has undoubtedly affected the attitude towards the actions of American citizens during the war.
What is more interesting is that Bernstein demonstrates how “Stein provokes a matricidal and misogynistic ruthlessness on the part of her most devoted haters,” and above all, he documents how the question of Stein’s secular Jewishness is of critical importance to the treatment she has received. As demonstrated by Bernstein’s list reproduced above, the campaign against Stein appears massive, and as his examples illustrate, also shockingly fact-resistant and judgmental, whereas the very same media treat Picabia’s art and politics with enthusiastic openness, refraining from passing moral or political judgment. Consequently, if the persona of an artist is a crucial part of the interface through which any audience encounters this artist’s work, then Bernstein’s comparison indicates that there are significant imbalances on the basis of gender, sexuality and ethnicity in the way we interact with this interface. The governing infrastructure that determines this interac-
tion differs, as is suggested by Hejinian in “Who is speaking?” and extended by Michael Davidson’s analysis of the female modernist always at risk of having her body confused with her body of work, a risk much less acute for the male artist (Davidson 1997: 44-45). For such reasons, attempting to isolate any artwork from these parts of their media ecology will always involve the risk of bias.

As suggested, the most alarming of Bernstein’s disclosures in “Vichyland” are those that concern Stein’s Jewish ethnicity, namely the implication that Stein led a comfortable life during the German occupation, and the persistent “insinuation that Stein and Toklas were not at risk in the systematic exterminates of the European Jews” (Bernstein 2017), leading to charges against Stein as a “denier of race” and a Nazi sympathizer. Bernstein’s tracing of the origins of the claim –repudiated by Edward Burns as early as 1996 – that Stein should have endorsed Hitler for the Nobel Peace Prize in 1938 by suggesting him directly to the Nobel Committee is highly distressing.

The claim can be readily dismissed by a fact check, as the Nobel Committee supplies a full record of nominators and nominees on their website and Stein’s Hitler nomination does not exist, nor does any other nomination by her. Burns refers the source of the claim as a piece from 1995 in Hebrew in the Journal Nativ by a Gustav Henriksen entitled “The Gentile’s Guilt and or the Jew’s Shame” (Burns and Dydio 1996: 414). Bernstein consulted the journal and had it translated. As his translator ascertains, the article proposes “that it is in fact the secular liberal Jews (Rabin, Peres, & then, of course, Stein as a bizarre precursor) who are making the choices that will lead to the destruction of Israel & the Jewish People (this in response to the ‘94 Nobel Peace Prize split between Rabin, Peres & Arafat)” (Bernstein 2017). Thus, the translation substantiates the Zionist agenda of the journal, that is “the rebuke of Jews for being insufficiently supportive of Israel” (Bernstein 2017), as it reveals that the true context of the claim was a Zionist frustration with the support for the Two-State Solution exhibited by the Nobel committee in 1994.
But it also casts suspicion on the identity of its alleged author, Gustav Henrikssen, claimed to be a Swedish professor emeritus of Christian theology from the University of Uppsala who had been a member of the Nobel Peace Prize Committee in 1938 and thus had experienced Stein’s nomination first hand. But, as Bernstein reveals, there was never a member of the (Norwegian!) Nobel Peace Prize Committee by that name (which will appear highly suspect in its orthography to anyone familiar with Scandinavian last names) nor such a professor at Uppsala University of any faculty. The degree of fact-resistance in the original fabrication of this story is shocking, and the unholy alliance between Zionism and right wing anti-Semitic propaganda that Bernstein documents in the media disseminating it (Forward, Jewish News of Northern California, Institute for Historical Review, AdolfTheGreat.Com and Stormfront are the names of some of the platforms that repeat the story) is truly disturbing. The rhetoric in the many posts and articles Bernstein quotes and links to all, more or less, follow the patterns described by Sara Ahmed in The Cultural Politics of Emotion, creating strong emotional narrations that shape the surfaces of individual and collective bodies, marking some, in this case the treacherous Jews not true to their own best interest, as dangerous “others” threatening the safety and existence of a collective, but specifically delimited “us” (either the Jews with undivided support for Israel or the non-Jewish, white race) (Ahmed 2014: 1-2).

In spite of this, Bernstein documents that the story continues to be repeated in mainstream media (for instance The New York Daily News, The Toronto Sun). Bernstein also points out that the claim is repeated uncritically in an article by Barbara Will (Will 2012), if only briefly and without supplying (Zionist) references. In her book, Will’s claim about the Nobel Prize appears rather misguided but not as directly preposterous as the abovementioned examples, as she does not directly repeat the “endorsement” charges but quotes from the well-known 1934 interview from New York Times Magazine in which Stein talks of Hitler:

“I say Hitler ought to have the peace prize,” she says “because he is removing all elements of contest and struggle from Germany. By driving out the Jews and the democratic and Left elements, he is driving out everything that conduces to activity. That means peace” (Warren 1934).

In this quote, Stein is definitely speaking about Hitler in a more casual way than anyone in their right mind could do post-Holocaust, but she is hardly endorsing him in any way, as her errand is praising activity and struggle, everything she claims Hitler to be reducing, as the raw material of life. Later in the interview she says:

Protection, paternalism and suppression [sic] of natural activity and competition lead to dullness and stagnation. It is true in politics, in literature, in art. Everything in life needs constant stimulation. It needs activity, new blood. […] Doing what other people tell you and being protected from this and from that is not so good, is not stimulating.
You must face life and struggle. Satisfaction comes from overcoming opposition and sometimes from enduring things that are not supposed to be good for one (ibid.)

The interview in total seems to align flawlessly with her position against “fathering” mentioned above. But, informed by Stein’s documented movement towards the political right over the latter half of the 1930s, Will stubbornly insists on paying minimal attention to this context and stressing the ambiguity of the first quote, well aware of the scandalous potential such an endorsement involves.91

Although he does not mention it directly, if we recall the sound piece #4 that opened this chapter, it is obvious that Bernstein himself has a particular investment in this aspect of the witch hunt against Gertrude Stein, as he shares Stein’s immediate interest in claiming a legitimate position for being a secular or even atheist Jew without being accused of Nazism or race treachery. In #4, Bernstein was struggling with the identity categories at his disposal, one of them being the unpleasant role model of the male, white patriarch, but another concerning the attitude towards Israel apparently expected of him as a “Bernstein” from the repeated excerpts of his father’s speech. In “Vichyland” he finds that Stein, whom he hung his hat on in #4, is posthumously being called out for not living up to related demands and condemned harshly for it as a despicable, threatening “other” not deserving a position in the (left-wing) cultural pantheon. Thus, it is highly understandable that Bernstein takes offence, not just at the preposterous right-wing lobbyist and fact-resistant journalists creating and reproducing fake news, but also at Barbara Will’s – to be fair – much less extreme account.

But this nevertheless still leaves the valid points of Will’s book largely unexamined. Bernstein’s research in “Vichyland” is untiring and the qualified scholarly work in the dossier is extensive and impressive. But it is also most of all concerned with determining once and for all that Stein, in Joan Retallack’s words, was “no fascist.” However, the important point here may not be labels such as fascist, collaborator or even Nazi, which have gained so much clearer valorizations in our time than they had in the 1930s and 1940s. As I will also return to, Stein herself was certainly never absolutist about any such labels. But what may have worked like a red flag in the face of those of her detractors who deserve to be taken seriously from a scholarly point of view, is not in the first place single ambiguous actions or naïve political standpoints expressed by Stein, which have demonstrably been distorted and blown out of proportion, but more likely the contradictory streams of militaristic fascination, rural romance and geographical and nationalist essentialism that are at play throughout Stein’s body of work – not just the essayistic writings of the 1930s and 1940s – and most of all, the fact that these very streams have

91 Especially when combined with another long-shot, Will’s literal interpretation of the photograph of Stein and a group of American G.I.’s visiting the abandoned German headquarters and giving the Nazi salute on the terrace. I agree with Bernstein’s repudiation of Will’s interpretation in his contribution to the 2012 dossier (Bernstein 2012b).
received so little substantial attention from the dominant Stein reception that has been shaped by formalism and language poetry.

My point is that it is, at least in part, due to the formalist heritage, that remains so strong in the Stein image propagated by language poetry, that the authors of this movement in the end seem unable to save her from the witch hunt. From their first introductions to and collaborative poetic ventures with Stein in the 1970s, they have been significantly less attracted to the parts of her work that are more culturally charged, and have to a large extent managed to strategically ignore these parts and, when forced to confront them, still continue to attend to them as little as possible, or to allow a more emotional and identifi- cational pull to shape their engagement. This goes back to the selective Stein canon of language poetry that I have outlined, which is designed to fit Stein into a progressive politics of form and as a consequence make a “language-centered” avant-garde poet of her. Because they have accepted Stein’s invitation to collaborate and this collaboration has adhesive effects generating a cohesive sense of community, they tend to treat her like a personal friend. In this sense, the language poets and their academic allies resemble a new set of “advocates and guardians” to Stein, like the ones Catharine Stimpson identified in the early biographical Stein reception (Stimpson 1984).

This also suggests why the discovery of the Pétain material appeared so serious to Barbara Will and not something she could pragmatically explain away, or at least move on from, like many other Stein scholars had done before her. As Will had previously established a consistent connection between Stein’s biographical performance and her experimental oeuvre, and uncovered her investments in the modernist cult of genius as well as in the essentialist identity categories of Otto Weininger, she was forced, as a literary scholar, to take the politics far more seriously than did the more strictly textual Stein reception of readers like Perloff or Perelman, who in various ways are trying to maintain a strict boundary between the experimental writing and the biographical cult. Also more seriously than Bernstein, who although he is well attuned to the performative power tied up in Stein’s persona seems only partially conscious of the more “sticky” identity markers that Stein is also subjected to and struggling with. This attitude also keeps Bernstein from taking seriously enough the essentialist and conservative strains in Stein’s writings, since they too can all be written off as playful positions.

If Bernstein, Retallack and other representatives of the language/formalist Stein reception appear to defend Stein with the vigor of loyal friends, and at times seem unaware of their own emotional investments in this job, then Barbara Will at times seems so offended by Stein’s politics that she loses her capacity for distanced analysis, and exhibits an agitation that appears no less emotionally invested than that of Bernstein, only instead of acting like a loyal friend and defender, Will’s is the position of the disappointed friend and admirer turned enemy. As the cliché goes, no hate is stronger than that built on broken confidence. Further, one could add that the behavior of the New Yorker journalists going after Stein are evidence that feelings are generally strong when it comes to Stein. Almost
as strong as the cohesive sense of community bordering on friendship that arose between Stein and the language poets, and that is also coloring the academic Stein reception, is the aversion, dislike and extreme irritation Stein seems to awaken in these readers who either suspect her of being a hoax or direct antagonism towards her identity attributes, and evidently are using this antagonism “to secure” other “collectives,” as Ahmed describes (Ahmed 2014: 42).

If Will does over-interpret her findings on several points to make the label of Vichy collaborator stick to Stein, it is also fairly clear that the agitation of Will and other critics can be regarded as a symptom that stems from the reluctance in the dominant Stein reception to discuss Stein’s heritage without prejudice. In Stein’s case, it apparently remains difficult to lead a nuanced discussion that includes all parts of her complex media ecology, and thus takes into account written works, cultural persona and the political implications and contexts actualized by both. Most of all, the challenge is to allow the complexity to stand throughout such a discussion. Not to judge Stein in retrospect like some of her detractors, nor to purge the complexity out of her, turning her into a collaborator entirely of our own design.

The general picture in regard to the debate on Stein’s war years is that the defenders of Stein are not nearly as biased by the strong moral dichotomy between being on the right or the wrong side of history as the fiercest of the critics. They generally stick to a pragmatist defense of Stein’s actions, making the muddy everyday perspective of political statements and actions of wartime Europe heard, and stressing the fear for life and safety that make Stein’s actions explainable. Yet, because they are not addressing her problematic convictions and the way they unfold in her writings, including the experimental writings, this more nuanced position does not help to disarm the agitated political correctness of Stein’s detractors. Instead, they confirm it to be an absolutist fight on words, when allowing it to remain a discussion about whether or not Stein was a “fascist” as Retallack puts it.

In the Stein essay included in Pitch of Poetry, Bernstein once again demonstrates the emotional attachment at work in his brief summary of the World War II debate, where he repeats the unsatisfactory move of calling the survival of Stein and Toklas and the collection of paintings during German occupation “a puzzle” and repeating phrasings that deny any connection or causality between Stein’s experimental writing and her political

92 Marie Smart’s unpublished paper “Conceptualizing the Great War: Duchamp’s Apolinère Enameled, Stein’s “Guillaume Apollinaire”, delivered at the conference A Valentine to Gertrude Stein in 2014, is one of still strikingly few examples that I am aware of of scholarly work taking up this demand for an open-minded approach to political and socio-historical recontextualizations of Stein’s experimental works with attention to some of Stein’s right-leaning convictions. In this case conceptions of militarism tied to World War I. Another is Birgit van Puymbroeck’s “Triangular Politics: Stein, Faî, and Elizabethe de Gramont” in Posman and Schultz (eds.) Gertrude Stein in Europe (2015), tracing strains of “political quietism” in Stein’s late portraiture. A less successful example, that I will return to in chapter four, is Barbara Will’s “And Then One Day There Was a War: Gertrude Stein, Children’s Literature and World War II”, about Stein’s writings for children and authoritarian politics.
views: “While Stein was radical in many ways, like some of the other modernists she was conservative in others.” (Bernstein 2016: 97). Repeating this position without making reference to Barbara Will’s book that, in spite of its instances of agitation, does cover the circumstances surrounding Stein’s survival in occupied France in a thorough manner and manages to make it a lot less of “a puzzle,” seems unbalanced. Even if I do not favor Will’s judgmental inclination towards Stein in this matter, I think it necessary to acknowledge that Stein did what had to be done, including the Pétain translations, and her survival as such maybe fortunate, but it is no mystery. I am convinced that any serious treatment of these issues must unavoidably address the affinities between her experimental writing and her political thinking at this point, connections that made it a lot easier for her to take these necessary measures during the Vichy years, and that challenge to its core the argument of the radical poetics, if it is made to include Stein’ practice.

What Bernstein’s recent essays on Stein demonstrate on many levels is the understanding of Stein’s oeuvre as a unit comprising both her written and her performative work, with Stein herself, as Davidson puts it, transformed “into a mass culture object” that the language poets as well as her antagonists engage with, even if they disagree about how to consider the political implications of her work. I would suggest that an appropriate way to address this unit is to apply a media ecological perspective to Stein’s oeuvre and its reception in order to address as equal components the performative composition of the persona cult, the printed words of more or less difficult writing, and the political contexts they actualize. Perhaps this perspective can provide a somewhat neutral ground on which to discuss the interconnections between these very different material levels of Stein’s oeuvre as an ecology.

Thus, I suggest that the debate on Stein’s World War II acutely demonstrates the need for a media ecological qualification of the Stein figure constructed in language poetry and formalist scholarship. As we saw, in “Stein’s Identity” Bernstein sees her escape from identity as an important part of her total poetics – stressing the playfulness with which she attacks stiffened identity categories, which he poetically seizes by playing with her voice, carrying out an impersonation of her, that demonstrates how the collaborative poetics is active, also at the level of the persona, but at the same time veils some corporeal identity bindings of Stein herself and refuses to take seriously her strong cultural bindings, what she herself called, “this native land business” (WIS 165). Instead, Bernstein – like Retallack, Stendahl, Perloff and other Stein defenders – rejects, excuses, pardons, minimalizes, and plays them down from various perspectives, which are all valid as contextualizations and explanations in their own individual right, but are also joined in an attempt to ignore the substance of the matter – the ties between Stein’s radical poetics and her conservative politics that can be traced throughout her body of work. Just as there are indeed strains that go the other way as shown in “Stein’s Identity” – from playful experimental writing towards a playful approach to identity politics. As I will demonstrate in more detail in the next chapter, these most delicate aspects of Stein’s writing will often connect to the very
strength of her work, as Stein’s particular, conflictual utility to marginalized artist will be addressed. And when I return to the war material in chapter four, I will demonstrate that even upon this topic it is possible for an aesthetic reception to deliver the political complexity that neither language poetry and formalism nor Barbara Will and the Stein detractors manages to redeem.
CHAPTER 3:

THE COMPLEX POLITICS OF COLLABORATION: STEIN, APPROPRIATION AND DISIDENTIFICATION

In her 2016 combination of book, performance score and digital album *Handholding: Five Kinds*, performance poet Tracie Morris includes the section “Handholding with Stein: If I Re-viewed Her.” Other handholding partners are Kurt Schwitters and John Cage, as well as the film directors Stanley Kubrick and John Akomfrah, and all sections directly address works by these artists, boldly talking back to them. The Stein section consists of the three parts “If I Re-viewed Her Objectively”, “If I Re-viewed Her Consumption”, and “If I Re-viewed Her Enclosed” – corresponding loosely to the three sections of *Tender Buttons*, “Objects,” “Food”, and “Rooms”. In the spoken verbal compositions Morris, in a rhythmic, repetitive improvisational style reminiscent of jazz and scat singing as well as freestyle rap, fully realizes the aspiration Charles Bernstein had vis-à-vis Stein’s words – she is to the highest degree “savoring” them.

But she is also accounting for them, challenging them, repeating them, and cutting them to pieces. Morris’ performance pieces all invite their audience to envelop in a multimedia situation and overlay their watching of Kubrick’s *Eyes Wide Shut*, their listening to Cage’s 4’33”, or their reading of *Tender Buttons* with listening to Morris’ composition of rhythmic, poetic commentary that is available for download and online streaming. In the over one hundred minutes of handholding with Stein, Morris takes us through practically every word and de-familiarized image in *Tender Buttons*, constantly fluctuating between, on the one hand, a practice of de-contextualization that savors Stein’s words and, like John Cage did in *Living Room Music*, cuts them up and repeats them even more excessively than Stein did herself. On the other hand, she offers a sharp, focused and humorous re-contextualization of the same words, tying them back to their cultural connotations, picking apart the social, colonial, sexual, racial structures that governed their use in Stein’s day and that governs it in 2016. Morris’ piece self-consciously frames itself as a recycling, a re-viewing, and it performs this condition by fronting the clash between itself and the pieces it collaborates with, in terms of historical situation, medium and materiality, thus letting its media poetic sensibility reverberate in an ambient space between the different media it actualizes. If Morris’ talk-back to Stein is a piece that occurs in a col-
laborative space of appearance between herself and Stein, then the listener familiar with another collaboration with Stein, twenty-five years older and exclusively book-bound in its medial form, will perceive here the voice of Harryette Mullen, interfering in the conversation between Morris and Stein (Morris 2016).

Harryette Mullen: Gertrude Stein’s poetry and politics appropriated and deturned

In the early 1990s, the poet Harryette Mullen (b. 1953) conceived of the idea of producing individual, collaborative responses to all three sections of Gertrude Stein’s *Tender Buttons*. The first two of these responses took “Objects” and “Food” respectively as their starting points, and have resulted in two published books of poetry, *Trimmings* (1991) and *S*PeRM*R*K*T (1992) that will be the main focus of this chapter. In both works, Mullen is using appropriative strategies in her collaborative approach to Stein. As we shall see, the techniques used by Mullen can be seen as extensions of both the collaborative works from the 1960s and those produced by the language poets, but they also, in a new way, outline the conflictual potential in the poetic interaction that tends to be overshadowed when framed by a concept such as *collaboration*, which suggests exchange as a mutual and equal process. Therefore, in this chapter I will introduce the concept of *appropriation* to supplement the media poetics, ambient poetics and collaborative poetics I have been working with until now, in order to address the distribution of power and dominance that is also implied in any collaborative gesture, and that Mullen in her practice is submitting to a media poetics of its own.

Mullen’s response to “Rooms,” the denser third section of *Tender Buttons*, which in contrast to the short prose “buttons” of the first two sections consists of one long, unbroken prose passage, was never completed as an individual book of poetry. Parts of her work in this vein was included in her later collections *Muse & Drudge* (1995) and *Sleeping with the Dictionary* (2002). Other parts went into the collaborative piece “Porch,” which Mullen composed with the artist Yong Soon Min for the collective internet art project *WomEnhouse*, a website designed in 1996 as simultaneously a virtual house and a female body consisting of a number of interactive pieces, named after either rooms in the home or female body parts. After engaging extensively with the book-bound poetry that sprang from Mullen’s collaboration with Stein, I will briefly address Mullen and Min’s contribution to *WomEnhouse*, as well as some general implications of the project that was conceived as a tribute to Judy Chicago and Miriam Shapiro’s 1972 *Womanhouse* in Los Angeles, and as a feminist intervention into the prevailing male dominance of cyberspace in the 1990s.

In a host of scholarly and critical accounts of Mullen’s poetry, her 1990s interventions with the poetry of Stein are represented as a new beginning in her writing. Previ-
ously, she had written the book of poetry *Tree Tall Woman* (1981) and published poetry in journals and chapbooks, some of which was subsequently collected in the volume *Blues Baby* (2002). The unified, vernacular voice of Mullen’s early poetry is often associated with the Black Arts Movement, in contrast to the polyphonic use of collage and appropriation techniques in her later works, which exhibit a media poetic strategy that calls attention to written language, and is often presented as a continuation of a more euro-centric modernist tradition (Spahr 2001, Mix 2008). This division of Mullen’s early poetic production is reflected by the infrastructure around the distribution of each work. *Tree Tall Woman* came out on Energy Earth Communications – a primarily black Houston press that had its heyday in the 1970s in the context of the Black Arts Movement (Thompson 1999: 147). Mullen has described how the audience that came to her readings of this book, was mainly colored, and how she was taken by complete surprise when she gave her first reading from *Trimmings* and turned out to be the only person in the room who could not pass as white (Griffin, Magee et al. 1997). Highly appropriate for its poetic project, *Trimmings* became one of the first publications from Tender Buttons Press, a small East Coast press founded and run by the poet Lee Ann Brown in 1989 and dedicated to publishing women’s experimental poetry. Although from a somewhat younger generation, Brown has a connection to the language community and shares their love for Stein, as indicated by the name of her press, and as her participation in the podcast “Poem Talk” briefly discussed in chapter two also suggests. Singing Horse Press, which published both *S*PeR*M**RK*T and *Muse & Drudge*, was another small independent press, also with ties to language poetry and run by the Philadelphia poets Gil Ott and Julia Blumenreich.93 When publishing her writings in the 1990s, Mullen could in this way benefit from the infrastructures so important in the community formation of the language poets as described in the previous chapter and which at this point in time were becoming more institutionalized.

The media ecological perspective is well-suited to approach Mullen’s concern for the ethnicity of her readership. If the cultural or ethnic affiliations of the reading audience are not part of the poetic work on a concrete material level, they become materially connected to it in the media ecology, as they connect to the infrastructural anchoring and distribution of the work and have concrete consequences for which aspects of this work that are actualized, and in what ways (Fuller 2005). Thus, when critics claim that the literary contexts of Mullen’s early and later work are practically incompatible, this claim is grounded in the infrastructure that the works are inscribed in. But uncritically repeating such claims is also, as Matthew Hart has stressed, highly problematic when considering Mullen’s outspoken attempts to dissolve precisely such boundaries as “minority writing” versus “avant-garde writing” in her own literary scholarship, essays and criticism. And first and foremost, they become problematic when faced with her poetry that is insistent-

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93 Singing Horse Press was founded in 1976 and has featured work by Charles Bernstein, Rae Armantrout, and other poets of the language generation.
ly both for the eye and the ear and ceaselessly transgresses the “speakerly”/“writerly” dichtotomy that minority literature has often been placed in, as we saw in the previous chapter when Silliman tied the writing of “marginalized poets” to an experiential rather than an experimental tradition. Hart uses Mullen’s poetics to transgress such dichotomies, including when it comes to earlier poets like Melvin Tolson whose reception—according to Hart—has suffered severely from the constant juxtaposition of African vernacular and European modernism (Hart 2010).

According to Mullen, behind the rhythmic quatrains she wrote in Muse & Drudge was the ambition to merge the figures of Sappho and Billie Holiday in an attempt to overcome the “aesthetic apartheid” she had experienced when she was told that with Trimnings she had begun writing less “black” because the writing was more “experimental” (Mullen 2012: 12). In protest, she wanted to unite the broader, but exclusively black or brown readership of her first book with the primarily white avant-garde readership she had met with Trimnings and S*PeRM**K*T, books that were in her own understanding no less “black” than her earlier work. As I will return to at the end of this chapter, her relative success in this endeavor can be witnessed in her continued career in which she has established such a hybrid reading community. At this point a glance at her publisher can give an indication of the aspired as well as the actual audience of a work. Hence, the publisher of her latest titles, Greywolf Press, a leading non-profit label with a strong experimental and global literary profile, in a way incarnates the successful merging of her audiences. In this manner, Mullen’s struggle to summon a community in which she could be recognized as both a minority writer and an experimentalist immediately demonstrates the point made by Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten in regard to the Silliman/Scalapino exchange that the contradictions of such agitated debates have indeed been exploded by “a new generation of minority writers [who] consider identity not as a given but as a site for exploration” (Hejinian and Watten 2013: 378).

Why Tender Buttons?

The importance of Stein’s Tender Buttons to Mullen’s poetry of the 1990s has been thoroughly investigated by scholars working in a feminist and post-colonial critical tradition

94 A corresponding ambition to dissolve the dichotomy between the “speakerly” and the “writerly” or the experiential and the experimental, albeit in a feminist framing, can be found in Juliana Spahr and Claudia Rankine’s anthology of poetry, American Woman Poets in the 21st Century (2002) and Cynthia Hogue and Laura Hinton’s anthology of critical essays We Who Love to Be Astonished: Experimental Women’s Writing and Performance Poetics (2001), both of which include work by Mullen.

95 Urban Tumbleweed from 2013 and Recyclopedia published in 2006 were both published on Greywolf. Mullen has also been engaged with university publishing as Sleeping with Dictionary (2002) was published by the University of California Press and her collection of essays and interviews The Cracks Between What We Are and What We Are Supposed to Be was published by University of Alabama Press in 2012 under the series edition of Charles Bernstein and Hank Lazer.
such as Elizabeth Frost, Deborah Mix, Juliana Spahr, Amy Moorman Robbins and others. From a somewhat different perspective, Sianne Ngai also investigates the relationship between Mullen and Stein as revolving around both writers’ negotiation of the aesthetic category of the cute, which I will return to. Most other discussions of the books, however, address Mullen’s invocation of other traditions than those usually mentioned in relation to Stein’s poetry. Spahr has described Mullen’s technique in *Trimmings* as well as its successor *S*PeRM*RK*T as talking with Gertrude Stein and Anglo-American modernism on issues of race and class […] [but] clearly rooted in an African-American tradition, a tradition that Henry Louis Gates, Jr., has argued is deeply involved in rereading, or signifyin(g): ‘repetition with a signal difference’ (Spahr 2001: 92).

I will develop Gates’ ideas in further detail below when discussing Mullen’s practice of using the linguistic raw material from Stein with a twist, in accordance with his post-colonial concept of signifying. But before approaching Mullen’s work in further detail, I will need to address the medially complex path by which Stein’s *Tender Buttons* ended up as the work upon which Mullen chose to signify.

As covered in chapter two, the community around language poetry contributed strongly to the reintroduction of Gertrude Stein during the late 1970s and 1980s, and *Tender Buttons* was a core text in their Stein reception. Almost every essay on Stein’s poetry and poetics I took up in the previous chapter included numerous references to it. That the language poets placed such an emphasis on *Tender Buttons* obviously relates to the rich playfulness of the poetry and the plurality of possible meanings that fitted well with their own poetic ideas as discussed in the previous chapter, and this position has been consolidated by formalist, academic scholarship also valuing the book highly. Thus, today, *Tender Buttons* is one of Stein’s most discussed works, both within and outside of academia, and holds a position as the closest one gets to a chief oeuvre in Stein’s experimental poetry. By her own account, Harryette Mullen’s encounter with Stein’s work was also mediated by language poetry:

I have been influenced by hanging around with the language crowd. It was their interest in Gertrude Stein that made me want to go back and

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96 Gates as well as others engaging in the field take great pains to distinguish between the African-American concept referring to a specific oral tradition of revision and talking-back and the homonymic term’s meaning in standard English: “The relationship that black “Signification” bears to the English “signification” is, paradoxically, a relation of difference inscribed within a relation of identity. […] I have selected to write the black term with a bracketed final g (“Signifyin(g)”) and the white term as “signifying” (Gates 1988: 45-46). As I am not putting the concept to analytic use in my work, and further, am not engaging with the vocabulary of structuralist linguistics in which the “white” term is commonly used, this distinction is not necessary in the following, and I will simply use the word “signifying” when referring to the specific African-American tradition, unless I am quoting other sources.
read Stein again after I was kind of frustrated with her. I think because I had been listening to a lot of experimental, engaged innovative poetry, her writing began to make more sense to me and I felt comfortable reading it (Mullen 2012: 217).

Apart from paying respects to the “language crowd,” Mullen’s comment here proposes how *Tender Buttons* singles itself out in Stein’s oeuvre if we direct our attention towards material and contextual factors. Because of the initial difficulty felt by many first readers when encountering the semantically challenging style of Stein’s writing from this period, becoming like Mullen “frustrated with her,” the opportunity of the silent book reader to put a book down and pick it up again at a later point in time becomes a crucial factor. This relates to the temporality of the codex, addressed via Lisa Robertson in chapter one as well as the power, praised by Stein herself in her lecture “Plays,” of the reader of a book – compared to the spectator to a play – to slowly and via irregular interruptions and beginning again, synchronize his or her own time to the words on the pages turned (LIA 246-49). But without the rising status of *Tender Buttons* as a classic book of avant-garde poetry that was one of the fruits of language poetry’s engagement with the work, the motivation for doing so might not have been present to Mullen. Crucially, the collaboration between the language poets and Stein had the effect of inserting *Tender Buttons* into a historical infrastructure, since the literary genealogy of “language-centered writing” was able to contain *Tender Buttons*. This is something academic histories of modern poetry had had difficulties doing, at least up until Marjorie Perloff broke new ground with *The Poetics of Indeterminacy* (1981).

As I suggested in the introduction, the oeuvre of Gertrude Stein in many instances exhibits a reduced distance between what Lori Emerson calls the interfaces of reading and the interfaces of writing (Emerson 2014). These qualities have severely influenced the publication history of Stein and in turn have had important consequences for the way her work has appealed to later poets and artists. As addressed, one of the ways Stein’s work resists the closure of the isolated reading interface is in its ambiguous relationship to the medial platform of the codex. After having experienced severe disappointments with the publication of *Three Lives* and *The Making of Americans*, her first serious literary undertakings, Stein increasingly began to work with other formats in her highly productive decades of the 1910s and 1920s, most notably portraits and plays, that were able to exist and gain readership independently of the printed book. These were also formats that fronted the relational aspects of literary processes, as they often implied direct collaborative engagement or social exchange with their immediate and future audiences.

The one most crucial exception to Stein’s departure from the book format in the 1910s was *Tender Buttons*. It was published in New York in 1914 by the small and short-lived press Claire Marie, and became her first individual publication on American soil. In a body of work like Stein’s where the bulk of writings were published posthumously in the long and occasionally somewhat arbitrarily structured series of *The Yale Editions of*
the Unpublished Writings of Gertrude Stein and various compilations, the apparent one-to-one equation between the work Tender Buttons as an aesthetic unit and the handy (and frequently reprinted) little book Tender Buttons as a material unit is no matter of course. Obviously, this fundamental bookishness is important for the work’s availability to Mullen at the specific point in time where her recirculation of Tender Buttons took place.

As already indicated, for instance by Tracie Morris’ handholding, John Cage’s “Living Room Music,” Steve MacCaffery’s “homolinguistic translations” and the entire “Reading Stein” section from the L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E journal, over the course of time Tender Buttons has also become one of the works by Stein most frequently made the object of posthumous collaboration. Accordingly, in the case of Tender Buttons, it seems that the invitation of Stein’s collaborative poetics coexists rather smoothly with the codex format. As I will develop in the following, one reason why this book is such a strong anchor point in the aesthetic reception history of Stein is that it is on the one hand drawing upon and benefitting from new infrastructures around book-bound literature, including book columns and the literary supplements in American newspapers and new popular literary journals, that was expanding explosively at the time of its publication (Leick 2009), and on the hand poses some severe challenges to the stability of the codex.

The events surrounding the book’s appearance in 1914 to a surprisingly broad public reception, even if it consisted primarily of ridicule and shock, created the basis for its later status. It was attractive for Stein herself to revitalize Tender Buttons in her lectures and meditations from the 1930s, because the book was already familiar to the American public, even if few had read it, and therefore it made sense for Stein to use it as a recurring reference point when approaching her earlier experimental writing in her autobiographies and lectures of the 1930s. In this way, recycling was a fundamental part of the book’s being, even in Stein’s day. Later, when Stein was being reintroduced via language poetry in the 1970s, her lectures were widely read, and many were openly influenced by Stein’s own emphasis on the importance of Tender Buttons to her general poetics. In turn, this also prompted Harryette Mullen to approach and respond to Stein’s work by way of Tender Buttons. But before I engage in further depth with the unlikely poetic community running across the better part of the 20th century hereby created, I will chart in further detail the media ecology of this Stein’s most famous book of poetry.

Mapping the media ecology of Tender Buttons

In his effort to redistribute the research tradition of material book history into contemporary literary scholarship, Jerome McGann has called attention to the text as “a laced network of linguistic and bibliographical codes” (McGann 1991: 13). Instead of talking about a “text,” McGann prefers to talk about a set of “textual conditions” that are subject to change. As he proposes, knowing a work of literature involves mapping it “into the
textual field, where ‘the meaning of the texts’ will appear as a set of concrete and always changing conditions: because meaning is in the use, and textuality is a social condition of various ties, places, and persons” (McGann 1991: 16). McGann’s approach, stressing that the “meaning” of a text is in its “use,” is compatible with the media ecological framework I have suggested for studying Stein’s work, as well as its reception as parts of the same interconnected material network involving, as McGann also stresses, several agents (human as well as non-human) and several sociohistorical situations.

In the case of Tender Buttons McGann’s considerations about the textual condition are helpful, because the work’s production as well as its reception history holds high complexity, but stays closely tied to the codex, which remains at the center of McGann’s study. I therefore include this brief attempt to map out some of the elements of Tender Button’s media ecology around its initial codex publication, that worked together to determine this text’s specific textual condition. This addresses the book as an object existing across a certain span of time and space, and thus, can cast light upon what material conditions were established around Stein’s seminal work, and how they have changed over time, and made the material available to Mullen.

Stein composed most of the material for Tender Buttons on her first trip to Spain with Alice Toklas in the summer of 1912 (Perlow 2014: 89). When she, in 1914, received a letter from the New York poet Donald Evans, who had recently started the publishing label Claire Marie Editions and wanted to publish some of Stein’s plays that he had heard about, Tender Buttons was the manuscript she decided to submit. Even if the manuscript for Tender Buttons was more or less complete when Evans approached Stein, it was far from polished in its shape. In the retrospective narration of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein credits Evans for the idea to publish the three individual sections, “Objects”, “Food” and “Rooms” as one book. Their editorial correspondence supports this, since it was Evans who asked Stein to come up with one uniting title to place above the three section headlines, the order of which was also changed by Evans (Schuster 2011). The author’s “originally intended” order of the three sections remains a wide-open question, as different parts of the textual genetic evidence point to each of the three sections as the initial one. Stein’s original handwritten notebook manuscript starts with “Food”, whereas the typescript for safekeeping produced by Toklas puts “Rooms” first, and the book version starts with “Objects.” The latter organization apparently happened on Evans’ initiative, yet it was a decision that Stein did not object to, neither in their correspondence, nor in the handwritten corrections to the first edition, that she made for the sake of future printings.97

In the case of Tender Buttons, the laws of change that according to McGann governs the conditions of any text are very explicitly operative in reminding us of the illusory stability of the printed book. Further, the fact that Stein picked the material that was to

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97 Stein’s corrections torn from her notebook are kept in the Stein papers at Yale Collection American Literature and were used as guideline in putting together Tender Buttons. The Corrected Centennial Edition (City Lights 2014) that also includes facsimile images of a number of them.
become *Tender Buttons* over her earliest plays which Evans had specifically asked for, suggests that Stein did not initially intend for her plays to meet the public via the printed page, and in this way challenges a frequently repeated claim in the reception of Stein’s plays, that she never planned for her earliest plays to be staged, and that the genre was merely a metaphor for her to begin with (Palatini Bowers 1991, Puchner 2002). On the contrary, as held by Sarah Bay-Cheng and Laura Schultz among others, when Stein engaged in play writing she did so out of interest in the stage as an alternative to print as a platform for the realization of her words, which is strengthened by the fact that she hesitated to realize her plays in print. Thus, her commitment to the genres of plays and portraits that, in her conception, were only remotely connected to the codex, demonstrates the nature of her media poetics as aimed at challenging the conception of literature as first and foremost a book-bound phenomenon and opening it towards an ambient dimension. And, as I have stressed, even *Tender Buttons* – Stein’s first book to be published and funded by an independent publisher – also poses its severe challenges to the book as a stable object.

As Joshua Schuster has pointed out, the editorial process with Donald Evans was the first chance Stein had to participate in a book’s actual layout, but the process was rapid, and it is striking how minimal the book’s design turned out. Even if Evans was the one keeping up the pace of events in order to get the book out in time for “the summer readers,” the important decisions about the sparseness of the book design appears to have been entirely Stein’s (Schuster 2011). Evans wrote to her in March 1914: “There will be no illustrations or tail or head piece or introduction or dedication, as you ask” (quoted

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98 Stein first published a number of her plays in print in 1922 when she put together *Geography and Plays*, her first retrospective collection. This was ten years after she had begun writing plays, starting with *What Happened* in 1912 (Bay-Cheng 2004, Schultz 2008).
in Schuster 2011). Stein appears to have been happy with the result, even if Evans was notoriously bluffing about the cultural importance of his – in fact – very marginal press. In addressing the American public, though, he was entirely outspoken about this. In the promotional material for Tender Buttons he wrote:

CLAIRE MARIE believes that there are in America seven hundred civilized people only.

CLAIRE MARIE publishes books for civilized people only.

CLAIRE MARIE’s aim, it follows from these premises, is not even secondarily commercial (Quoted in Leick 2009: 42).

This attitude did not appear to concern Stein at the time, even though she did retrospectively, in her account in The Autobiography, distance herself somewhat from Evans, implying that she and Toklas through most of their professional correspondence mistook him for a woman: “We took it for granted that there was a Claire Marie but there evidently was not” (ABT 815). In spite of everything, the book did in the end stir up quite a bit of attention in the papers.

As Karen Leick has shown, one needs to understand the general American public’s interest in experimental art and literature at this time in order to explain the stir caused by Tender Buttons (Leick 2009). An infrastructure of art talk and book talk was building up in American public media in the first half of the 20th century, where the demand for entertaining news for the growing reading public made editors, journalists, and critics write about new trends in art. In 1914, Stein’s name was already quite well known, as it had been associated with the notorious Armory Show, which had introduced modernist painting and sculpture to the American public in 1913 and been a tremendous audience magnet with almost 300,000 visitors overall in New York, Chicago, and Boston where it was showed (Leick 2009: 32-33). The interest in modern art generated by this show was quickly popularized in fashion, home decoration as well as popular media, and accordingly knowledge of new ways in art was not something confined to a highbrow elite. The diverse commercial offshoots of the Armory Show demonstrate the tendency claimed by Sianne Ngai’s of an increasing belief that “mass culture and high art could be reconciled” over the course of the 20th century (Ngai 2012: 58).

Even if mockery – especially in verse form – was a common approach to both modernist painting and literature, it is worth taking note of the fact that such matters were also considered important enough to be discussed in the most popular newspaper columns of the nation. When Tender Buttons came out, reviewers and columnists picked up the thread from the debate about modernism and free verse that was launched in 1912 when the first issue of the periodical Poetry made a broader public acquainted with poetry in free verse not following classical conventions of rhyme and meter, and had intensified with the Armory Show of the following year. Hence, despite its small and semi-dilettante publisher
and the modest number of copies printed, *Tender Buttons* was literary news all over the country and not just widely reviewed in many newspapers and literary magazines but also debated and mocked in columns, humor pages, and editorials.

Photograph by Carl Van Vechten (1934) showing a department store window playing on the title of Stein’s opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*, running on Broadway at the time. The fashion industry’s popularization of modern art – including Stein’s – increased in the following decades (Courtesy of the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

The news clippings from Stein’s archive at Beinecke discussed in chapter one, document a few of the contemporary engagements with the language of *Tender Buttons*, but there were many more. One major contributor to Stein’s and *Tender Buttons*’ fame in American popular media was the conservative cultural columnist Don Marquis, whose humorous column “The Sun Dial” in *The New York Evening Sun* was among the most widely read in the country. As Leick has dug out, Marquis’ weekly column referenced to or quoted from *Tender Buttons* for comic effect over fifty times in less than a year (1914-1915), and the book was even a popular topic of exchange between Marquis and his readers. Marquis frequently printed the letters he received and there are several examples of how these letters good-humoredly play with Stein’s words, for instance: “Sir: What’s this here from Gertrude Stein about tend ‘er buttons? Why doesn’t she tend ‘em herself?” (Leick 2009: 55). The purpose of these word plays, for Marquis as well as his readers, may be to poke fun at Stein’s work, but they also witness the material appeal of Stein’s media poetics, even to her detractors. A phenomenon Stein herself also stressed on several occasions, not least in *The Autobiography* where “Gertrude Stein” says to “Alice”:
They always say [...] that my writing is appalling but they always quote it and what is more, they quote it correctly, and those they say that they admire they do not quote. [...] My sentences do get under their skin, only they do not know that they do (ABT 730).

According to the thorough archival work of Leick, the practice of quoting extensively from *Tender Buttons* as well as rewriting passages and attempting to imitate the book’s characteristic style, was surprisingly widespread in American newspapers over several years. Apart from being an effect of Stein’s media poetics inviting its readers to participate in the play with sounds and making the texture of the English language palpable, this tendency had obvious connection to an infrastructural level, as it also derived from the concrete, limited availability of the actual book, that had been printed in 1000 copies only and was not distributed broadly. As the work had news interest but was not available to most readers, quoting was essential. Several papers printed lengthy extracts of the text in the period immediately succeeding its publication as a service to their readers, and therefore many early readers first approached *Tender Buttons* via other interfaces than the codex.

![Cover of *transition* no. 14, 1928; excerpt from bottom of page 13 (Facsimile from Upenn/Writing).](image)

As Lori Emerson stresses, an interface is part device and part user, and the interface of the newspaper with its temporally short distance from writing to reading and its options for engaging in discussions (like in the letters from Don Marquis’ readers), distributes the reader interaction with *Tender Buttons* differently from that of the printed codex. In 1928, only fourteen years after it first appeared, the work was reprinted in its entirety by French-American writer and translator Eugene Jolas’ deliberately transatlantic journal *transition*, taking up about one third of the pages in issue no. 14, and so in its journal form it received a wider international distribution and globalist contextualization.
as Jolas put Stein’s text side by side with Aztec tales and Columbian sculpture in a section titled “America” (Spahr 2014). Furthermore, as Leick also shows, little magazines like transition, The Little Review and the transatlantic review in which sections of Stein’s The Making of Americans appeared from 1924, were a popular topic in the mainstream press that frequently joked with – and quoted extensively from – work by Joyce, Stein and other experimental writers published in these magazines (Leick 2009: 90-101).

Thus, in quite a particular way, the immediate reception of Tender Buttons from the very beginning, included extensive appropriation, rewriting and distribution across different interfaces. This was in part due to the media poetic effect of Stein’s language inviting its readers to participate in its play (even if it was sometimes with the “hostile” intent of poking fun), and in part for infrastructural reasons, due to the demand for reader access to the poems via other interfaces that were tied to wider infrastructures of distribution than the codex.

Sianne Ngai also notes this tendency that “Stein’s admiring and critical reviewers alike seem compelled to approximate her language and, moreover, to savor or take pleasure in these acts of imitation even when the intent is clearly ridicule” (Ngai 2012: 87) and she ascribes it to the effect of cuteness in her writing, specifically emphasizing Tender Buttons. Cuteness, claims Ngai “cutifies the language of the aesthetic response it compels, a verbal mimesis underscoring the judging subject’s empathetic desire to reduce the distance between herself and the object” (ibid.), a point that also recalls the Stein collaboration by impersonation of Charles Bernstein and testifies to the nature of the affects that often fuel the collaborative responses Stein’s writing generates.

Even if it appears to have been more or less in spite of everything that Tender Buttons ended up as a printed book of poetry, this material shape had a decisive influence on its contemporary reception as well as its afterlife. As a printed book, it has been subject to numberless reprints since the 1970s, and accordingly this particular version of its interface remains available for readers to return to. But what I wish to stress about the textual condition of Tender Buttons, is how the stability of the work as book-bound combines with the open structure of the work and its continued reception as appropriation, and creates a work that is, in a very literal sense, a textual network, the meaning of which is in its use. Ultimately, Tender Buttons is a book, and not just any book, but a classic, but it is a classic that has always been more rewritten than it has been read – or one that is inevitably being rewritten as it is being read.99

99 This claim is also substantiated by the journal Jacket2’s celebration of the 100th anniversary of Tender Buttons with “Twenty-two on Tender Buttons.” A collection of “micreviews,” that is “short, impressionistic, discursive, or momentary reflections on the book” written by rich a variety of writers and scholars, many of them with a personal and collaborative stance (Bloch 2015).
Recycle that book

In 2006 Harryette Mullen published the volume *Recyclopedia*, a republication of *Trimmings*, *S*PeRM**K*T and *Muse & Drudge*, all of which had very limited availability at this time as they were originally published and printed in small numbers by Tender Buttons Press and Singing Horse Press, and had been out of print for years. Albeit in an entirely different historical situation, this gesture constitutes an obvious parallel to the media ecology of *Tender Buttons*, also marked by various types of textual reproduction, thus stressing with McGann’s phrase, that the meaning of poetry is in its (re-)use. Mullen introduces her volume of auto-recycling with a statement of poetics framing this affinity:

If the encyclopedia collects general knowledge, the recyclopedia salvages and finds imaginative uses for knowledge. That’s what poetry does when it remakes and renews words, images and ideas, transforming surplus cultural information into something unexpected (RCP vii).

Behind this statement about poetry, as something that is not first and foremost “making it new” as Pound and other modernists would have it, but instead a practice that can at best recycle or renew words, ideas and images, lies a poetics drawing upon a long tradition of conceptual and appropriative art practices in the 20th century. This tradition is often traced back to dada and cubist collages and the ready-mades of Marcel Duchamp, obviously central references for Mullen’s three poetry collections of the 1990s. But the quote also suggests how her three books all point forward towards the experience of excessive information overload and participation culture characterizing the media ecology of our present day.

When we approach Mullen’s appropriative poetry from the 1990s, we are faced with a highly complex mosaic of recycling that tie together a number of different temporal layers. As just discussed, the media ecology of *Tender Buttons* is already permeated by recycling and reframing: Stein’s own, and that of her contemporaries, the intermedia artists of the 1960s, and the language poets. Mullen’s collaboration with Stein is informed by all of these, but it is also decentered by her picking from a range of other sources, not immediately related to Stein. In combining the self-conscious recycling gesture towards her own works in *Recyclopedia*, with a request for readers to recycle it further, to put it to use in new contexts, Mullen is adding media poetic attention to these layers of textual recycling. In Mullen’s works we are not just faced with a response to Stein’s collaborative poetics, but with a general poetics of appropriation where the poetic text is specifically pointing itself out as an assemblage drawing from all corners of culture, a “recyclopedia.”

In his 2002 essay *Postproduction* the French art historian and theorist of relational aesthetics Nicolas Bourriaud proposes that contemporary art and culture is increasingly influenced by the artistic tradition of “postproduction” from Duchamp to Warhol. Bourriaud finds that modes of appropriation, remediation, sampling, recycling, and remixing
– that is, artistic strategies that are working with material that has been taken from other sources – are omnipresent when he looks around. In extension, Bourriaud calls for a re-formulation of the fundamental project of the artist, very similar to Mullen’s statement:

The artistic question is no longer: “what can we make that is new?” but “how can we make do with what we have?” In other words, how can we produce singularity and meaning from this chaotic mess of objects, names, and references that constitute our daily life? (Bourriaud 2002: 17)

Bourriaud also examines historical predecessors like the “ Appropriation art” movement that rose in the late 1970s and 1980s where visual artists like Sherrie Levine, Jeff Koons, Richard Prince, Cindy Sherman and Barbara Kruger took both artworks by other artists and images from film and advertising and appropriated them smoothly into their own work. As Sianne Ngai has stressed, these and other artistic movements in late 20th century express “the continuousness and everydayness of our aesthetic relations to the often artfully designed, packaged, and advertised merchandise that surrounds us” (Ngai 2012: 58) and, in this way, contribute to reducing the distance between art and commodity.

Mullen’s method of composition has a lot in common with the postproductive artist as DJ or curator as described by Bourriaud, as she also appropriates from all spheres from high art to commodity culture. However, the works I focus on were written in the early 1990s, immediately before the breakthrough of the internet, arguably the most significant technological invention for the postproductive artist, not least the one working with text (Goldsmith 2011a; Goldsmith 2011b). Thus, the poetic reshaping of the appropriated material in Mullen’s works on the face of it seems more explicit than is the case in Bourriaud’s examples from the realm of visual arts. But more importantly, Mullen in her appropriative practice has political investments negotiating power relations that Bourriaud’s concept does not address. If the visual appropriation art of the 1980s has sometimes been accused of a superficiality that approaches the consumption objects or advertisements they feed on (see for example Perloff 1991: 129-133), then the feminist, critical and even activist dimension inherent in the practice of appropriation was highlighted in literature, associated with techniques of appropriation in the same period, for instance Kathy Acker’s. Acker wrote her novels on top of classics like Great Expectations, The Scarlet Letter and Don Quixote, but added a feminist impulse to the act of appropriation (Acker: Great Expectations, 1983; Blood and Guts in High School, 1984; Don Quixote: Which Was a Dream, 1985). As she puts it in an essay about her youth experience of the limited scope of female self-realization and expression: “I was unspeakable so I ran into the language of others” (Acker 1995: 80). The strategies of textual appropriation applied by Acker include a gesture of disidentification as they involve an experience of being in conflict with the available identification figures, and instead of negating them, then using them with a difference. Similarly, when Harryette Mullen in her original afterword to Trimmings, in discussing the found material she is picking from in this work, points to
the “ironic relationship to this pink and white femininity” (Mullen 1991: 69) of English literature that she holds as a black woman, she also indicates how an essential dimension of political and racial as well as gender awareness is crucial to her own use of strategies of appropriation.

Through this aspect of conscious identity politics in Mullen’s aesthetics, I want to suggest, we can take our reading of Gertrude Stein in particular, and the cultural situation of poetry in general, beyond the limitations of both the discourse of formalist politics of language poetry and of its critics, in order to approach questions of identity from the point of view of cultural studies informed by post-colonial, queer, or feminist theory that were discussed in the previous chapter. In *Muse & Drudge* and *Trimmings* these themes are played out in an exemplary manner. But it is in *S*PeR*M**K**T*, set in the supermarket, this unspectacular modern temple of abundance that most perfectly illustrates the “chaotic mess of objects, names, and references that constitute our daily life” (Bourriaud 2002: 17), that her specific strategies of literary appropriation are best explored, and for this reason I will initially turn to this book.

Appropriating Stein in the supermarket

As suggested I have settled on the concept of appropriation for describing Mullen’s specific practice of recycling words and phrases rather than Bourriaud’s suggested term post-production, and also Henry Louis Gates’ concept of signifying and other post-colonially invested terms.

In regard to more post-colonially invested concepts, it is crucial to stress that figures of imitation and reuse as pastiche or parody, as well as other forms of appropriation, have a long history within the African, African-American and black vernacular tradition described by Gates in *The Signifying Monkey* that Mullen is declaredly building upon.¹⁰⁰ As Juliana Spahr stresses in regard to the reception of many recent African-American writers, “what has been so crucial about Gates’ work has been his pointing out that what might look to be postmodern, might be upon closer examination African-based” (Spahr 2001: 97). There are in fact striking affinities between Bourriaud’s 2002 observations about contemporary postproductive art and African-American writer and anthropologist Zora Neale Hurston’s 1934 essay “Characteristics of Negro Expression”. In the sections “Originality” and “Imitation” Hurston discusses the common belief that the black race is somehow “imitative” in contrast to the white race being “original” and “creative” (Hur-

¹⁰⁰ The African American or Black English vernacular tradition refers to the varieties and dialects of the English language spoken in some African American, particularly working class, communities. One of the objectives of the literary Black Arts Movement as it was formulated in the late 1960s and 1970s was to base their writing in this language heightening its overall status by making it heard as a medium of literary expression, not just a spoken language which deviated erratically from standard (white and written) English. (Gates 1988: xix)
ston 1969: 42-43). “The Negro, the world over, is famous as a mimic” claims Hurston, “But this in no way damages his standing as an original”, since for her originality is merely “re-interpretation”, and all great artists perform this praxis:

It is obvious that to get back to original sources is much too difficult for any group to claim very much as a certainty. What we really mean by originality is the modification of ideas. The most ardent admirer of the great Shakespeare cannot claim first source even for him. It is his treatment of the borrowed material (ibid. 43).

As Gates puts it:

For Hurston, the distinction between originality and imitation is a false distinction, and for a black writer to suffer under the burden of avoiding repetition, revision, or reinterpretation is to succumb to a political argument that reflects a racist subtext (Gates 1988: 118).

Hurston’s view of originality here, which is developed further by Gates in his concept of signifying, appears strikingly contemporary and well suited to contain the critical investments in Mullen’s recycled poetry. The reason why I still choose to stay with the more neutral, technical term of appropriation is primarily my wish to avoid the bifurcation between orality and vernacular language and written practices that is explicit in Gates’ work. Also, this path into Mullen’s work has already been covered in several studies, upon which I will be drawing, and I generally want to keep my approach as open as possible and, in accordance with Matthew Hart’s warning, attempt to resist a pre-understanding of Mullen’s work that could be in danger of reducing its material strategies to specific themes associated with her minority background (Hart 2010).

Appropriation is a wider concept and comes with a baggage from Marxist economics, Bakhtinian linguistics, as well as the aforementioned art history of the 20th century. Following Marcus Boon’s pragmatic definition that “appropriation” is “the act of claiming the right to use, make, or own something that someone else claims in the same way” (Boon 2010: 205), I wish to underline the element of theft or conflict inherent in appropriation. In fact, Boon introduces the concept by associating it with slave trade as the ultimate act of appropriation, and adding that

most of what we call history is arguably the history of appropriation, and the history of one group stealing from another group and claiming those people’s bodies, minds, properties, lands, or cultures as their own (Boon 2010: 205).

101 The bifurcation upheld by Gates indeed partially overlaps with the one suggested by Ron Silliman between experiential and orally oriented minority writing and experimental and textually oriented language writing. Gates’ disposition is explicitly criticized by Mullen in her essay “African Signs and Spirit Writing” (Mullen 2012: 79-101).
For Bakhtin, all words spoken are initially appropriated, never from a neutral source, but always taken from a different context that is hereby negated. In Marxism, appropriation can be described as the most basic act of power. The capitalist is appropriating the surplus from the workers’ production, but beforehand man has appropriated his surroundings through acts of labor, and so the concept in a Marxist line of thought is connected to the use of force or even violence on a very fundamental level. Boon stresses how artistic appropriation was completely elementary to art production in any medium up until the 18th century, where it became heavily negated by the cult of originality rising with romanticism. Thus, appropriative strategies in 20th century have all fronted the element of conflict: Marcel Duchamp’s appropriations of industrial products in his ready-mades were negating or altering their original use value and attacking the “retinal” aura of art. The situationist practice of détournement, appropriated and reframed fragments from art history and commercial and popular culture to point out and eventually undermine the inevitable entanglement of any human expression with the spectacle of capitalist culture. And, finally, the appropriation art of the 1980s copied and pasted openly in frontal attack on the concept of originality, the figure of the sovereign artist, and the segregation of art and popular culture.

Appropriation and sampling from a variety of sources is the central method of composition in Mullen’s S*PeRM**K*T, and already the title of the work, constructed from the word “SUPERMARKET” tellingly subtracting the four letters “U A R E” (you are), is fronting the risk of losing oneself in this context, in accordance with the situationist analysis of the “society of the spectacle” (Debord 1994). However, the practice of appropriation dominant in S*PeRM**K*T does not stem only from the confrontation with the alienating chaos of late capitalist consumer culture, but is already embedded in the
“Food” section of *Tender Buttons* that Mullen picks from, both in terms of its turbulent media ecology as described above, and on a strictly linguistic level.

The words on the list reappear as headings of the poems of the section. Some of them, however, are repeated several times. “Milk” and “Chicken”, for instance, appear as headings of several, radically dissimilar texts, and some reappear in varied form, such as “Orange”, which is once repeated, then deferred into its plural form “Oranges” and finally to the enigmatic “Orange in.” In a media poetic vein, Stein uses the words of the “shopping list” as pieces of found material that can be repeated, cut up, and altered much like the newspaper clippings with the word “journal” repeated by Picasso in his early cubist paintings and collages. And as in Picasso’s pictures, each alteration offers a new range of possible meanings.

Pablo Picasso, *Siphon, Glass, Newspaper and Violin* (1912); *Violin, Sheet Music and Newspaper* (1912); *Study of Newspaper* (1913); *Still-Life With Chair Caning* (1912).

Entering the texts below the headings, the techniques of collage and appropriation become even more extensive. It seems that individual words are exchanged between texts like physical objects. The poem “Eggs,” for example, contains no eggs, but its neighbor
“Milk” does. The egg also reappears in the first “Orange” poem, where, along with “orange” and “oyster,” it is participating in a sort of physical rhyming-process quite characteristic of this section: All foods with a hard shell, that needs to be broken or peeled off to reveal the edible part, a soft, wet interior.

The pattern formed by these three foods that are physically similar, but at the same time completely different, on a structural level resembles the patterning of acoustic rhyme, creating phonetic connections between words that are similar, but at the same time semantically disparate. The point here is, as Laura Schultz has stressed, that in “Food” the materiality of the words, the concrete play of sound and sight, does in no way block out of the materiality of the objects to which they refer (Schultz 2005: 93-96). On the contrary, there seems to be an exchange or metonymic proximity between the materiality of words and the materiality of the objects as Stein in “Food” attempts to treat both in the same way. All of their physical, sensual qualities are constantly present. The object can do semiotic work, it can signify, metaphorically pointing to other things or concepts, producing new meaning. Accordingly, the foods can even “rhyme” and form various patterns, like the eggs, oranges and oysters, and correspondingly words can be cut into pieces like produces in the kitchen. The words in this way materialize on the page as found objects appropriated into an assemblage. In “Rhubarb” Stein even plays a joke on this technique by literally cutting up the word “collage” itself: “coal age.” As Peter Quartermain has observed, “Food” generally “deals in transformations” (Quartermain 1992: 23), it is centered on processes, not objects. There is a lot of cutting and cooking, separating and mixing going on and there is an omnipresence of eating, tasting, and smelling, but completely relieved from a sense of necessity. As it says in “Roastbeef”: “There is no use there is no use at all in smell, in taste, in teeth, in toast, in anything, there is no use at all and the respect is mutual” (TB 37). Food and eating is a sensual pleasure that has no purpose but the sensuality and enjoyment of it that often becomes closely linked to sexual pleasure. Correspondingly, all over “Food,” the sensual satisfaction and savoring in Stein’s language so highly appreciated by both Bernstein, Lee Ann Brown, and the other participants in “Poem Talk” is dominant. Ngai, in her analysis of the cuteness of Tender Buttons, is also interested in the alterability of the words and substances in Stein’s texts. The cute object, according to Ngai is often characterized by its “soft squishy form” (Ngai 2012: 67). An important quality of the cute object is that it is diminutive, familiar, and subordinate, but also mendable, soft and compliant, and in our response to it we often fluctuate between cuddling intimacy and aggression.

In Mullen’s S*PeRM**K*T the food is also relieved from satisfaction of immediate needs. No hunger is felt, but here instead the food is turned into commodities that supply identity. The hunger of poorer nations is present as a contrast and the anorectic’s perspective is played out to underline the grotesque abundance of late 20th century western consumer culture. But the transformational materiality entailing the sensual fluidity and concrete alteration of the foods that is so outspoken in the domestic space of Tender
Buttons, is not present in S*PeRM**K*T. Here foods are no longer plural and indefinite produces that reveal their physical qualities immediately or through preparation, but plastic wrapped objects, double wrapped in the words of politicized advertising, as they are telling each shopper what “U ARE” (in terms of race, class and gender) if you buy this product. As Ngai remarks about S*PeRM**K*T “here one encounters the commodity mediated always by its advertising” (Ngai 2012: 68), which is another result of the “slackening of tension between autonomous art and the commodity form” (ibid. 58) that is played out in 20th century art, particular in the tradition of appropriation discussed earlier.

Like Tender Buttons S*PeRM**K*T has no identifiable speaker or steady lyrical person, but whereas this in the former is due to the concentration of open, grammatically incomplete and partly interrogative sentences ambiguously invoking the processes of cooking and eating, in the latter the declarative sentences and direct addresses of advertising are dominating (the only “you” being the “you” of rewritten jingles), it is capitalist culture talking. Some of Stein’s most significant foods like milk, butter, eggs, and ham reappear in the S*PeRM**K*T’s assemblage of Steinian parataxis, the language of labeling and advertising, blues songs, popular music, and racial awareness, but they behave quite differently here. The book opens with this poem:

Lines assemble gutter and margin. Outside and in, they straighten a place. Organize a stand. Shelve space. Square footage. Align your list or listlessness. Pushing oddly evening aisle catches the tale of an eye. Displays the cherished share. Individually wrapped singles, frozen divorced compartments, six pack widows, all express themselves, while women wait in family ways, all bulging baskets, squirming young. More on line incites the eyes. Bold names label familiar type faces. Her hand scanning throwaway lines (RCP 65).

As the speaker takes Stein’s shopping list to her local supermarket, she is forced to align. The Tender Buttons way of enjoying both the material world and language, seems unavailable, leaving the shopper with her list fatigued, “listless”, standing in line, surrounded by the food of the supermarket. Not sensual and inviting intervention like the food of Tender Buttons, but wrapped up and forced into place. The sentences are dominated by parataxis, the text consists of an enumeration of descriptive observations yet the assembled words and phrases are rich with ambiguity, drawing on diverse references.

The lines and organizations of space point to the supermarket’s attempt to hail and straighten us as consumer subjects, controlling our movements and habits as well as our purchases, and negating all sense of human community (“individually wrapped singles”). Yet, at the same time, the superimposed image of writing on paper in this first poem, originating from the same words of the text, only read differently (that is, “lines”, “gutter”, “margin”, “footage”, “bold”, “names”, “type faces”), suggests a media poetic opening that disturbs the invisibility of the written poem’s interface, and at the same time creates cracks in the powerful language of consumerism.
Some texts are veritable collages of commercial slogans, like this one appropriating, mixing, and modifying a whole list of soap and deodorant slogans, common in the 1960s-80s:

Aren’t you glad you use petroleum? Don’t wait to be told you explode. You’re not fully here until you’re over there. Never let them see you eat. You might be taken for a zoo. Raise your hand if you’re sure you’re not (RCP 69).

All the slogans appropriated were used in print ads and TV commercials for deodorant soap brands during the 1980s: “Aren’t you glad you use Dial? (don’t you wish everybody did?)”; “Raise your hand if you’re Sure”; “You’re not fully clean until you’re Zestfully clean”; “Don’t wait to be told, you need Palmolive Gold” and “Never let them see you sweat.”

All of the original slogans are concerned with cleanliness, with negating bodily physicality, hiding the smells and liquids of the body. But Mullen’s alterations of the slogans make them ready to explode, perhaps associating from a well-known Dial commercial with a very crowded car (with one passenger presumably not using Dial making the whole
vehicle smell and making us “wish everybody did”) she substitutes petroleum for soap, generating a comic effect.

The Zest line is mixed up with a Steinian alteration of deixis, the contradictory use of the categories of here and there suggesting the impossible or empty utopian dimension in all advertising, always promising the instant availability of the greener grass on the other side with the purchase of this particular product. All soap slogans are turned, and statements on cleanliness suddenly suggest critiques of essentialist narratives of belonging and the segregation of others (i.e. “taken for a zoo”) as a key tool in the constitution of a stable identity as it is performed by commercial language, creating identity by negation of the other. If Stein in a media poetic gesture treats the words as physical material, in Mullen it is somehow reversed, all bodies are inscribed by words, the words around us make us who we are in a way that is heavily politicized. In these poems, the products of a capitalist supermarket are immersed in language and culture, hailing us as members of various groups, as carrying specific group identities as consumers. In this line of thought described by Marxist philosopher Louis Althusser, we are always already hailed, interpellated as subjects by ideology (Althusser 1971).

Thus, instead of modifying the foods, or the nouns replacing the foods like Stein, Mullen modifies the commercial language that wraps up the goods of the supermarket. As Ngai also stresses, most of the compact, sonorous, punning poems in *S*PeRM**K*T** behaves strikingly like the carefully crafted language of the cute commercial jingles they appropriate (Ngai 2012: 68). Stein has famously described how in *Tender Buttons* – since poetry inevitably is all about nouns – she was stuck with this her most despised grammatical category. The thing about nouns, in Stein’s conception, is that they are practically incapable of “being mistaken” due to their stability and unambiguousness. This situation made her approach the nouns in a new way:

Poetry is concerned with using with abusing, with losing with wanting, with denying with avoiding with adoring with replacing the noun. It is doing that always doing that, doing that and doing nothing but that. Poetry is doing nothing but using losing refusing and pleasing and betraying and caressing nouns. That is what poetry does, that is what poetry has to do no matter what kind of poetry it is (LIA 327).

Like Stein with her nouns, Mullen is attacking the commercial language with a gesture of “abusing it by using it.” Mullen’s appropriationist praxis here resembles a situationist gesture, a *détournement* of the images of capitalism and literary history that turns them against themselves. It seems that Mullen’s analysis of contemporary consumer culture resembles the French chief situationist Guy Debord’s claustrophobic analysis of the workers fate in late capitalist society of overflow where work life, leisure, and social life have all been colonized by the spectacle:
Understood in its totality, the spectacle is both the outcome and the goal of the dominant mode of production. It is not something added to the real world not a decorative element, so to speak. On the contrary, it is the very heart of society’s real unreality. In all its specific manifestations news or propaganda, advertising or the actual consumption of entertainment the spectacle epitomizes the prevailing model of social life. It is the omnipresent celebration of a choice already made in the sphere of production, and the consummate result of that choice. In form as in content the spectacle serves as total justification for the conditions and aims of the existing system. It further ensures the permanent presence of that justification, for it governs almost all time spent outside the production process itself (Debord 1994: 6).

In this reasoning, we are in no way better off than in the materially poorer days of early industrialism with their harsh exploitation of the workers; materially richer, we are significantly poorer in spirit. Our daily life is immersed in the spectacle, alienated as a distorted flow of images, the actions and identities of all human beings caught up in an atomized, commodified expression. Although fairly categorical and heavy in its Marxist vocabulary, Debord’s analysis is interesting in the light of media ecology because he attempts to theorize the interconnection of the totality of elements that constitute daily life into an impenetrable interface of spectacle, that, just like in Emerson’s analysis of the reading/writing interfaces is constantly diverting attention from itself as a material reality. Mullen’s supermarket seems a perfect image of the society of the spectacle: its intermingling of words and images turns everyday basic physical needs into entertainment, identity and spectacle that inhabits social relations between people by marginalizing the other. It seems that to Mullen, Stein liberated the food from “use”, only for it to be occupied by the spectacle.

The liberation from use value makes the products available for the exchange value of commodity fetishism and the ideology of segregation. Hence, the appropriation of the avant-garde of the early 20th century was followed and trumped by the appropriation of the market. The relevance of the situationist idea of détournement with its element of political subversion is evident to Mullen’s technique in the quoted poem as it is in the visual design of the whole work, which was made the by publisher Gil Ott.102 In dialogue with Mullen he added black and white close-up photos from his local supermarket to both the cover and inside of the book and used phosphorescent orange types for title and author and completed this discount aesthetics via an orange “IMPROVED!” blurb at the bottom of the front cover. All of this owes a lot to the “anti-aesthetics” of situationist détournement and later developments such as the amateurish DIY ideals of the punk movement. According to Debord, the appropriating praxis of détournement calls out the spectacle,

102 And becomes even more so in later works by Mullen, for instance in the Fourth of July-poem “Land of the Discount Price Home of the Brand Name” (Mullen 2003) and in Sleeping with the Dictionary where Mullen is combining an inspiration from the mathematical and alphabetic constraints of the French OuLiPo collective with an extensive use of détournement style appropriation.
not unlike the media poetics in Emerson’s analysis is calling out the hidden control in the seamless interface: “Détournement is the antithesis of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context” (Debord 1994: 208).

But contrary to the situationist negation of art, Mullen seems to position her writing as a possible counter strategy like the one suggested by the practice of media poetics. She appropriates the linguistic and cultural wrappings of consumerism and modifies it to reveal and parody the voices of cultural and commercial oppression that lurks inside. And just as Stein takes pleasure in the foods and the words that describe them, Mullen plays with the language of advertising, using it and turning it around, but enjoying its suggestiveness, taking advantage of its immediate appeal and familiarity – the slogans and labels of the supermarket groceries being the oranges, eggs and tails of her own generation.

Here, again, Ngai’s analysis of the affects awakened by the cute object appears relevant. Like Debord, Ngai draws on Marx’s analysis of the commodity, but if the focus in Debord is on social structures becoming commodified, then Ngai focuses on the commodity, or the cute object, becoming socialized (Ngai 2012: 60). As she demonstrates, in Marx, the commodity is anthropomorphized and awake social feelings of care as well as aversion that makes us want to engage with it, as the foods do in Stein, and the supermarket products and their jingles do in Mullen.

The penultimate poem of the collection, suggests the marginalizing of people of color, hiding the face, and removing whatever is dirty or different,

Hide the face. Chase the dirt with an ugly stick. That sinking sensation, a sponge dive. Brush off scum on some well scrubbed mission. It’s slick to admit, motherwit and grit ain’t groceries (RCP).

The text plays on the idiom “beaten with an ugly stick” and returns to the straightening and determination (“well scrubbed mission”) of the collection’s first poem (“straighten a place”), but, once again, alternative messages are superimposed as Mullen appropriates and modifies the title line of Little Milton’s 1969 blues song “Grits ain’t groceries,” into the line “It’s slick to admit, motherwit and grit ain’t groceries.” As Deborah Mix points out in her reading of the poem:

She remakes the food “grits” (a staple diet of many poor southerners) into the personality trait “grit” and ads to it “motherwit”. In doing so, Mullen recalls geographic, social, and economic histories as well as the familial and geneological histories – through which “motherwit” would be passed down – that shape literary tradition and her own writing. She also points her readers toward the possibility of moving outside a consumer driven culture (Mix 2008: 63).
Mix is implying here that motherwit and grit in the poem are made out to be valuable qualities that money can’t buy, and I agree that an appreciation of the practical intelligence and wit of the maternal lineage and of a strength of character that is not for sale is part of the story in this poem, but the fact that Mullen takes the porridge “grits” and changes it into “wit” (a verbal sort of intelligence) and determination (“grit”) also makes a point about the strong discursiveness of the supermarket-foods. In the song “grits” is considered the most basic grocery in the world, but as we have already seen, the indefinite, wet and eatable groceries of “Food” (like oatmeal, clear soup, or grits) no longer fit into the well-scrubbed plastic wrapped atmosphere of the $PeRM**K*T where groceries are commodities inscribed with words. Also, with its connotations of success and perseverance, the “grit” hooks on to the “well scrubbed mission” and thus leads us back to the “chasing dirt”, the segregation of whatever does not fit in the picture, and the ambiguity of the line increases. On top, what Mullen is actually showing all over $PeRM**K*T is that if motherwit can’t be bought, it can always be stolen – or appropriated – by the commercialized language. The core of the language of advertising is often found in proverbs and idioms, and, as is also frequently the case with Stein’s work, in the popular wisdom of nursery rhymes and basic figures of speech. This is why it works so well, and why it awakens the feelings of tenderness and recognition (as well as irritation) described by Ngai.

This fact is exploited by Mullen as she re-appropriates the commercial material. The whole refrain of the blues song goes: “If I don’t love you baby, grits ain’t groceries, eggs ain’t poultry and Mona Lisa was a man” which acquires a further meaning when read in relation to $PeRM**K*T and its consistent subtext. In the original lyric, all statements are rhetorical negations, the certainty and matter-of-factness of grits being groceries, eggs being poultry and Mona Lisa not being a man, but a beautiful woman, is supposed to reinforce the “I’s” declaration of love towards the “you.” In $PeRM**K*T for one thing, “grits” are not really groceries, and as Tender Buttons shakes the affiliation of things and words to fixed categories, eggs can be fruits or seafood (oranges and oysters), and as traditional codes of gender are thoroughly queered in both works, it might be less given how Mona Lisa fits into the traditional gender binaries. The last point, of course, recalls Marcel Duchamp’s memorable visualization of the lady’s implied queerness in one of the most famous and funny appropriations in 20th century art history, his assisted ready-made L.H.O.O.Q from 1919. Clearly, what seems certain in the blues song is highly unstable in poetry and appropriation art.

What I should also stress at this point, is how the references to blues music that pop up repeatedly all over both $PeRM**K*T and Trimmings, not to mention Muse & Drudge with its insistent tribute to Billie Holiday, reveal Mullen supplementing the genealogy of experimental poetry that the language poets constructed around Stein and other “odd” modernists as an attack on “official verse culture.” Mullen is evidently relying on the genealogy established by the language poets, but is also extending it with elements
from African-American culture such as jazz and blues, folk culture, and poetry by, among many others, Langston Hughes, Lorenzo Thomas, and Gwendolyn Brooks, whose names she, like the language poets did with Stein, in turn seeks to build into a literary genealogy in her essays. But in her poems, the technique of appropriation always leaves room for critique.

This point is taken further in the final poem of the collection, playing on the children’s song “Skip to My Lou”, and also paying a visit to Black Power activist and chairman of the SNCC (Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee) H. Rap Brown’s autobiography Die Nigger Die (1969) from where the deceptively Stein sounding phrase “That’s why white milk make yellow butter” is lifted. This points towards other parts of the civil rights and new left movements of the 1960s and 1970s than the ones actualized by the language poets.103 Or actually, to prove Zora Neale Hurston’s point that “there is no first source” for anything, Brown probably coined the phrase from the 1956 Bo Diddley blues-single “I’m bad,”104 which may also be an additional source for Mullen. The poem goes:

103 The literary parts of the Black Art movements were clearly among the “separate literary communities” that according to Timothy Yu’s analysis discussed in chapter two, posed a threat of “atomization” to the unity of the new left that he described Ron Silliman as reacting to. In Black Chant, Aldon Nielsen counts no less than twelve American anthologies of poetry exclusively by black writers that came out between 1969 and 1973 (Nielsen 1997: 51) which testifies both to how massively black poets had hitherto been marginalized and kept out of mainstream publishing, and to why the threat of identity political atomization of the field of poetry could be experienced as imminent from the point of view of the language poets.

104 In Bo Diddley’s song the lyric goes: “One more question, honey / before I start to stutter / I can even tell you why / white milk make yellow butter //I’m B-A-D bad ...” (Diddley 1956).
Flies in buttermilk. What a fellowship. That’s why white milk makes yellow butter. Homo means the same. A woman is different. Cream always rises over split milk. Muscle men drink it all in. Awesome teeth and wholesale bones. Our cows are well adjusted. The lost family album keeps saying cheese. Speed readers skim the white space of this galaxy (RPC 96).

The references to H. Rap Brown and Diddley are important because they front the African-American folk cultural practices of the “dozens” and “signifying,” both important traditions to the Black Arts Movement and to Mullen that are celebrated in S*PeRM**K*T. But just like the case is with Mullen’s use of Anglo-American modernism, the tribute is not uncritical. Elsewhere Mullen has criticized part of the 1960s and 1970s Black Arts Movement for its occasional “framing black art as a safely masculine arena for young men” and in calling out the “contamination of white culture” often coarsely “conflating bourgeois culture, homosexuality and Judeo-Christian religion” (Mullen 2012: 69). The currents of sexism, homophobia, and racial segregation that occasionally run through the rhetoric of the black folk tradition, and Rap Brown’s reuse of the tradition in particular, are challenged by the poem. The appropriated phrase is picked from a rhymed sequence, an autobiographical oral poem, praising the sexual capacities and hard-hitting force of the speaker:

Yes, I’m hemp the demp the women’s pimp
Women fight for my delight
I’m a bad motherfucker. Rap the rip-saw, the devil’s brother-‘n-law.
I roam the world I’m known to wander and this .45 is where I get my thunder.
I’m the only man who knows why white milk makes yellow butter.
I know where the lights go when you cut the switch off […] (Brown 1969)

It is included by Brown in his autobiography to illustrate the practice of signifying as a folklore tradition for the linguistic education of young black men, which is actively opposed by the official schooling taking place in the American educational system, an important point to his racially informed political activism via the SNCC. In the context of Mullen’s poem, however, the phrase is made into an explicit statement about mixing up the colors and codes of this world, including the queer ones (“Homo means the same”). The strong contrasts insisted upon by Brown are not negated in Mullen’s poem, yet they do inevitably break down, and opposing fields flood into one another. Milk, a femininely gendered substance, is consumed by “muscle men”, and origins seem to be disturbed as the “lost family album keep saying cheese.” In the poem’s final line (“Speed readers skim the white space of this galaxy”) as in the first poem of the collection, Mullen is calling out her own recycling technique, as she superimposes an image of a textual interface
with that of dairy products, suggesting an intermingling of consumption and reading as a seamless – and white-coded – activity. As before, she is exploiting the punning ambiguity of the line’s key words, where “skim” can refer both to a type of milk and to fast, shallow reading, “white space” recalls the white pages – often used by poets in the Black Arts tradition to call out the white cultural dominance of literary culture105 – and is also the color of milk – and finally, “galaxy” associates to a common milk chocolate bar as well as to the discourse network of print culture (McLuhan’s Gutenberg galaxy) and the home of our solar system that shares its name with another dairy chocolate bar (Milky Way).

The concrete elegance of Mullen’s technique here, sticking with the dairy theme across the various found phrases of the poem’s assemblage, recalls Stein’s collaging with the elements of her shopping list. If Mullen cannot work the dough of the foods like Stein, she can work the words, the language of identity politics, the cultural stereotypes, and the tales of origin. The physical presence of Mullen’s text is in its affiliation with the language of the street, its clever appropriation of popular music and advertising, showing off these discourses’ roots in popular wisdom, linguistic play and humor. Using Steinian syntax as a crowbar, she lets her readers laugh at the mean stream of imperialist capitalist discourse implicit in the adwords that so immediately relate to our everyday life and memory, and hereby makes an alternative use of this language available to us. The media ecology in which Mullen operates is very different from the one in which Stein was working. The modernist image of the experimental poet as “an outsider”, which was still active in early language poetry, even though it had already been given an ironic tint with Stein’s genius pose, has destabilized further in the highly commercialized and consumerized space that Mullen’s speaker is moving around in.

This last point, that there is no complete escape from appropriation as a use of force, points to important nuances at work in $\text{S*PeRM**K*T}$, that are in danger of being glossed over by politically progressive readings of the work as simply critical of patriarchal and white dominance. As we have seen, Mullen’s poetics is very far from the claim to authentic identity that Ron Silliman in “What/Person” set up for minority writers to occupy, but it also differs from the subversive politics of radical poetics working via its disturbance of narrative coherence. The strategy available to Mullen remains the re-appropriation of what has already been appropriated by capitalism, patriarchy, colonialism, and white cultural dominance. In this practice, she is embracing the power and the linguistic delight these appropriated words produce, even in their commercial contexts. This re-appropriation does not imply an attempt to erect a stable and authentic counter-position, as was suggested by Deborah Mix in her reading of “motherwit,” but it implies an embrace of current cultural complexity resulting from appropriation while recognizing that exploitation of minorities remains a part of this practice, a crucial part, which is not to be glossed over by pretending that a free position exists outside of appropriative use of force.

105 See for instance Elizabeth Frost’s reading of Sonia Sanchez Home Coming (Frost 2003: 78-80).
The media situation of Mullen’s prose poems

As I have already suggested, *S*PeRM**K**T is rawer in its collage effect than any other work by Harryette Mullen. Its cuts and jumps are sometimes violent, and its photographic illustrations visually underline the relation to a situationist or agit-prop heritage. Its predecessor *Trimmings* deals with clothes and body and here sexuality, race, and gender identity become more central than the critique of consumer capitalism that resonates in *S*PeRM**K**T. The comparably smoother surface of *Trimmings* gives this work an acuteness and power that makes it a perfect outset for discussions of identity politics. As also suggested, the difference between the two books by Mullen relates back to the sections they collaborate with. In “Food” Stein is more actively using collage techniques than in the more fetishizing “Objects,” which with its hats, umbrellas and petticoats, provides linguistic raw material for *Trimmings*’ collaborative engagement with Stein.

Before I take a closer look at *Trimmings*, I will add some reflections about the genre and material conditions of both works. As briefly discussed in connection with Carl Andre’s rewriting of Stein, it is a generally recognized feature of the prose poem that it defies the generic boundary between poetry and prose and therefore is fundamentally a hybrid. As Amy Robbins claims, “the prose poem […] has retained an aura of subversion and transgression” in all of its modern and postmodern incarnations (Robbins 2014: 101). With reference to Steve McCaffery’s work Marjorie Perloff in *Radical Artifice* suggests that the use of prose poetry in the late 20th century can be connected to the formal exchange between poetry and the language of signs and billboards that has taken place (Perloff 1991: 105). Mullen’s poems confirm this exchange in an even more evident way than those of McCaffery, as the language of billboards and TV jingles as well as modernist poetry run together in their prose surface. But the cultural stream in the poems is also sharply cut up. In both her collections of prose poetry discussed in this chapter, the page is used as a strong compositional unit as each poem is printed on the top of an individual page, leaving most of it blank, unlike in *Tender Buttons* where up to six consecutively printed poems can fit into a page. As Andrew Piper has claimed “the page is the atom of the book” (Piper 2012: 45), and the clean, nearly blank pages of *Trimmings* and *S*PeRM**K**T frame each poem and marks out the physical boundaries between them. The required act of turning the pages forces sharp pauses into the reading and has the ambient poetic effect of resisting fluidity and transparence, marking out the space in which each poem resonates. Just like Andre re-concretized the abstract textuality in Stein’s two prose poems through his situated cuts, Mullen is also, via her use of the blank page, re-fixating what Stein in her prose poem made fluid, and thus applying a media poetic strategy to call attention to the visual materiality of the prose poem.

Mullen herself addresses the hybrid and assembled nature of her prose poems, through her notion of texture: “Writing poetry for me is more a matter of texture than form,” she has stressed, explaining how she uses “multivalent fragments, which produce
a layered effect of multiple and sometimes contradictory semantic meanings and cultural allusions” (Mullen 2012: 16). This attention towards “texture” is media poetic in defying smoothness and seamlessness, in drawing attention to the quality of the surface as its layers are felt. It is similar to the effect that arises from abrupt shifts in medium and in the intermedia aspirations where the borders between different media practices became porous, as in many of the 1960s collaborations. As Matthew Fuller suggests in *Media Ecologies*, diverse media ecologies, that is, media situations where no one medium is in dominance but multiple connections between a host of agents and devices in the ecology can be exploited, often give rise to innovations in aesthetic practices with both social and political impact (Fuller 2005: 13-16). In Mullen’s poetry, as considered above, this effect is not primarily the result of direct transmedia connections like the ones traced by Fuller. By defying the use of a unified voice, yet weaving her work together with linguistic musicality, Mullen is creating an open network structure out of the appropriated bits and pieces of language. Instead of letting in other media than writing, she accentuates the mixed media qualities inherent in the reading situation itself, by outlining both its visual and audial components, and allows multiple familiar voices and discourses to resonate in her readers’ heads and rub against the words of the poem on the page. These discourses can, in the spirit of “hybrid poetics” as framed by Amy Robbins among others, come from all over the cultural spectrum, as the case is with the commercial jingles, blues music, proverbs, images from art history, and words from literary history that are tied together in the media ecology summoned by these poems.

At the same time Mullen’s block-like prose texts bear witness to electronic word processing’s easier approach to appropriating and collaging where any textual material can be picked up and, flexibly, with a few clicks be formatted into the same type face on the word processing interface, as Perloff also describes in *Radical Artifice* (Perloff 1991: 16-19). Accordingly, Mullen’s appropriation techniques do not produce a textural collage effect in the literal sense, achieved by for instance cubist or dada collage where visible cuts and pasting make the fragments rub materially against each other, showing off their torn edges. But they do exhibit some of the “radical artifice” that the flexibility of electronic word processing, in Perloff’s analyses, reinstalls into the assumed transparency of writing in prose (ibid 18). Furthermore, Mullen’s preoccupation with texture is realized in the encounter between this accentuated interface of the writing and the associations in the readers’ mind. The multivalent texture effect comes from the diverse cultural references and sources, times and materialities of the media ecology that rub against each other in the reader’s mind while she is reading.

However, the more radical digital appropriation that the theorists of conceptual poetry are addressing, where being connected to the internet is a basic living condition for anyone working with text and where the intermedial implications for the appropriating artist are more far-reaching as word, image, and sound all exist as digital impulses on the same platform is still a few years off (Goldsmith and Dworkin 2011, Perloff 2010). If they
do bear witness to the introduction of electronic word processing, Mullen’s poems place themselves prior to our current situation in which the printed book is only one material, and, in some sense, arbitrary output for the text that is always electronic before it is anything else (Hayles 2005).

Like Stein was, Mullen is also working with notebooks when gathering poetic material. Even if her prose poems appear block-like and smooth, almost like claustrophobic closed containers as Robbins suggests (Robbins 2014: 108, 114), and are not often showing off their breaks in the textual surface, they in other respects resist the illusory fluidity and ease of digital word processing. As we have seen in S*PeRM**K*T and will also find examples of in Trimmings, they have their own strategies of media poetics working against the invisibility of the interface to reveal the rougher texture of their appropriations. Never glossing over but often displaying the discreet ways in which the interface works, shapes, and transforms the linguistic material it presents as well as the reader interacting with it.

**Trimmings** and the impact of color on perception

*Trimmings* is the book in which the collaborative relation between Stein and Mullen appears most focused, and where the relational space of appearance is felt the strongest. Like S*PeRM**K*T it summons a media ecology of elements that are spliced together in the texture of the poems, but the part played by European modernism and especially Stein is more dominant in this assemblage than in its successor’s. In *Trimmings* Harryette Mullen is setting off from “Objects,” the first section of *Tender Buttons*, in a reflection on the racialization of the language of the feminine. Zooming in on the female wardrobe and commercial beauty ideals complete with all sorts of garments, high heels, and accessories, Mullen shows how racially biased color codes permeate the English language. *Tender Buttons*, and particularly “Objects” is notorious for deconstructing romantic stereotypes of gender and femininity, and in my own readings of the work I have enjoyed Stein’s disturbance of the color codes in the language of the feminine. For many years I have read the book’s frequent play upon the colors of yellow, brown and black as playing out conventional household virtues against erotic and scatological themes, but I never considered that Stein’s investigation of colors in *Tender Buttons* exhibited a general concern with the impact of color on perception that could even include questions of race. But it took only a quick read of *Trimmings* to change this. In the most obviously appropriative poem of the collection Mullen takes the words of Stein’s short poem “A petticoat”

A PETTICOAT.
A light white, a disgrace, an ink spot, a rosy charm (TB 24).

and recycles them one by one, establishing, in her poem, a relation between Stein’s poem 272
and Édouard Manet’s classic painting *Olympia* (1863). Mullen’s poem combines appropriation from Stein with an ekphrasis of Manet’s painting where Stein’s ambiguous language of the disgrace of the ink spot disturbing the charming “pink and whiteness” of the scene, is used to display how the liberated sexuality of the reclining nude is feeding upon the repressed and shapeless black servant, lurking in the background of Manet’s painting, dressed in an unbecoming pink dress.

![Édouard Manet, *Olympia*, 1863. Courtesy of Musée d’Orsay, Paris.](image)

A light white disgraceful sugar looks pink, wears an air, pale compared to shadow standing by. To plump recliner, naked truth lies. Behind her shadow wears her color, arms full of flowers. A rosy charm is pink. And she is ink. The mistress wears no petticoat or leaves. The other in shadow, a large, pink dress (RPC, 11).

Some readers have suggested that Manet’s painting is already present as a subtext in Stein’s poem which of course is a claim that is difficult to prove (Spahr 2001: 105). But its accuracy in relation to Stein’s original intentions is a lot less important than the effect Mullen’s highlighting of this connection has. By merging these two modernist classics, Mullen is suggesting a colonial infrastructure running through the media ecology of European modernism, with regard to its depictions of women and female sexuality. By tying Stein’s poem and Manet’s fifty years’ older painting together in her own text, Mullen is displaying the historical layers in the media ecology making visible the historical circumstances under which Stein was working, where colonialism was an active infrastructure.
of European culture that is also influencing modernist artworks as it is plain to see in Manet’s image. At the same time, her interweaving of the contrasting media of painting and writing is working as a media poetic strategy, calling attention to the compound texture of Mullen’s language.

The element of conflict between the different media is mirrored by the conflict that becomes explicit in the strategy of appropriation. By appropriating Stein’s language and re-contextualizing it in an investigation of colonial power at work, Mullen is setting the scene for a discussion of racialized language and the impact color has on perception in Steins work. As suggested in chapter two, such a discussion has been initiated several times by scholars with a background in cultural studies and postcolonial theory that in later years have taken on the task of reassessing the history of European modernism and uncovering its racist undercurrents and gestures of objectification and exoticization towards non-European bodies.106 It is not a pleasant discussion, nor an easy one, and as already suggested it has frequently turned out to be difficult to conduct it with sufficient complexity. But Trimmings’ critical recycling of Stein’s words and it’s miming of her descriptive yet ambiguous sentences exhibits Stein’s investments in the “pink and white femininity” of English literature with the problematic connotations of colonial history this may suggest, yet at the same time it lets the culturally, medially, and politically disparate elements appropriated and sampled continuously rub against each other, disturbing the seamlessness of the textual surface and the unambiguousness of the textual messages, and in this way manages to simultaneously problematize and appreciate the material complexity of Stein’s language.

Trimming the phenomenology of whiteness

Sara Ahmed has described how what she calls “a phenomenology of whiteness” is active on multiple levels in Western societies (Ahmed 2007). Following the lead of Husserlian phenomenology by way of Frantz Fanon, Ahmed describes whiteness as an orientation that puts certain things within reach, certain objects, but also styles, attitudes, aspirations, techniques. As such whiteness can be regarded as an invisible infrastructure that supplies only certain members of a society, while bypassing others, and as is the habit of infrastructures, according John Durham Peters, draws attention away from itself (Peters 2015: 36). In accordance with this, much of Mullen’s work after 1990 could be described as poetic investigations of the experience of the different availability of different styles,

106 Aldon Nielsen’s Reading Race (1988) and Black Chant (1997) both address Stein’s work at broad. Other studies of importance are especially focused on the reception of Virgil Thomson’s first staging of Four Saints in Three Acts with an all-black cast: the coded queer desire released in the objectifying of the black dancers, the exoticizing of the black singers as unspoiled and naturally capable of singing Stein’s primitivist words, see Allmer and Sears (eds.), 4 saints in 3 acts. A Snapshot of the American Avant-Garde in the 1930s (2017).
attitudes, and cultural forms to women with different racial backgrounds, hereby drawing our attention towards this infrastructure steered by whiteness.

“I feel most colored when I am thrown against a sharp white background” wrote Zora Neale Hurston in *How It Feels to Be Colored Me* (1928) (Hurston 1979: 154), and in *Trimmings* Mullen makes utterly visible the sharp white background against which the body of a black woman can feel to be thrown, even if the whiteness of this background is constantly veiled in everyday cultural discourse, thus hiding the racism from white eyes. A poem framing how cultural discourse is reproducing whiteness as natural, is this one, referring to names of colors for nylons and beauty products (nude, flesh, tan), and displaying how they assume whiteness as the natural point of departure:


In two other poems printed on opposing pages the chastity and fragile innocence of white gowns are juxtaposed to the crude and dangerous sexuality connoted by blackness:

Chaste, apprehended, collared and cuffed. Kept under wraps, as bridal veils visually haze precious, easily torn, gauzy romantic tissues. Thin threads lace into delicate, expensive fabrics woven and unwoven at night by patient spinsters with needles and scissors. Laced in, as fate would have it. Knots and the tiniest holes. Surgical cutting and sewing. Peeking as usual. Skin under lace. A thread, a net effect, a web to sleep in. A white nightgown, girl, child, baby, laced and unlaced. A ruffle, a frill. A pale piece of something, almost made of air (RPC 54).


The image of the web reappears in both poems, but in the first as an apparently innocent “web to sleep in” spun by “spinsters” who serve the chaste bride “patiently” and invisibly (“at night”). The services of the spinsters and the garments they produce however gradually turn more scary, surgical or castrating, as the laced garments are almost sewn into the skin, practically negating the physical body of the women, who are only implicitly present in the poem as they are neither named nor addressed, before caught up in the web and lulled to sleep like the sleeping beauty of the fairytale (which also evolves around the spinning of threads and the disarming of an awakening juvenile sexuality), only to become completely infantilized (“girl, child, baby”) and deprived of any sexual enterprise. The web of white lace does not only catches and contains its female beholders, restricting their path to the narrow road of virtue, but even veils their bodies to make them disappear
or dematerialize in pale indefiniteness.

In contrast, the webs of the second poem are the much more sexually alert “rapt babes” that unlike the ephemeral white girls of the opposing poem, are up front from the very beginning. Aligned with “spiders in black weeds”, they are predators, creating their own web from which they lurk out, and eventually burn up in (self) destructive desire while decadently “selling the sizzle”. If the white version of virginal femininity disappears into thin air, the black femininity seems to go up in flames. Here, the unveiling of racist clichés should be hard to miss, which the majority of scholarly readings of Trimmings also demonstrate. The conventional cultural associations of colors played out in these poems are also investigated in the complex deconstructions of linguistic codes at play in Tender Buttons. But clearly, colors are not used by Stein to build such pointed critiques of racial stereotypes. In Tender Buttons ambiguity is maximized to destabilize stereotypical imagery, while Mullen in the poems above is destabilizing the stereotypical by exposing and mocking it. Or, as Juliana Spahr proposes, in her treatment of color codes in language, Mullen once again uses Stein’s approach in relation to the nouns, “she refuses them by using them” (Spahr 2001: 110).

This actualizes the difficult question of the layered temporalities in the media ecology. Most of the scholarly readings of Trimmings, that deal specifically with the Stein-Mullen-relationship, at one point touch upon a more or less direct juxtaposition of the turn of century racially biased structures of language and culture set at play in Stein’s work against Mullen’s, from a contemporary point of view obviously more progressive position as an African-American poet operating almost eighty years later. Unlike Stein, Mullen is working actively to generate a mongrel poetic tradition of her own, including both classical lyric poetry like Sappho, euro-centered modernism, African-American oral genres of signifying, the dozens, rap, blues music and the literary heritage of the Harlem Renaissance writers, and the Black Arts movement as well as the products of popular culture and advertising of the late capitalist America she grew up in. Such comparisons will end by pointing to Stein’s blindness towards issues regarding race and the privileges she enjoyed as a well-to-do white woman relieved from the drudges of housework and manual labor. This is also the case when Deborah Mix, in her discussion of the aforementioned opposed poems of whiteness and blackness from Trimmings, after recognizing Stein as a predecessor for Mullen’s deconstructive approach to linguistic gender codes, addresses the racist infrastructure and points out that “the ability to critique these constructions [of femininity] has also been differently available to black and white women, which is precisely what Mullen sees, and Stein does not” (Mix 2008: 49). Or they point directly to Stein’s overt racism – for example in relation to her occasional inclusion of abusive vocabulary like “coon” or “nigger” in her experimental word play, as in the phrase from “Dinner” that has puzzled many readers “needless are niggers” (TB 56). What Mullen is ultimately doing, then, according to Mix, in her reuse of Stein, in her signifying upon Tender Buttons, is “trimming the racism out of Stein” (Mix 2008: 46).
My intention is not to argue with Mix in the first case. That Mullen has a stronger racial awareness than Stein is obviously true, given the different historical and cultural starting points at play here. Neither do I want to deny her convincing observation that racially abusive vocabulary such as “nigger” has proven more resistant to Stein’s attempts at shaking and restructuring their cultural impact than have other heavily freighted words, such as “wife” or “rose.” Even in an open-ended playful poem such as “Dinner,” the word “nigger” does stand out with some of the denotative abusiveness, that it held in Stein’s day and still holds today, in contrast to her effective queering of fixed gender positions like husband and wife and essentialist categories such as genius and masterpiece. This can indeed, as Mix points out, be read as an evidence of the strong “power that such frozen linguistic formulations have over American speech – and thought” (Mix 2008: 43).

But in regard to both quotes, it does strike me as a slightly odd manoeuver, to judge Stein’s ignorance of what we today find politically suitable, from a distance of a hundred years. Stein was obviously a product of her time, her upper class, and her bourgeois background, and to display the racialized language and stereotypes at work in her writing is extremely easy, as demonstrated by visual artist Glen Ligon’s picking up two words from Stein’s story “Melanchta” in his sculptural neon light installation, Warm Broad Glow (Negro sunshine), that I will address in a moment.

Contrary to Mix, however, I believe that Mullen’s interest in Stein is not maintained in spite of the “racism” in her language, which Mullen then, in turn can try to “trim out”, but in a certain sense because of it. As is indicated, both by her joking about Hitler discussed in the previous chapter, and by her late writings for children that I will address in the next chapter, Stein respects very few taboos and practically no automatic valorizations and prejudgments about anything. For this reason, many ill-advised comments about all sort of subjects have emerged from her mouth and pen, but this is also why she, in her poetry, can use and abuse practically whatever word in the English language, regardless of its connotations and implications. Because Stein is not one to gloss things over, she has been the subject of much criticism from the academic disciplines of cultural studies, but quite paradoxically, if one follows the logic of political correctness, this quality is also a key to her importance to artists of minority backgrounds in general and Mullen in particular, because this stubborn “dirtiness” of Stein’s actually goes against the one major challenge that racist discourse according to Ahmed’s phenomenological analysis keeps posing to our societies, that is, the continued self-veiling of the phenomenology of whiteness.

The racist structures in societies are most difficult to fight, according to Ahmed, because they become invisible, naturalized. A major point is the strong inclination in societies towards always reestablishing the blindness that keeps the phenomenology of whiteness in power, and ceaselessly, new tools are invented for this. In the landscape of contemporary minority studies for instance, where Ahmed herself is working, she calls attention to what she terms the “institutional desire for good practice” (Ahmed 2007: 64),
the expectation that research on questions of minorities and questions of equality must be useful and constructive. In order to receive funding, you are asked to present examples of good practice to be followed instead of sticking with the discrimination and the structural racism.

From Ahmed’s perspective, little is gained by for instance multicultural trends in advertising, recruitment policies and CSR strategies of major companies that are branding themselves as inclusive and so veiling once again the everyday racism hidden underneath. In fact, they are exploiting the very extraordinariness of the colored face included in their executive staff or in their ad campaign to prove their essential multiculturalism. Racial diversity is used as a token suggesting that racial equality has been achieved, when ironically the very iconicity of images of racial diversity are proving the opposite. The effect of such tokenizing can be conceived as the “merchandising and packaging of racial difference” that Sianne Ngai identifies as also drawing on the trope of cuteness, hereby turning the racialized face or body into a manageable, cute commodity (Ngai 2012: 80). Such disarming of the colored body entails once again a veiling of the phenomenology of whiteness, and what is constantly pressing, from Ahmed’s point of view, is the unveiling of it. She is warning academia to be aware of how a certain kind of political correctness can in fact work opposite to its apparent anti-racist intentions, glossing the norm of whiteness over in a new way.

If we recall once again the debate between Silliman and Scalapino, a similar accusation lurks underneath this discussion, as Scalapino in her letters seemed to be implying that Silliman in his editorial work at *Socialist Review* used her own work and that of other women and minorities poets as tokens, like in Ahmed’s analysis of multicultural recruitment policies. When including these poets, the implicitly white, Anglo-Saxon, and male nature of “the experimental poet” is veiled by a staged diversity that is experienced as patronizing and insincere by the one of the “othered” poets thus included. Following the critical discussions by Elizabeth Frost and Deborah Mix about the abstracted and ungendered Gertrude Stein of language poetry, a similar claim could be made about Stein as a female token poet legitimizing an otherwise all male canon. As Hejinian and Watten’s comment indicated, poets of Mullen’s and younger generations have in many ways been able to explode this paradox in terms of their explorative approach to identity. As I will elaborate on shortly, Mullen is able to do the same in regard to her collaboration with Stein. For all the similarities that exists between Mullen’s writing and some of the writing studied in the previous chapter (such as the extensive parataxis, the removal of the lyrical I, the attention to sonic materiality and punning) it seems evident that the political potential Stein holds for Mullen and other writers with minority background differs fundamentally from the one she holds for the left-wing “radical poetics,” associating her with a general politics of form, but also shying away from Stein’s most controversial and complex parts. In the Black Arts Movement running parallel with the beginning of language poetry for instance Tom
The impact of color on perception in “Objects”

Reading through “Objects” with Mullen’s poems in mind, matters regarding color suddenly turn out to be ubiquitous. The word “color” (or derivations of it) occurs more than thirty times in the sparse amount of text that constitutes the section. Most dominant colors are the red, pink and white of feminine sexuality so often pointed out in readings, but also black, yellow, grey and brown occur frequently. Thirty-eight of the fifty-eight prose poems in “Objects” deal with color or complexion in a direct way – especially dealing with the effects of mixing colors, and the differences that occur from changes of color: from dark to light due to cleaning, rubbing, polishing or from light to dark, due to the cooking or mending of things or to dust or dirt. Especially “dirt” reoccurs in connection with colors like yellow, brown and black and the darkening of other colors. In Tender Buttons the mixing of colors – not white or black but grey, dirty or sloppy – is often invested with negative connotations. These are examined further in this short poem from Trimmings, which piles up an impressive number of synonyms for sloppiness, dirt and drudgery.

Punched in like slopwork. Mild frump and downward drab. Slipshod drudge with chance of dingy morning slog. Tattered shoulders, frayed eyes, a dowdy gray. Frowzy in a slatternly direction (RCP 45).

The first line’s “Punched in like slopwork” invokes underprivileged sweatshop workers as well as the sellers and buyers of low prestige garments. Like the rest of the poems in Trimmings it mimes the parataxis and the apparently descriptive or enumerative mode of most of the sentences in “Objects,” even if its words are approaching a fairly streetwise vernacular that has few literal overlaps with Stein’s 1912 everyday vocabulary. Here, also, the declarative statements are imposed with an implicit grammatical futurity structurally imitating the grammar of a radio weather forecast, an effect subsidized by linguistic conventions of that genre such as indications of probability (“a chance of”) specifications of direction (“downward drab,” “in a slatternly direction”) and moderating adjectives (“mild,” “dingy,” “dowdy”).

In this poem, Mullen is responding to the theme of dirtiness and colors in “Objects” via a Steinian syntax but at the same time, she is drawing upon the vocabulary and speech patterns of contemporary media. By letting her poem follow an unspectacular cliché form of broadcast media, but substituting the nouns and adjectives of meteorology with a vocabulary of cheap and unfashionable clothing, of the dirty rags and the sloppy dress code of the discount retail store, Mullen is superimposing the dreary, sad ambience associated with an unpromising weather report onto the experience of the clothes produced and worn by people less economically fortunate. In this way, the poem is calling attention to a particular version of social class contempt that disguises itself as aesthetic.

Postell and Norman H. Pritchard have engaged in poetic collaborations with Stein (See Nielsen 1997: 82-3 and 141-2).
judgment and furthermore poses as a completely neutral, natural feeling that one can hardly argue with, just like the dislike of gloomy weather. The capitalist exploitation that lurks in all links of the textile industry chain is treated as a natural phenomenon that we can influence as little as we can the weather. Mullen’s poem is calling out the class and race contempt disguised as aesthetic judgement by exploiting Stein’s technique of calling such naturalized perceptions into question.

To return to “Objects,” a poem like “A red stamp” challenges the cultural valorizations of color, like the cultural connection of whiteness to purity and grace, and also has a certain way of sticking with the powers that are invested in color:

A RED STAMP.
If lilies are lily white if they exhaust noise and distance and even dust, if they dusty will dirt a surface that has no extreme grace, if they do this and it is not necessary it is not at all necessary if they do this they need a catalogue (TB 15).

If we recall Lyn Hejinian’s assessment of Tender Buttons as concerned with the realness of realism, with the phenomenology of the perceptions that constitute our sense of the real, this assuming or inquiring of lilies and the impact of their whiteness upon their grace is invested in the ways we enunciate and valorize color and how this affects our interpretation of the real. Or take the opening of “A piece of coffee”:

More of double.
A place in no new table.
A single image is not splendor. Dirty is yellow. A sign of more in not mentioned. A piece of coffee is not a detainer. The resemblance to yellow is dirtier and distincter. The clean mixture is whiter and no coal color, never more coal color than altogether. [...] (TB 13)

Here we see the association of yellow and dirt reappearing many times throughout Tender Buttons and the reference to the mixing of colors. If the line “A sign of more in not mentioned” following right after “Dirty is yellow” seems to address the tendency towards not addressing color and its effects, then the final line stressing whiteness over “coal color” in a “clean mixture” reflects upon the tendency described by Ahmed towards glossing over the differences in a racially mixed society by pretending that non-white bodies blend into the culture’s phenomenology of whiteness, until they for some reason are forced to stand out. In this context, it is interesting to note that even in Steve McCaffery’s 1975 “monolinguistic translation” of “A piece of coffee” he is diligently associating the statements of color in Stein’s text to elements of race. McCaffery’s version opens like this:
call it four cream grains and put in a place you put before a single grain
without imagining a negro met a chinaman and didn’t know it couldn’t
say it
and even when water poured and the grain soaked all up like a sponge
well

it still wasn’t a cup. so it disappeared and the chinaman thought I’ll not
wash for a year.
and he didn’t
and everyone left (McCaffery 1975: 31).

That even McCaffery had the experience that Stein’s use of colors actualized racial ste-
reotypes, translating the line “Dirty is yellow” into a “chinaman” not washing for a year
and most likely associating “negro” from either the “coal color” or the title’s “piece of
coffee” modifies the claim made above that approaching Stein by pairing the material
pleasure of the language to a politics of form also implies a shying away from “dirty
Stein” – yet McCaffery’s translation, with its obvious humorous intention, cannot exactly
be said to stick with or expose the racism either. Although reading it in this context does
make one notice that the norms for depicting race in poetic language changes over time,
also between 1978 and 1991.

I am obviously not suggesting that “A piece of coffee” – or any other text in Tender
Buttons – is explicitly and exclusively “about” race, but when reading Stein informed by
the racial awareness of Harryette Mullen, it becomes clear that the mixing of colors and
its effect on perception are investigated in Tender Buttons with ambiguous connotations.
Even if this by no means makes Stein a post-colonial freedom fighter avant la lettre, it does
show that she is not contributing to the veiling of the phenomenology of whiteness either.

Even though an earlier collaborator like McCaffery responded to Stein’s language
of color in terms of racialization, it took Mullen’s collaboration with Stein to bring it out
in its complexity. In this way, Mullen’s work with Stein’s color codes in S*PeRM**K*T
and Trimmings demonstrates that the mutuality of the collaborative situation is entirely
active, also in the case of appropriative collaboration where the frontiers between the
socio-historical and bodily circumstances of the collaborators are full-drawn. The space
of appearance between Mullen and Stein where they “appear to each other,” as Hannah
Arendt writes, is effective and changes the poiesis of both poets, even though they in
some senses seem to actively negate or oppose each other’s positions. Stein changes
Mullen’s language as Mullen appropriates Stein’s words and adapts her technique of us-
ing by abusing, but Mullen also changes Stein’s words and make her colors stand out by
incorporating her into a more complex media ecology, including other genealogies in art
and culture. This establishes new relations from Stein’s words and into the ecology that
highlight the impact that color and race has on our perception. Something that takes dif-
ferent shapes whether we are in 1912, 1978, 1991, or 2018, but nevertheless should stay
a matter of serious concern, rather than something to obscure.
The mulatto Melanchta - “the stain of miscegenation” in Stein

Importantly, Mullen’s preoccupation with Stein both in *Trimmings*, *S*PeRM**K**T and *Muse & Drudge* that I will touch upon briefly at the end of this section, has another key text than *Tender Buttons*, the one that in Mullen’s own account first opened Stein’s work to her:

For years I had difficulty with Stein. After several unsuccessful attempts at reading her, I found an entry into her work through her story “Melanchta” in *Three Lives*. I was startled by the liberties she took with the literary stereotype of the “tragic mulatto” in “Melanchta,” a possible influence on writers of the 1920s Black Renaissance through their association with Stein’s friend Carl Van Vechten. Richard Wright noted that Stein was a catalyst for his own writing (RCP ix-x).

Stein’s novella “Melanchta”, from *Three Lives*, is set in a colored neighborhood and follows a cast of black characters centering on the tragic life of the “pale mulatto Melanchta.” As discussed in the previous chapter, in connection with Charles Bernstein’s critique of them in “Professing Stein/Stein professing,” many of the post-colonial investigations of Stein’s racism conducted from the 1990s on depart from this text, that does give the reader a glimpse into some of the stereotypes regarding black Americans that were at work in Stein’s day (Nielsen 1988; Gubar 2000).

When one first starts reading “Melanchta” today, many elements will come out shocking. Picking up two words from the text is enough to show how times have changed the perception of some of these elements, like visual artist Glen Ligon actually did in his sculptural neon light-installation *Warm Broad Glow (Negro sunshine)* from 2005. Here, he outlines a recurring expression from the text, which refers to the stereotype of the joyously happy “darkie,” who laughs and sings without a care in the world. The glowing neon pipes of Ligon’s installation are covered in black paint, and so seemingly delivering an artificial version of the highly contradictory phenomenon of “negro sunshine.” The letters are shaped in a retro typewriter font visually calling attention to the age of Stein’s novella, while also directing attention to the already contradictory and unstable position of expressions like this one in Stein’s text, where the “warm broad glow of negro sunshine” is constantly held off, as none of the characters in the story manage to fit into the stereotype.

Ligon has also worked with appropriation of quotes from Zora Neale Hurston including “I feel most colored when I am shown against a sharp white background.” See *Untitled (I Feel Most Colored When I Am Thrown Against A Sharp White Background)* (Ligon 1992).
In a 1999 essay, Harryette Mullen departs from “Melanchta” in her discussion of her own relationship to Stein’s depiction of race. It is well established how part of the plot in “Melanchta” was inspired by autobiographical events in Stein’s own life – an unhappy lesbian love triangle in her college years that she also treated in her very first attempt at writing fiction, the novella *Q.E.D (Things as They Are)* (1903) – and how the main character Melanchta, with her constant “wandering,” is an important predecessor to a lineage of later important Stein characters such as *Ida*. But apart from these aspects, Stein is also clearly preoccupied with matters concerning race in “Melanchta.” For one thing, the principal female characters, Melanchta and Rose, have names fronting questions of color, even if the relation between the characters’ names and their skin tone is ironic: The “pale mulatto” is called “Melanchta” suggesting her melancholic temperament, but rooted in the Greek *melan* – meaning black – and the “dark negro” Rose has the most “pink and white” of all names in Stein’s writings. Mullen observes how references to their racial origins are frequently connected to personality traits in the story, and the way the characters see and describe each other is often informed by differences in their skin tone. Stereotypic phrases such as the “warm broad glow of negro sunshine” are repeated, but also shaken by the characters of the story constantly deviating from them. In her essay, Mullen remains critical of “Melanchta,” which she sees as reproducing the stereotype of “the tragic mulatto,” but she also points out how the concerns of Stein in “Melanchta” are continued in her other work, not least *Tender Buttons*. And how these are exactly the concerns that make Stein’s work so relevant to her own. As Mullen continues, writing about *Tender Buttons*:

> When I encounter in this charmingly disarming text a perplexing ca-
tale of unlikely items that includes “a white bird, a colored mine, a mixed orange, a dog.” I examine it with the critical consciousness of America’s “others” confronted with signs that once decreed, “No Jews, dogs, or niggers allowed.” My ancestors on the black side were corralled together with Gertrude Stein and Rin Tin Tin by the peculiar heterogeneity of this public prohibition. I can certainly imagine Gertrude laughing at its absurdity as she purchased her one-way ticket to Paris; and if I can imagine that, I suppose I can imagine myself laughing at every absurdity I find in “Melanchta.” So I imagine myself laughing – in sunshine or rain (Mullen 2012: 27).

Stein does not in any way articulate a coherent critique of racialization either in Tender Buttons or in “Melanchta.” But for Stein, color, race, origins and the possibilities or limitations these factors can lead to, are all crucial matters of concern that she approached head on. Susan Gubar demonstrates Stein’s unashamed approach to the complexity of race in America in her critical analysis of the depiction in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas of Stein’s encounter with the African-American singer and entertainer Paul Robeson who came to her salon:

Carl Van Vechten sent us quantities of negroes beside there were the negroes of our neighbour Mrs. Regan who had brought Josephine Baker to Paris. Carl sent us Paul Robeson. Paul Robeson interested Gertrude Stein. He knew american values and american life as only one in it but not of it could know them. And yet as soon as any other person came into the room he became definitely a negro. Gertrude Stein did not like hearing him sing spirituals. They do not belong to you any more than anything else, so why claim them, she said. He did not answer (ABT 894).

“Alice’s” assurance that they received “quantities of negroes” in the salon is probably intended to suggest that Stein did not consider herself as one to discriminate against black people. But of course, as Gubar also notes, from a present-day perspective this harshly demonstrates that “the sharp white background” of early 20th century was also very functional in Stein’s salon. Yet Stein’s interest in Robeson demonstrates an attentiveness towards the complex cultural situation he was in as an African-American artist at this time. Robeson’s knowledge of “american values and american life” as someone who was “in it but not of it” pinpoints the paradoxical inside-and-outside feeling, described by W.E.B. Du Bois as the “double consciousness” of African Americans (Mullen 2012: 50). And Stein was most likely able to appreciate this from her own position of exile, of being – oppositely – “of” but not “in” American life. When it comes to her remark about his suddenly becoming “a negro” and the subsequent rejection of his singing of “spirituals,” Gubar notes how this shows a sensibility towards the socially instituted racial stereotypes at work – “her record of Robeson’s racial metamorphosis hints at the complexity of his
situation. When refusing to answer Stein’s question, is the Northern born and trained artist politely acquiescent, mutely resistant, or really in accord with his hostess about the fictitiousness of his relationship to nineteenth-century, Southern spirituals?” (Gubar 2000: 118-119)

Here, as also in “Melanchta,” it is quite clear that Stein’s concern with race is not immediately overlapping with the exoticism and embrace of an African authentic primitivism that can be found all over the American and European avant-garde of her time, from the dadaists’ and cubists’ fascination with African masks to Virgil Thomson and his choreographer Frederick Ashton’s objectifying and romantic racist fascination with the “natural” and “primitive” voices and bodies of the black performers they chose for the production of *Four Saints in Three Acts* (Barg 2017: 64-81). As in so many other cases, Stein is able to call the bluff, also of the romanticized “negro” shaped by the expectations of his white audience (he is a black man, so he should sing “negro spirituals”), which adds an empathetic sadness to the likewise ignorant and condescending statement with which “Alice” finishes the anecdote about Robeson’s visit: “Gertrude Stein concluded that negroes were not suffering from persecution, they were suffering from nothingness” (ABT 894). It seems that the many ways that Stein herself in her own time experienced being infantilized, exoticized and described as especially intuitive, primitive, or natural, in her perception resembled the discourse with which many of her friends and admirers treated the black Americans they were also clearly fascinated with. Thus, even if she was in many ways in complete sync with the highly racist historical situation in which she lived, Stein seems closer than many of her contemporaries to a conception of racial identity as a “social, cultural and discursive formation” in the way Mullen describes it, rather than an essential one (Mullen 2012: 68).

When the contemporary experimental poetry and performance art group The Black Took Collective picked their name from the heading of the penultimate poem in *Tender Buttons*’ “Objects” – “It was black, black took”– they were responding to exactly this complexity in Stein’s work. The still productive collective was started in 1999 by the three African-American poets Duriel Harris, Ronaldo Wilson and Dawn Lundy Martin. Looking back on the founding, Martin explains how the collective wanted to launch “a conversation about how language can trap us into certain ways of knowing ourselves and the world. These familiar languages, the tropes of blackness, were grating upon us, I think, which was a kind of catalyst for the meeting [that started the collective].” (Black Took Collective 2012: 212) About Stein’s line Martin elaborates somewhat along similar lines as Stein in her controversial plea about the “negroes” suffering from “nothingness,” but also on the counterstrategies of reappropriation such a condition can spur:

“It was black, black took.” Had been thinking of the “idea of blackness,” of the constructed body place, of lostness. It’s a reversal, maybe meaning black taken. What has been taken, what will be taken back black” (ibid. 218).
From a perspective of racial awareness Stein’s line resonates with the impact of colors, specifically black, as racially coded, in accordance with the other instances from *Tender Buttons* already described. A threatening connotation is added to “black,” suggesting perhaps a theft conducted by “black.” Yet a certain potency and energy is also invested in it, even if it comes nowhere near the familiar tropes of blackness that Martin expresses the desire to disrupt. This combination of weird ambiguity, unpleasant racist connotations and potency is exactly what made the group pick up Stein’s line to frame their activities.

In a video interview with Elizabeth Hoover, Martin explains the collective’s choice of name with the “satirical, slippery kind of intertextuality going on in the conversation about race” that they are having with Stein, who in Martin’s words “some think of as a controversial figure, when it comes to the way she represented raced bodies” – which is exactly what she gives as their first reason for choosing the name with objective of producing that gap of uncomfortable uncertainty that satire lives on (Hoover 2015). The collective produces experimental and satirical works of video, poetry, and performance investigating race and gender, challenging the radical adherence to tradition that they had experienced as a constraint in black poetics and, like the “dirty Stein” called out by Mullen, they ponder in the controversial, dirty, uncomfortable places in their disruptions of monolithic conceptions of black identity.109

Racialization as a highly complex “social, cultural and discursive formation” matters in Stein’s work because such mechanisms also mattered for herself, as she had her own investments in marginality. Her Jewishness, lesbianism, and femininity put her in the margins of the gentile, heterosexual and male context of the literary genius in which she wanted to be seen. As discussed earlier, this situation made strategies of disidentification crucial to Stein’s author performance. Notably, Stein did not aspire to be an important “female writer,” “Jewish writer,” or “lesbian writer.” She wanted to be a “writer” – and preferably the only writer worth mentioning. Her practice remains relevant to any writer concerned with identity politics, because she refuses to take the place assigned to her by these discourses. By insisting on her position as a male genius in her biographical performance and in meditations and lectures, she is exhibiting the phenomenology of maleness, heterosexuality, and gentile whiteness that is implicit in the category of the literary genius.

In a certain sense, Stein’s mission of becoming a writer without prefixes of identity was accomplished in the reception formed by the formalist approach and language poetry discussed in chapter two. The image of Stein as one of “our ‘fathers’” expressed by Gre- nier and of her writing as decontextualized, working primarily to break down the process

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109 Elizabeth Hoover’s article “Revolutionary poetics: Dawn Lundy Martin on experimentation, collaboration, and the university” frames the quoted video interview with Dawn Lundy Martin of the Black Took Collective. See especially the final part “Innovation as Necessity” for Martin’s account of the collective’s choice of name. In the group’s over one hour long performance at Lannan Center for Poetics and Social Practice (2013) they return to some of the most chockingly racist yet weirdly slithering quotes from Stein’s “Melanchta” addressing the “negro” identity of various characters, that are projected onto screens behind the performance.
of signification, that is fronted, for instance by Bernstein in *A Poetics*, allows Stein to enter the narrow category of the experimental poet. However, as I have elaborated further upon in this chapter, this happened at the cost of dealing with important parts of her work, such as her strong preoccupation with matters of color, race and nationality, which devoted Stein readers like Bernstein and Perloff have tended to evade.

Just like we observed it with some of the language poets, in her collaboration with Stein Mullen is also operating at the level of the persona, but contrary to some of them she is embracing the historical and bodily distance between Stein and herself as she performs this gesture. Like the disidentification between Jean-Michel Basquiat and Andy Warhol departing from the queerness, but also from the racism in Warhol’s work, Mullen in the previously quoted passage is performing her own disidentification with Stein via Stein’s marginality as Jewish, but also looking her racism straight in the eye, as she imagines “Gertrude laughing as she purchased her one-way ticket to Paris” and then imagines herself doing the same “in sunshine or rain.”

**WomEnhouse and future communities**

In her appropriative Stein reception Harryette Mullen is challenging the abstracted version of Stein, reclaiming a Stein with body, investments, and limitations. Furthermore, she is challenging the split between experimental writing and writing by minority writers, present in the 1970s and 1980s literary avant-garde discourse discussed in chapter two. When Mullen picks up from *Tender Buttons*, she is reopening Stein’s work for new collaborations and stressing the political and performative potential in Stein’s experiments while putting them to use in her own situation as marginalized. As Elizabeth Frost has observed, Mullen is pushing Stein’s language back to an awareness of the social formation of identity, as well as the complex relationships in American culture among race, sexuality, and economic privilege, and in this manner setting up new poetical and political relations across time (Frost 2003: 141).

Although Mullen, to my knowledge, is the only one of the participants in the pioneer feminist internet intervention *WomEnhouse* (1996) who is immediately referring to Stein in her discussion of the project, the overall concept has an unmistakable *Tender Buttons* touch to it. And not chiefly because it also deals with a domestic space that is femininely coded. From its punning name – suggesting womb ‘n house – to its fundamental idea of turning innate, hard constructions into living, soft body parts and then merging the two dimensions in a new medium that is neither a house nor a body but a “homepage” (as one said in the 1990s) it is recalling Stein’s classic work. Likewise, the tender buttons of *Tender Buttons* are not shirt buttons, plant buddings or nipples but merge these elements as poems in a book. The sonic and structural proximity between “room” and “womb” that the project builds on, is also explored heavily in the “Enclosed” part of Tracie Morris’
“Handholding with Stein” and suggests a connection to the predominantly feminist tradition of body art of the 1970 to which Stein has also been a significant reference. In several of the contributions to the “house,” the cyber-feminism of Donna Haraway with its exploration of a compound cyborg female body is brought in to join the feminism of body and performance art with the digital technologies explored in the of the internet art project.

_WomEnhouse_ was curated by the feminist performance scholar Amelia Jones, among others, and was, according to Mullen, conceived as “a collaborative feminist project to use the internet as a tool for constructing a virtual _WomEnhouse_, as previous feminist artists had used carpentry tools and construction equipment to renovate the original Womanhouse in Los Angeles.” It involved a number of women artists, writers, and scholars in the construction of this virtual space, and was at the same time meant to educate the participants in the new possibilities of digital art production as an intervention into the high degree of male dominance in early cyberspace.

The original site was online from 1996 until 2003. Even if the site is fairly rudimentary compared to the virtual spaces that can be experienced online today (from gaming environments over commercial spaces to digital art projects), it is interesting to compare _WomEnhouse_ to the Electronic Poetry Center or other of the language poets’ early utilizations of the internet as a platform for distributing art and poetry, as it is evidently building on a much more ambient conception of cyberspace. Even today, most of the sites that language poets were involved in, are structured more like archives or libraries than around a virtual architectural spatiality, and thus they have transitioned smoothly from alternative platforms into an institutionally endorsed infrastructure for the distribution of poetry. In comparison, a project like _WomEnhouse_ is much less viable in terms of estab-


111 Email from Haryette Mullen to the author, 16.07.2015

112 The original URL &lt;www cmp ucr edu/womenhouse/&gt; is no longer active. However, an incomplete documentation dummy of the site was launched 2016. Not all functionalities and links are working but it is possible to retrieve the majority of the “Porch” piece. A partial description of the site as it functioned in 1996 can be found in “A Visit to _WomEnhouse_” (Morton 1997).
lishing lasting infrastructure, but also more media poetic and playful in its conception. The multimodal potential of the digital interface is integrated into its conception along with the collaborative principle, as all individual pieces are the results of smaller collaborations involving both visual and verbal elements, often closely integrated. Also, there is a clear ambition to create a virtual imitation of three-dimensional space via the interactive and dynamic structure of linking introduced by the web. Here, the user could explore the different rooms and body parts, penetrate the hymen and other liminal spaces and zoom in and click around the “house” and “womb” creating her own path, without experiencing her progression through the structure as predetermined, linear or consecutive.\textsuperscript{113}

The contribution of Mullen and Min do not engage directly with Stein’s words in “Rooms,” but is concerned with the continuum from the feelings of homelessness and belonging that are implied in Stein’s domestic universe to negative affects of disturbance and anxiety experienced by those excluded from this universe. In an interview with Caroline Crumpacker from 2014 Mullen recalls:

I’d originally intended to write a third book, corresponding to Stein’s “Rooms,” that would explore ideas about home and homelessness. Some of those ideas went into a collaborative project with Yong Soon Min for the “Porch” of the Womenhouse web project, which might be considered the third part of the trilogy responding to Stein’s poems about an interior domestic space of feminized objects (Crumpacker 2014).

As Juliana Spahr has stressed, it is unclear when and where exactly the domestic space of Tender Buttons is located, yet it is most certainly “a bourgeois interior” (Spahr 2014: 110). In “Porch,” Min’s images focus on home security and surveillance systems in wealthy LA communities that in a contemporary setting are making possible a secluded life in the bourgeois home, while Mullen’s satirical poems reflect aggression towards intruders to the home as well as the country, and depict the tendency to exoticize ethnic food culture while marginalizing the people cooking it. As a response to “Rooms,” “Porch” radicalizes the gesture towards Stein that Mullen performs in her poetry books, as it takes the decontextualized and isolated rhythm of domesticity so celebrated in Stein’s work and re-politicizes it by directly addressing how the (white) privileged experience of domestic coziness and seclusion is feeding on an aggressive exclusion of others, leading to homelessness and segregation. In a sense, the piece makes palpable how, to Paul Robeson, a visit to Stein’s home in Paris, the space that readers most often imagine as the site of Tender Button’s interior, was an experience of the “sharp white background” at work, and not one of a secluded haven.

On a material level, Mullen and Min’s piece is consciously working with texture

\textsuperscript{113} It is always worth noting that the term interactive is problematic, and that the participatory freedom of the website clicker is in no way automatically greater than that of the reader of a poetry collection or a comic book, just like the concept of liveness is inevitable to mediatization (see Auslander 1999).
and tactility. The simplistic language in the poems, also using mechanical techniques of alphabetization that Mullen explored in *Sleeping with the Dictionary*, in which the poem “Mantra for a Classless Society” was later included, and the images’ exploration of the simplistic iconicity of traffic and warning signs create a textural interweaving of the means of the two media. The piece is insistently dwelling on the borderline between inside and outside, between word and image, between screen and paper, as in the image of the menu note attached to the doorknob on the virtual “Porch” on which one could zoom in to read on screen Mullen’s poem “It’s not about the menu.” This resting in a liminal space, both in form and content, makes palpable the very different life rhythms of the included and the excluded in contemporary society.

All the addressed examples of Mullen’s work follow up on Stein by making a self-conscious attack on the invisible whiteness of the category of the experimental writer, without trying to purge Stein. The unveiling of the phenomenology of whiteness is all about showing Zora Neale Hurston’s “sharp white background” as an infrastructure at work, distributing options unfairly, even in a politically conscious category of identity such as experimental writer. In her essay, Hurston addresses the desire to be able to be human and an individual before being “colored,” and along similar lines, Harryette Mulllen does not accept the position assigned to her as a “minority writer” nor does she settle with the shift of audience and literary scene that occurred when she first started working within an experimental framework. She insists that she is equally an experimental and African-American writer and proves that there is a strong coherence between traditions made out as separate.

In another essay, “Imagining the Unimagined Reader: Writing to the Unborn and Including the Excluded,” Mullen describes the reader community she is trying to build in her own poetry, fusing the experimental avant-garde poetics that has been reserved for male, white European eyes with the folk culture of African-American communities, commercial and popular culture and the poetic traditions of black America. Mullen reflects on the historical exclusions of people of color from readership and sees herself as a reader Stein did not imagine when she wrote, but whom she never the less left a space for, since Stein herself, due to her experimentalism and her investments in marginality, was a writer only just imaginable in her own day. In a similar way Mullen is creating a writer’s position for herself that was challenging to imagine for the experimental poetry community of the early 1990s where she first took up her work on *Tender Buttons*, and is equally concerned about her own future readership: “I try to leave room for the unknown readers I can only imagine” (Mullen 2012: 8).
This attentiveness recalls Lyn Hejinian’s call for a communicative silence in “Who is Speaking?” yet it also expands from Hejinian’s thoughts. In Hejinian’s account, the writing of “women and other “others” […] has been regarded as trivial” and therefore has not been met by the “ready silence” that allows it to resonate (Hejinian 2000: 37). Yet, Mullen’s concern here springs from her own experience of reading “words that were never meant for me, or anyone like me – words that exclude me, or anyone like me, as a possible reader” (Mullen 2012: 3). Hence, it is not in the first place a concern for the marginalized writer not met by the “ready silence” of listening, but for those who are kept off our porches by the neighborhood watch signs, those who are not implied as readers, those not even supposed to listen. In her humble concern for possible future readers, imagined as “the offspring of an illiterate woman” (ibid. 4), Mullen is adding new substance to Stein’s recommendation to be “talking and listening at the same time.”

My marginality as a black artist teaches me important lessons for my survival and integrity as an aesthetic innovator; and certainly my experience crossing boundaries as a participant-observer in the “mysterious” avant-garde has provided me with additional models, resources, alliances and readers in my development as an African American artist whose work struggles to overcome aesthetic apartheid (Mullen 2012: 12).
In *Muse & Drudge*, the first poetry collection in which Mullen was outspoken about overcoming this “aesthetic apartheid,” the appropriations from Stein are not a defining feature as in the two predecessors. But here and there references pop up and they are characterized by their active embrace of the most “improper” aspects of Stein. In one richly alliterative quatrain, approaching nonsense verse or scat singing in its dominant rhythm and sound structure, Mullen draws out the black character that Stein has been most vigorously criticized for, Rose Johnson: “the sullen, childish, cowardly, black Rose” of “Melanchta.” In the story, the dark-skinned Rose is described as both stupid and lazy, qualities that are repeatedly linked to her skin color in accordance with racial stereotypes from the discourse of slavery. But the feature most often repeated in connection to Rose is “sullen.” In the first stanza of this poem Mullen is punning on her own name Harryette Rommell Mullen in the manner of Shakespeare in his sonnets, but she mixes in an unmistakable reference to Rose Johnson:

marry at a hotel, annul’em  
nary hep male rose sullen  
let alley roam, yell melon  
dull normal fellow hammers omelette (RPC 162)

In her essay about “Melanchta” Mullen joins the general and justified critique of the racist implications of the character Rose Johnson. She addresses how the name Rose evokes color, but abstains from commenting upon the massive investments in the rose that happen later in Stein’s oeuvre. The rose ended up as a crucial part of Stein’s author’s signature, most notoriously of course, when she, in collaboration with Alice B. Toklas made the famous excerpt from “Sacred Emily”: “rose is a rose is a rose is rose” into a ring and used it on her stationery. In this stanza, Mullen is tying her own signature closely to Stein’s signature rose, but instead of the “rosy charm” of *Tender Buttons* or the Dickinsonian rose of “Sacred Emily,” she picks out the first rose in Stein’s writing, the rose in its initial racist incarnation: the figure of Rose Johnson.

Mullen shares her situationist heritage and direct approach to the political context of poetry with other Stein affiliated poets of what one could call the post-language generation, such as Juliana Spahr and Joshua Clover, and to a certain extent Lisa Robertson, who have assumed a more directly activist “revolutionary” position than the language poets, both in relation to the writing of openly agitating political poetry, in relation to the establishment of literary infrastructure designed in accordance with an anarchist political ambition, and in relation to the involved poets’ direct engagement in popular political movements such as Occupy, climate-change movements and #Black Lives Matter.114 But

like Tracie Morris, Glen Ligon, The Black Took Collective and other artists with a minority background Mullen stands out in the context of the many writers who also “claim [Stein] as an ancestor” (Mullen 2012: 26), because she actively appropriates and uses exactly the parts of Stein that could be called “the dirty Stein” – the Stein that from a contemporary point of view is preposterous or even racist, but that is also, I argue, defying the sort of political correctness implicitly veiling the phenomenology of whiteness that Ahmed is warning against. In such collaborative engagements with Stein, Stein’s historical racism can be used to call out other racisms. Thus, judging Stein by contemporary political standards is not wrong, but it may not always be the most interesting approach to her work and may also miss parts of her potential in the struggle against the constant re-veiling addressed by Ahmed’s phenomenology of whiteness. What Mullen is doing, then, is not actually “trimming the racism out of Stein,” but rather recycling Stein’s racism as a form of racial awareness, which is also a weapon against the false colorblindness of the discourse of political correctness and institutional good practice.

Mullen’s choice of technique, the appropriative collaboration that lays bare the clashes and conflicts between the different socio-historical and bodily positions of the collaborators, is crucial for her accomplishments. So far, I have studied several strategies in the collaborative engagement with Stein’s work. A media poetics concerned with making tangible the interface of sequences of printed marks organized on flat pages was played out in many of the examples from the 1960s, pushing the collaborative pieces towards an ambient space where the borders between writing and music, writing and image, writing and theatre and writing and an unframed social exchange or collaborative impulse became porous. Many collaborations realized in language poetry were more mono-medial in their focus and brought out the radical possibilities for poetry as textual materiality that Stein’s language implies and engrafted her work into an institutional infrastructure of poetry that has made it more readily available to Mullen as well as later readers. The collaboration by impersonation performed by Bernstein worked by identification rather than disidentification, in the sense that, rather than pointing out a difference it was acting out a likeness towards Stein. I propose the concept of appropriation to frame how Mullen’s collaboration – involving a fluctuation between identification and disidentification with Stein – does not imply the same uncritical embrace of Stein as the impersonation did, but, on the other hand, releases some of the subversive potential that Bernstein and other language poets insistently see in Stein.

All practices mentioned above are equally collaborative, and all apply media poetics and a degree of ambient poetics, but their approach to the conflictual potential in collaboration is very different. What is particular about Mullen is that she is reclaiming Stein through recycling techniques, and by sticking with the parts only few others are comfortable with.

son’s collaborative stances towards Stein are also extensive and politically attentive and includes works such as *The Weather* (2001), *R’s Boat* (2010), *Occasional Works and Seven Walks from the Office for Soft Architecture* (2010), *Nilling* (2012).
As Ahmed claims, most of us have a cultural inclination to gloss over racial inequalities and atrocities, and I am suggesting that Mullen, Morris and many others keep returning to Stein because, rather unusually – not just for her own historical period, but perhaps even more for our time – she is not set on this glossing over. And this quality is inseparable from the more or less “dirty” cultural investments that made her the victim of an identity political “witch hunt” that in turn becomes hard to isolate from her deeply contradictory apolitical stance during World War II. But contrary to claims that I will be looking more into in the next chapter, Stein did not neglect or run from differences. She stuck with them. Hence, the piece that is most commonly regarded as her first serious accomplishment as an experimental writer, is a long, complicated story about black Americans in which color is both constructed, deconstructed, reconstructed and really insisted upon, and for the rest of her career she keeps working with the color codes that run through our language and culture, and she keeps trying to stir powerful racialized and abusive language by punning and decontextualizing it even if some words have proven more or less resistant to this work. This quality is stronger than we are able to grasp if we focus on her obvious failure to comply with present day standards of political correctness.
CHAPTER 4:

THE INFRASTRUCTURES OF READING:
STEIN AND AMBIENT POETICS

*The Making of Americans* is the title of a brief thirty-two-page booklet published in 2012 by American conceptual poet Holly Melgard on the online platform Throllthread Press of which she is coeditor. In the foreword, Melgard writes:

NOW ‘there is no such thing as repetition’ in *The Making of Americans*, because I deleted it. Herein, every word and punctuation mark is retained according to its first (and hence last) appearance in Gertrude Stein’s 925-page edition of the book (Melgard 2012).

Melgard has taken Stein’s claim from “Portraits and Repetition” – that there is no such thing as repetition – quite literally, and simply removed every reoccurring word or mark in Stein’s massive and infamously “unreadable” book. The result is certainly no more readable than Stein’s original “long book,” as syntax naturally becomes more and more distorted and elliptical as the text progresses, and the trimming down of Stein’s original text becomes more extensive. For instance, the approximately 200-page long “Martha Hersland” chapter appearing about one third of the way into Stein’s book amounts to four closely written pages in Melgard’s piece, whereas both of the book’s final chapters can fit into about half a page. Thus, Melgard’s last page, corresponding to pages 783-925 in Stein’s original, consists of sixty-six words. By this time, it seems, adverbs and adjectives are the word categories that leave most room for variation:

drearily joyously boisterously despondingly fragmentarily roughly energetically repeatedly funnily hesitatingly dreamily doubtfully tilling boastingly delightfully touchingly quaintly flatly transparent trunk tenderly uninteresting daintily ruined jumping landing distance desolating jumped jump frighten exchanging explanations astonishes doubtful quarrelsome talkative breathless thank toss tossed rhythm regularity struck fully minding uninterested contradicting smelled gloominess noise noises disgust displease unlike buried everyday expository recognising regretted HISTORY A FAMILY’S PROGRESS similar similarly (Melgard 2012: 24)
Yet, this final list of descriptive vocabulary does exhibit an impressive variation. Looking over Melgard’s piece in total, the reader is confronted with an impressively rich and varied selection of English language. The piece thus acts as a comment on the infinitely repeated claims in Stein’s reception about the enervatingly limited vocabulary of her early repetitive prose style, but also highlights the virtuosity of combinatorics required to keep about twenty pages worth of vocabulary going and going for almost a thousand dense pages by continuously changing the combination of the elements.

Obviously, Melgard’s piece has been constructed with the help of computer software, running Stein’s text through an algorithm to remove all repeated word units, distinguishing between lower and upper case letters as indicated by the final section’s inclusion of the better part of Stein’s last chapter heading (“HISTORY OF A FAMILY’S PROGRESS”, losing only the “OF” that had already occurred in the work’s main title). Thus, in a sense, it goes along with the premise of “unreadability”, subjecting Stein’s novel to a type of processing other than human reading, and in turn inclining its own reader to adapt other strategies of reading than the close reading normally connected with modernist literature, just as Melgard herself is adapting other strategies than what we would normally consider creative writing:

With the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography. By that, I mean that writing has encountered a situation similar to that of painting upon the invention of photography, a technology so much better at doing what the art form had been trying to do that, to survive, the field had to alter its course radically. If photography was striving for sharp focus, painting was forced to go soft, hence impressionism. Faced with an unprecedented amount of available digital text, writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance (Goldsmith 2011a: xvii).

This is conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith’s characterization of the media situation that he sees as the background for poetic practices like Melgard’s and countless other conceptual approaches to literature that have thrived in the past few decades. In *The Making of Americans*, Stein is famously set on telling the story of “everyone who ever was or is or will be living,” frankly, an exhausting prospect for writer and reader alike, and thus the present environment of textual abundance that Goldsmith depicts can be said to have been anticipated by Stein’s novel, making it a fit choice for Melgard’s conceptual intervention.115 Goldsmith’s analogy that with the internet writing has met its “photography” may be cutting some corners, but it does give a pretty accurate snapshot of some important conditions in the media ecology of the works I will address in this chapter. If Harryette Mullen’s appropriation poetry was responding to a situation of abundance experienced in the 1990s, mainly on the basis of other media like television and advertising that ap-

115 For a discussion of *The Making of Americans* in relation to the idea of information overload, see Stephens 2015.
peared like a massive spectacle occupying daily life, then the media situation of writing two decades later must be characterized as an acceleration of this situation to the point where Mullen’s politically acute response of charging the act of appropriation itself with political potential would appear futile to many artists.

If the introduction of electronic word processing in the 1990s was starting to smooth out the acts of copying and pasting text, then appropriating, stealing, sharing and copying from all the different modalities that are now integrated into the one digital interface of the world wide web is becoming the air we all breathe. Thus, the picture of the politics of dominance and struggle implied in these operations is becoming somewhat muddier. Goldsmith proposes that it is relatively new for literature as an art form to find itself enmeshed in this chaos that painting first faced some 150 years ago. As Marjorie Perloff has put it, “ Appropriation, citation, copying, reproduction – these have been central to the visual arts for decades […] In the poetry world, however, the demand for original expression dies hard: we expect our poets to produce words, phrases, images, and ironic locutions that we have never heard before” (Perloff 2010: 23). Yet, as N. Katherine Hayles, among many others, has suggested, something radical is happening to the media ecology of literature with the rise of digital technology. Hayles points to the fact that the life of a book as a paper bound object now appears so much briefer and more arbitrary than it used to. Just a few years back, the printed book could, without objection, be considered the final output of a work of literature. Now, the text is practically always digital before it is anything else, and print is just one of many operations that we can perform with the text file that constitutes a literary work (Hayles 2005). Whether it is printed or not, the text will lead a long and variable existence in the computer, and every work of art and literature is disseminated to its audience via a myriad of remediations and bifurcations, from social media, blogs and live situations controlled by its authors or instigators to all sorts of mentioning, critique, discussing, copying, and sharing that will sometimes even “go viral” and explode beyond any individual’s control. But depending on the algorithms of the search engines, all these bifurcations will remain connected. They are likely to pop up in the same Google search, and the internal hierarchy between them (such as, which hits are ranked at the top of the search) will follow patterns that often appear to be beyond immediate human command. These conditions naturally affect literary output and the possible ways in which it can meet a human reader or be subjected to other types of processing, as Holly Melgard’s conceptual piece demonstrates.

Although we are asked to let go of fundamental ideas like artistic originality and personal expression, it would seem that this new eclectic situation of art and literature is immensely fertile and diverse, exploding with new forms of writing and especially new ways of distributing it – at least as it was approached by Nicholas Bourriaud in his description of the postproductive mode discussed in the previous chapter, and as it is framed by Goldsmith and other theorists of conceptual poetry who apply terms like “unoriginal genius” (Perloff 2010), “against expression” (Dworkin 2010) and “plagiarism” (Lethem
to describe the new ways of writing. However, in the context of this study a number of questions creep up. What exactly happens to collaborative poetics in a media ecology where eclecticism, it seems, is both an all dominant technique and an ideology? As we shall see in the following, with such a massive predominance of postproductive techniques, a host of other temporally dispersed collaborators beside Stein are often added to the collaborative situation, which makes the bigger picture somewhat more complex. And how is agency distributed in the collaborative situation between Stein and the artist engaging with her work when originality is discarded and the idea of an autonomous source or originator of an artwork is problematized even more persistently than it was in the artistic communities of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s and 1990s?

The political implications of art and poetry and the relationship between Stein’s poetics and her politics are once again at stake. The post-media revolution that Felix Guattari called for certainly addressed a situation of media ubiquity like the present, and involved an active abuse of media or using them against the grain to renegotiate the way these media relate to the mental, social and environmental ecologies, and make alternative forms of subjectivation possible (Guattari 2009). The works I will look at in this chapter are all activating the outskirts of the media ecology in question, making tangible entailed processes that are normally below the reach of our attention. In this chapter, I will be looking at artworks that become critical and engaged in various ways as they try to distribute access to aspects of the media ecology that are normally considered beyond our control and to affect the infrastructures governing our engagement with art and literature.

If Holly Melgard’s work is produced by computational means, it is still very human in its conceptual design as it directs our attention to possible ways of reading. This is even more true for the other works I will take up in this chapter. All of them are postproductive in a more radicalized sense than the case was with the works by Harryette Mullen examined in the previous chapter. In these works, the harsh appropriation used by Mullen gives way to a more frictionless practice of copying, borrowing, and assemblage with less direct authorial aftercare. As we shall see, the assemblages produced appear more multimodal even in the cases where the works superficially resemble regular paper-borne poetry collections from small presses in the ‘avant-garde tradition.’

The chapter begins with Gertrude Stein’s own exploration of the outskirts of her medium. I will illustrate this via her theatrical and ambient contributions to modernist print history and via her late writings for children in which she conducts a fundamental investigation of the anthropotechnics of reading and its ties to learning and disciplining. These questions regarding violence and human agency in the face of a threatening historical horizon lead back to the intricate relationship between Stein’s poetics and her politics and the way this played out in the last decade of her life, as already discussed in chapter two. As we shall see, it has taken the collaborative engagement of German stage director and composer Heiner Goebbels to release in its full complexity the political potential in
Stein’s ambient poetics and her circular conception of history that in later years has been widely accused of taking a problematic apolitical stance in the face of the politically acute situation of World War II in which it was articulated. From Goebbels’ work, with its stressing of audience autonomy, I will return to poetry as I look at the multifariously collaborative piece *A Prank of Georges* by Abigail Lang and Thalia Field, which evolves both the anthropotechnics and the theatricality implied in Stein’s work into a machine that activates multiple layers of Stein’s media ecology in its production and disturbance of stable subject positions. Finally, I will consider the work of American poet Tan Lin, who establishes a relation to Gertrude Stein in his elaboration of an ambient poetics to explore the outskirts of reading’s infrastructure and to occupy and activate parts of literature’s media ecology that are generally not considered to be the subject of authorial or readerly control, or even influence, and therefore of either secondary or no significance to the literary object.

**I. READING, HOMINIZATION AND THE POLITICS OF AMBIENCE**

When we approach a book, any book, the poet Tan Lin claims, the better part of the reading has already taken place before we even open it, because all the circumstances surrounding it, its metadata, paratext, and framing, have already determined how we will engage with it. As I will develop in the first part of this chapter, this is a fact that Gertrude Stein seemed surprisingly aware of. Her work with the codex in the latter part of her career shows her asking multiple questions about the framing or staging of her work as book-bound. As has been well established in media history, the processes of reading and writing are fundamental components in producing what we think of as a person (Kittler 1990). Furthermore, in the latter part of her life, when she was experiencing the restrictions of liberty imposed on her by a raging war, Stein began exploring these processes in new ways, bringing out both their collaborative elements and their inevitable connections to disciplining, violence, and brutality.

Reflecting on such instances of disciplining in all communication, also in staged performance, Heiner Goebbels suggests that the last thing we need right now is “anymore theater that tells us what to think.” Rather, “we need theater or concerts or performing arts which trust in our own option to judge” (Oteri 2011). Artworks that communicate unambiguous political judgements will only work as new types of disciplining. To Goebbels, “politics is nothing that can be presented or represented from stage. It’s only something which can happen within the audience by using the words and images and sounds and performance of a piece” (Barker 2010). Thus, although the political action is left outside the artwork itself, the work is still concerned with such action. As we shall see, Goebbels finds collaborating with Stein helpful in his attempt to establish such spaces in which the
reader or spectator is in charge of her own thinking. Led on by Stein’s ambient poetics, Goebbels is applying postproductive and ambient strategies to make palpable assumptions and patterns of thought that we are not used to question, and thus Goebbels’ performative and musical collaborations with Stein animate their audience to include a broader media ecology of reading into their understanding of literary practice.

Gertrude Stein and the cultural technique of reading

As modernist scholar and philologist Jerome McGann has pointed out, it may be well known to all of us that reading is not a natural inborn ability, but an acquired skill that is always implying cultural contexts, but it is also a fact that tends to slip our minds as reading has become such a naturalized part of what we consider foundational for civilization to exist. In recent German media theory, this claim is taken to a more fundamental level, when reading is considered among the fundamental “cultural techniques” that, as Berhard Siegert stresses, do not originate in man, but actually make man, time and space:

There is no ‘man’ independent from cultural techniques of hominization, or anthropotechnics; there is no time independent from the cultural techniques of calendars, time measurement and synchronization; there is no space independent from cultural techniques of ruling spaces and so forth (Siegert 2011: 15).

In Stein’s work, the question of being someone seems always to be also a question of being somewhere, being in a particular spatial position, which is why the concept of cultural techniques can be helpful when discussing the complex sense of spatiality in Stein. Or, in the terminology of this study, can help conceptualize the intermingling of her media poetics and her ambient poetics, since this concept connects technologies like writing and counting to other, even more fundamental techniques of filtering and differentiating time and space. This connection helps us understand the way visuality and spatiality are at work in Stein’s writing, as she is always committed to a simultaneous organization of the material space of world and word where the one does not precede the other. If we recall Stein’s concept of “composition” from Composition as Explanation addressed in the introduction to this study, it frames her idea of a continued practice that includes at the same time the daily living and the creation of art in a specific period. Thinking in terms of cultural techniques as forms of active anthropotechnics can provide new grounds for understanding Stein’s double move in this lecture that has in fact puzzled many readers in posterity. Siegert’s concept above is a straightforward way of conceptualizing Stein’s double vision of art and world as permeated by the same pattern of activity (what she refers to in the lecture as “way of seeing” and “composition”) or, to use the concept in question: cultural technique.
As suggested, all the years of living in the Gutenberg Galaxy has made the interface of the printed book increasingly seamless in literate culture and naturalized the technology of reading to the point where it is no longer is considered a technology. The neo-philological work of McGann and others has sought to undo this blindness, and direct attention to the material aspects of printed books and how these affect the act of reading. Another way to strengthen awareness of the way reading functions as an anthropotechnics is to turn attention towards young readers who do not yet possess perfect reading skills, and thus bring forward the material aspects of the process.

As we shall see, both strategies were applied by Stein in the later years of her career. To her, reading was always a very physical process, and during World War II, after she had experienced relative success with the publication of *The World Is Round* (1939), she cultivated her interest in children’s books further. And this time she was not only experimenting with children’s books, but with didactic and instructive children’s books. Specifically, the ‘ABC’ and the ‘First Reader’, both genres used when instructing children in the art of reading. The fruits of this interest became her somewhat flawed ABC, *To Do: A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays* (1940) and a primer in twenty lessons, *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* (1941). The first of these was only printed years after her death, even though Stein and her friends spent years during the war trying to place it with a publisher, and in a fully illustrated version, as Stein had planned, until 2011. Stein did in fact succeed in placing the second title with the British publisher Maurice Fridberg, along with three children’s plays she had written at around the same time with illustrations by her friend, the British painter Francis Rose, but she did not live to see the book in print in the fall of 1946.

Publishers, scholars, critics and other readers – even some of Stein’s closest supporters and friends – have all had their doubts about the sincerity and the success of Stein’s pedagogical endeavor. It is obvious, that in many ways, these two books do not comply with the generic norms of didactic children’s literature. Both have repeatedly been dismissed as not being serious contributions to their didactic genres and deemed unsuited for children altogether. Even Toklas – not often one to severely criticize Stein’s writing – said about *To Do* that “It is too old for children and too young for adults” (quoted in Gallup 1957: viii). But, as will become apparent when I dig a little deeper into it, if Stein’s ABC does not seem to be particularly preoccupied with teaching children the alphabet, it is not so much because it is not being serious but more because it takes its investigation of the alphabet and the process of learning it to a more fundamental level where alphabetization becomes an anthropotechnics in Siegert’s sense and as such connects with other fundamental techniques of hominization that are also techniques of disciplining – and thus inevitably related to violence. As I shall develop further, on this last point the book bears the clear marks of the turbulent atmosphere in which it was written, that of Europe in the middle of a raging war, and in fact provides alternative grounds for developing in further detail the controversial discussion of the relationship between Stein’s poetics and her politics in the war years initiated in chapter two.
Stein and modernist print history: file sharing, self-publishing and staging the paratext

As addressed earlier, for almost three decades Stein’s writing was only loosely connected to the printed book, as she was generally unsuccessful in placing her work with the popular publishers she desired and never willfully entered the world of art and vanity presses with the determination of some of her contemporaries. In compensation, Stein initially sought distribution of her work through her Paris salon where she practiced a form of file sharing of the early 20th century, whereby manuscripts were exchanged with friends and occasionally published by friends adding an important social and relational dimension to the reading and distribution of her writing that stays with it even today. This also made her early publication history sparse, lacking the continuity of that of many of her modernist peers. When considering her close involvement with the Paris avant-garde, especially in the visual arts, it is surprising how relatively little she worked with the aesthetically ambitious small presses that were numerous in European cities in these years, and that writers such as Ezra Pound engaged with in his early career, providing the basis for Jerome McGann’s appointment of him as “the crucial point of departure” for any “history of the modernist book” in his foundational book on the topic, *Black Riders* (McGann 1993: 76-80). In contrast, Stein in his account “did not utilize the physical presence of the book in any notable ways” but instead sought out linguistic methods to obtain the effects that other modernists achieved through bibliography (McGann 1993: 19-23). According to McGann, the renewed interest in fine printing of poets like Pound and Yeats resulted in artisan print work in which a synthesis between modern and medieval print styles made “the semantic content of the message […] carried by the graphic features” (McGann 1993: 83).

Although her work influenced later poets developing this same impulse further, like the strands of concrete poetry and artists’ books that flourished in the 1960s discussed in chapter two, Stein herself in many ways resisted the modernist impulse traced by McGann of turning the book into an exclusive artifact. Yet McGann’s claim about Stein’s indifference to the tools of bibliography does appear to be a somewhat hasty generalization. As is indicated in my discussion of *Descriptions of Literature* in chapter two, and also revealed by other of Stein’s collaborative book works involving visual artists such as *A Book Concluding With As A Wife Has A Cow A Love Story* with Juan Gris (1926), *A Village Are You Ready Yet Not Yet* with Elie Lascaux (1928), and *The World is Round* with Clement Hurd (1939), conscious work with the bibliographical procedures of the book does occur over the years in Stein’s production. Consulting Stein’s handwritten notebooks from her entire career, gives a completely different experience than from most of her printed works. Here, she can be found playing with spacing, lines, pages and continuously addressing the material conditions of the paper she is writing on, by letting the

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116 This is the explanation Jerome McGann gives for not trying to trace it (McGann 1993: 19).
design and shape of her French school notebooks dictate everything from line breaks to semantic content. Yet, the material conditions of these gestures are often lost in the typed manuscripts that are generally considered the authorial versions of the many works not printed in Stein’s lifetime,\(^{117}\) and in the light of his interest in print culture, McGann’s refraining from a consideration of the notebooks seems quite justifiable. What is more surprising, as is pointed out by Sarah Stone in a *Jacket2* article, is the fact that he does not examine Stein’s self-publishing venture The Plain Edition (1930-1933), which she initiated in collaboration with Toklas, and where Stein plays the triple role of publisher, editor and author and thus had decisive influence over everything from choice of paper, binding and typeface to advertisements, blurbs and matters of distribution and retail prices. As Stone shows in her article, the history of The Plain Edition is indeed a uniquely rich source of information about Stein’s contribution to the history of the modernist book (Stone 2013).

Stone stresses Stein’s close ties to the visual arts through her activities as salon hostess and art collector and, in an analysis of the design of the first Plain Edition publication, *Lucy Church Amiably* – with the puzzling and genuinely intermedia subtitle “A novel of romantic beauty and nature and which looks like an engraving” – brings out the importance of paying maximum attention to the visual aspects of Stein’s books and how “the semantic content of the message is carried by the graphic features” (McGann 1993: 83), just as McGann would have it. Stone even shows how the choices of cover and binding contribute to this symbiosis between bibliography and semantics, such as the “painfully blue” cover of *Lucy Church* that, according to Stein’s correspondence on the matter, was chosen for its resemblance to the French school notebooks that she used to compose in, thus disturbing the clear division between the interfaces of writing and reading, to make a recourse to the terminology of Lori Emerson, but not in a way that was entirely literal. As Stone writes:

*Lucy Church Amiably*’s composition notebooks have solid black oilcloth covers, which suggests that Stein’s decision to stage the print version of her novel like a school book was not intended faithfully to reproduce the site of composition, but rather to stage a productive confusion of the different features associated with print and with manuscript. Stein’s design “looks like” a place to be written in rather than read (Stone 2013).

Thus, when Stein actively used the material conditions of the printed book in her work, she did so not only in a more subtle way than figures like Mallarmé or the futurists, famous for taking up heavier typographic artillery when playing with fonts, sizes and spacing. Moreover, Stein’s book design does not exactly follow the direction of Pound

\(^{117}\) Another important point is that Stein’s printed works, both those published in her lifetime, and those printed posthumously, have generally been available in compilations, reprints and collections that took little note of choices in page design and printing and generally normalized many of Stein’s innovative notions (Stone 2013).
and the rest of McGann’s modernist canon either, with their renewed interest in “fine printing”, but, quite the contrary, seems to actively resist the fetishizing of the book as a completed visual art object, instead bringing out the processes of writing and reading, making tangible how the process of publishing is a “forward movement from manuscript to print” (Stone 2013). Stein’s correspondence and the choices she made in her brief career as a publisher document how she openly favored “plain print” as opposed to the more artisanal expression of many other small presses operating in the context of high modernism. But, as Stone shows, the more sparse, modern and industrialized look of The Plain Edition’s titles does not prevent Stein from using “the paraliterary work of book design” as “an opportunity to extend her poetics to the book’s cover, title page, front matter, and advertising materials” (ibid). Rather, The Plain Edition is, as Stone puts it, a stunning demonstration of Stein’s notorious composition principle of “using everything” – and thus loading, not only the language but also the paratext of her books with significance.

Copy of Lucy Church Amiably by The Plain Edition (1930) + Two of Stein’s French school notebooks, Beinecke Library.

If Stone is correct to point out the unrighteousness of Jerome McGann’s dismissal of Stein as a direct player in modernist book history, McGann does deserve credit for the important observations he makes about her indirect importance in this same history. As he puts it, Stein

developed linguistic (as opposed to bibliographical) procedures for bringing the reader’s attention back to the text’s literal surfaces and immediate moments. Her technical adventure was to find linguistic equi-
valents for the bibliographical innovations that were being developed and explored by others (McGann 1993: 21-22).

If it ignores Stein’s accomplishments in publishing and book design, this characterization of her linguistic strategies is a rather striking formulation of what I have previously called her media poetics, a poetic practice that seeks to make the interface of writing tangible through language. As McGann puts it: “The free forms of modernism – and Stein’s are among the freest of those forms – depend upon the writerly exploitation of the spatial field of the printed page and the codex form.” (McGann 1993: 20-21). Yet, he seems to imply that Stein’s media poetics fails to get the impact of that of her peers who, through their more continuous work with publishing and distribution, eventually obtained the “creation and consolidation of an audience of readers” (McGann 1993: 21) that Stein, in his evaluation, lacked.118 But even if this indicates that McGann is not entirely aware of the productive implications in terms of readership that follow from Stein’s collaborative poetics (even she herself was not always aware of this), he does in fact note this quality in her writing. When he suggests that in terms of readership in the 1920s Stein’s “writing was difficult to locate or characterize (except through parody)” (McGann 1993: 19), he is – although packed away in parentheses – close to pinning down the collaborative element: the important point about her work, that it invites rewriting and interaction, rather than passive consumption, even if this interaction often occurred in the shape of parody and mockery. Further, when he notes that “Not until she allowed herself to be transformed into a kind of circus animal, in the 1930s, would her writing find acceptance in regular publishing venues” (McGann 1993: 21), he is, albeit once again in a negative vein, addressing Stein’s performative persona, the relational factor introduced so effectively into her oeuvre in later years.

However, in relation to the claim of this study about Stein’s three-fold poetics, what is particularly interesting about ultimate print fetishist McGann’s phrasing of this “writerly exploitation of the spatial field of the printed page” is his reoccurring use of a scenic or theatrical vocabulary in explaining how it functions. Not only does he see the modernist self-consciously constructed book as “putting a frame around romantic writing”, to bring a level of reflexivity into the “scene of textuality”, he also stresses how such a book shows “not the dialogue of the mind with itself, but the theatrical presentation of such a dialogue” (McGann 1993: 21). What McGann is getting at, is how the material framing of the text affects its reading conditions – how its paratexts are effectuated in its language as well as the details of its printing. His metaphorical gesture towards the stage points to the presence of an ambient poetics in this paratextual practice. If we cast

118 McGann’s claim is contested by more recent scholarship. For example, Karen Leick gives a thorough account of Stein’s reception and the surprisingly large amount of discussion and reviews her relatively few published works generated in American print media. However, the evaluations were mixed and the share of bewilderment and mockery was high, and Leick’s statement that “Geography and Plays was certainly not a best seller but it was a sensation” (Leick 2009: 74) could be applied to many other publications.
a glance at one of the most famous demonstrations of Stein’s distinctive interest in the paratext of her published books, McGann’s vocabulary of staging, framing and putting on display seems strikingly apt. The first edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* appeared without Stein’s name on the title page and cover, playing actively with the paratext’s influence on our reading and the consequences of keeping its crucial elements open, ambiguous.

Dust jacket, hardcover and title page of the 1933 first edition of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* by Harcourt Brace and Company, none of which included Stein’s name as author. Note how the ambiguity of authorship is played out in the repeated photograph by Man Ray showing Alice standing in the light of the doorway while Gertrude is seated in the shadows in the front, writing, and demonstratively unnoticed by the caption, although her body takes up the better part the image. Note also the rose circle vignette on the book’s hard cover – replacing both the title and name of the author.

What is striking about the way the paratext works in *The Autobiography* is that it is not primarily used visually (framing book design as a visual and sculptural art) but performatively, affecting how the reader will situate what he or she reads in a broader social space. Sarah Stone shows in her article how Stein uses book design to directly influence the reading, and correctly stresses Stein’s strong bonds with the visual arts in her analysis, but like McGann she frequently falls back on theatrical concepts when explaining the rather sophisticated way in which Stein uses the spatiality of her medium, for instance in the passage quoted above, where she stresses how Stein’s book design for *Lucy Church* was not meant to “reproduce” but rather to “stage” a proximity to the notebook as its site of composition. What appears more important in relation to Stein’s book design than considering writing as a thing to be looked at, is considering writing as a thing that is situated in a three-dimensional space and, as implied in the conceptualization of writing as a cultural technique, taking measure of both time and space through the making of marks.

By extension, it seems relevant to stress that Stein herself, as also discussed in chapter one, actively used the theater to institute her ambient poetics. From 1912, when she wrote her first play she turned her entire practice towards theatrical writing and particularly investigated the ways in which the page and the stage intermingle. Stein continuously used the double meaning of the word *play* to call attention to the interrelated
materialities of reading and performance. Play being both a noun (that can refer to a
genre) and a verb – an activity – covering linguistic play, dramatic acting as well as other
types of activities.

New publishing conditions and the turn towards young readers

When Stein wrote her late children’s books, her relationship with printing and publishing
had undergone years of development from the early salon years. Not only had she gone
through her own publishing venture where she was able to acquaint herself with every
material detail of the printing and publishing process – from typeface and paper quality
to press releases and distribution matters – she had subsequently also experienced access
to broad popular publishing, most significantly at Random House where several works,
including more experimental ones, had been published and distributed to the broad Amer-
ican market.119

At this point in her career, well after the publication of her bestseller The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, Stein had tasted the popular recognition she had always
cried for. Yet, the ridicule of her more difficult writing still prevailed, even with her newly

119 During her American tour, Stein became friendly with Bennet Cerf, founding publisher and editor at
Random House, who was very impressed with The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas, and with Stein as a
personality. He agreed that the time was ripe to publish some of her earlier writings as well as intellectually
demanding new work in relatively large print runs while waiting for a follow-up to The Autobiography.
Founded in 1925, Random House had become a significant player in the American publishing industry
(not least after publishing the first authorized version of Joyce’s Ulysses in the Anglophone world in
1934) and Stein titles published by the label include: Portraits and Prayers (1934), Four Saints in Three
Acts (1934), Lectures in America (1935), The Geographical History of America (1936), Everybody’s
Autobiography (1937), Ida A Novel (1941), Wars I Have Seen, (1945), Brewsie and Willie (1946) and
– after her death – the Selected Writings (1946) that Stein was involved in compiling, which includes a
brief introduction by Stein herself and one by Carl Van Vechten.

120 An often-cited example, most likely because of its witty title, is “Officer, she is Writing Again”
from Detroit News, June 1914, but a substantial number of equivalent pieces exists. For a selection, see
Curnutt (ed.) 2000. See also Reid 1958 for a brief survey of humorous highlights in the negative Stein
reception and Leick 2009 for a more thorough discussion of the corpus of Stein mockery in contemporary
American newspapers and magazines.
Stein’s turning her interest towards the actual reading process seems logical.\footnote{If her strong preoccupation with the materiality of language is indubitable from the earliest years of her career, it seems a fair claim that after her early assertions about readers in \textit{The Making of Americans} (“I write for myself and strangers”) she is generally addressing the writing process much more than the reading process, as is indicated by titles such as the grammar pieces in \textit{How to Write, Composition as Explanation, An Acquaintance with Description}, “How Writing is Written” etc.}

In both her late children’s books, Stein is teaching her poetics to young readers by encouraging them to keep reading with the material nearsightedness that all readers possess to begin with – an endeavor that carefully undermines the authority of traditional alphabetic schooling and attempts to break free from the image of the child as an unfinished subject, as problematized by Stein in \textit{The Geographical History of America}: “What is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man” (GHA 370). The direct attention to the reader at play in these works is relatively new to Stein’s work at this point. Both works seem openly interested in the actual impact of writing when it is read, and in the part reading can play in the processes of constructing “so-called man” (Kittler 1990: 16) by shaping identity and human subjectivity and (since it is Stein we are dealing with) the possibilities to introduce elements of distortion or free play into these processes. Still believing strongly in the potential large public for all of her work, Stein is trying to shift the conditions of reading for her audience. Attempting to educate readers to read her, she wants to shift the premise from allegedly unreadable to readable to the properly engaged and playful reader.

In this way, the children’s books can be seen in the same vein as her lectures and autobiographies from the 1930s, as writing trying to open up her other work for readers. These books are in a very concrete way concerned with “building a better reader,” as Dana Watson has put it (Watson 2011). When studying the children’s books, Stein’s media poetics as was described by McGann is easy to follow, as it is taken to a very basic level, because these works deal so directly with reading – they are trying to teach us how to read again – maintaining the multi-sensorial attention on the concrete technique of reading that can be so invigorating to witness in young readers and discovering the sounds and contexts of the words as they read them, not yet numbed by habit.

\textbf{Reading and becoming a person: \textit{The Gertrude Stein First Reader} and \textit{To Do. A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays}}

As Juliana Spahr explains in \textit{Everybody’s Autonomy}, a primer for reading always favors unambiguous semantic meaning, or as Spahr phrases it, “the word ‘duck’ in the primer means the bird not the verb” (Spahr 2001: 11). Yet, \textit{The Gertrude Stein First Reader} completely fails to live up to this central generic rule of the primer. Quite contrary to this demand, in Stein’s first reader, playing endlessly with homonyms and rhyme and encouraging readers to play along with the inherent ambiguities of language seems to be
the whole point of learning how to read:

Saying a word even a big word is not the same as reading that word. Oh no said the daily bird indeed it is not, not knot. Just notice that if you say not knot, how do you know if you did not know how to read, which knot has a knot and which has not a knot. So you see you have to learn to read (FR 9).

This particular trait may be the most likely explanation for the fierce criticism Stein’s primer has received over the years (Ardam 2011; Watson 2011). In her account of the importance of reading for the process of subject formation, Spahr further emphasizes that in the primer, the insistent semantic unambiguousness has regulating and disciplining implications that go far beyond just teaching children how to read. The traditional primer demonstrates reading as a learned and regulated act that go hand in hand with social assimilation, Spahr asserts: “Dick and Jane, to use the most clichéd example of a primer, teach how we live the normalized lives of the nuclear family as much as they teach us how to read” (Spahr 2001: 12). Thus, in a primer, deviating from the postulated one-to-one relationship between word and meaning can also have socio-political consequences – and this is what happens all through the First Reader, often addressed as the difference between reading and talking.

If The Gertrude Stein First Reader does insist rather clearly – even if in an anarchistic way – on the constructive benefits of learning how to read, then To Do. A Book of Alphabets and Birthdays seems overall to disobey the demands of its didactic genre. It reads like an apocalyptic parody of a children’s ABC as it deconstructs the abstraction and ordering process of a regular ABC. It is organized like an ABC, with a section for each letter, but breaks off from the system continuously. For example, the letter G, represented by the characters “George Jelly Gus and Gertrude”, stresses not just the different possible phonemes evoked by the letter G, but also the identical initial phoneme of George and Jelly even though they do not have the same initial letter, thus undermining the alphabetic structure. Throughout, it marks out all the irregularities that we are forced to swallow in order to believe in the alphabet, with the consequence of shaking the stability of the letters as well as the words they form, in particular the proper names of the characters. Consequently, it makes the materiality of reading very palpable. Puns and rhymes are tossed and turned, and the letters – represented by children, animals and even machines starting with the different letters – attempt to take the power back in a series of stories that do not all of them end well.

The instability that follows from playing with these elements is not always problematic. As is announced on the first page – “Alphabets and names makes games” – this playful ease of naming and renaming often prevails. But it certainly can become problematic, like in the story of Y that associates from the letter Y’s sonic equivalence to the interrogative pronoun “Why” and from the double meaning of the word “letter” (an
alphabetic mark and a written message in the mail). It tells the story of Yvonne Yet, who sadly becomes unable to pronounce her own name after the letter Y is put in an envelope that accidentally ends up in the fireplace and burns up. Clearly, the proper names in To Do are not stable as identity markers – yet they are attempts to introduce and shape distinctions in the world. The naming becomes a technology that makes and shapes the person supported by the force of the alphabet. However, in most of the stories, the consequences that follow from losing, changing or disturbing a name are pretty harmless.

But equally important as agents of subject constitution in To Do are birthdays and, with them, numbers. To Do shows Stein playing with naming and numbering, and together these two factors determine who and what we are and how we can move about in the world: “without an alphabet well without names where are you, and birthdays are very favorable too, otherwise who are you” (BAB 11). The name, it seems, primarily relates to the spatial position of an individual mirroring the spatial ordering of the letters in the alphabetic structure and of letters when they are grouped and organized to make words. If a name will tell you where you are, then the birthday, it seems, will tell you who you are, as the identity of an individual “who” appears to be determined by the order of time.

As Cornelia Vismann has developed (Vismann 2008), the cultural techniques of writing and counting are historically intermingled, and the Indo-Arabic numeral system is also a fundamental factor in Siegert’s concept of anthropotechnics. In To Do, having a birthday binds the characters to a lineally progressing time that is structured by the calendar – just as the letters are bound to their particular position in the alphabetic sequence; they cannot alter, even if they often want to (for instance, “D says bad words to E says don’t come tagging after me I have had enough of E, let me be” (BAB 21)). In To Do, thus, the introduction of the numerical seems first and foremost related to the structuring of time, a process that appears crucial, but becomes highly threatening, when it is disputed.

“It is very astonishing about birthdays, some people are born on their birthdays and some are not,” (BAB 18) we learn. And not only are not all characters born on their birthdays, some of them fight over them and some lose them, and the consequences of these numeric and temporal ambiguities prove far more violent than the confusion with name changes to the characters of the book, who frequently drown, burn up or vaporize when their birthdays are challenged or lost. If, as Siegert has it, “the basic operation of those cultural techniques responsible for processing the distinction between nature and culture, or barbarism and civilization, is a filtering operation” (Siegert 2015: 32), then To Do is tracing these operations at work, through the name and the birthday, both markers being introduced to filter the figures off from their surroundings and from chaos, but its stories also tend to linger in the spots where this filtering operation is disturbed, interrupted – and in this way it keeps stressing the channel, the materiality, or the phatic element, of these distinctive processes. That it is the birthdays that appear the most troublesome seems well in accordance with Stein’s opposition against 19th century teleology, and her
ongoing contesting of identity anchors such as descent and genealogy.

In *To Do*, Stein is pinning out the alphanumerical structuration of communication as a fundamental cultural technique in the sense that it ties disparate objects together into practices that in turn “produce something that within a given culture is addressed ‘a person’” (Siegert 2015: 11). When an element is removed (if you are not born on your birthday, or if you lose your name or the coherence between name and function is disturbed), the subject position becomes destabilized. Stein’s ABC dramatizes the loss of this stable position, that is often experienced as threatening and as restricting the physical movement of the characters, like when the boy Brave drowns during a nightly fishing venture, simply because “this is what happens when you are not born on your birthday” (BAB 15). The element of struggle appears particularly strong when *To Do* is compared to related Stein works such as *Ida A Novel*, which Stein was in the course of finishing when she started work on *To Do*.

Ida’s ability to shift identity markers (name, relations, husband, job) as she moves over the American continent is a strength – Ida remains Ida, independent of all the outer characteristics – an entity defined by being in constant movement. Her constant travelling is continuing the positive quality of “wandering” that has been attached to numerous Steinian heroines, from the title character of the novella “Melanchta” in her first published book *Three Lives* to characters in operas like *Four Saints in Three Acts* and *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938). In contrast to these freely wandering figures, the figures in *To Do* are much more restricted in their movement. Both space and time are fought over and the world appears chaotic. Whenever the filtering operations are disturbed, the fragile materiality of the (ambient, phatic) space established by these operations becomes tangible and often threatening or dangerous to the characters involved. Thus, the violence inherent in alphabetization that has been pointed out by media historians, at least since Kittler, and that Stein’s earlier playful handling of language has sometimes appeared to suggest an escape from, suddenly becomes very tangible in *To Do* as the escape or counter-strategy represented by “wandering” appears inaccessible.

**Writing for children and enduring a war**

The close ties between technologies of war and violence and media technologies put forward by Kittler and continued in the discourse on cultural techniques have parallels in Stein’s own thinking about the relationship between word and world. In the opening lines of *Composition as Explanation* she famously ties art and war together, and in her essay *Picasso* (1938) she recounts the anecdote of Picasso seing the camouflage painted trucks drive into Paris during World War I and exclaiming “it is we who made it, that is cubism”

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122 *Ida* was published in 1941, but Stein worked on the manuscript from May 1937 until May 1940 (Esdaile 2012: 144). According Stein’s own account in “The Winner Loses” she started working on *To Do* at “the beginning of May” of 1940 (WL 117).
(P 501) and goes on to claim that “wars are only a means of publicising the things already accomplished,” thus war makes everybody realize the change in the composition that has already been performed by the artists (ibid. 518). In a more specific vein, many readers have suggested that the threatening atmosphere of To Do seems directly connected to the socio-historical conditions Stein was living under when she wrote it. That is, to the horizon of the world war that was raging in Europe at this time. In this historical situation, the freedom of movement so crucial in Ida was clearly most limited. From Stein’s point of view, as an elderly American Jewish woman hiding in the south of France, the space of the earth had been colonized by physical threat. One could even in the troubling status of the birthdays in To Do trace how the implications of ethnicity, birth and descent, that Stein had always insisted upon treating somewhat lightly, as she was not religiously raised and never very preoccupied with her own Jewish heritage, were more than ever threatening to catch up with the world, and with herself, as it had started catching up with Jews all over Europe. Elsewhere, I have followed this track in a historically situated reading of this work (Daugaard 2015). Here, in spite of Stein’s own claims in “The Winner Loses” that she used the writing of To Do as an escape from the troublesome war news, I read the ABC as a sort of ‘evil double’ of Stein’s more essayistic wartime writings that upheld a pacifist and quiet strategy of resistance. In this context, I will stick to a single example and discuss the implications of this reading for my purposes of bringing out the tricky, double-sided political potential in Stein’s poetics.

The most indisputable reference to the war in the ABC is in the book’s most bizarre and disturbing section, the letter Q, which tells the story of Mr. and Mrs. Quiet who are horrified by the behavior of their nameless favorite pet rabbit that eats a baby rabbit each year on its birthday. Instead of confronting the rabbit, they try to put a stop to the killings while avoiding direct conflict by taking the rabbit’s birthday away from it. This results in a grotesque escalation where the rabbit turns into a frightening red-eyed monster, with fire coming out of its eyes. Eventually the furious monster implodes – or burns himself up. In one of the rare studies dealing with this story, Barbara Will writes:

The expressionistic horror of this scene is rendered worse by its inexplicability: Mr. and Mrs. Quiet embody docility and unobtrusiveness, yet somehow they are drawn into the demonically repetitive actions of their pet rabbit. Their qualities of quietude render them helpless, even infantile, in the face of the devil. In Mrs. Reynolds, a novel Stein wrote for adults in the first years of the war, the Quiets reappear in the form of the passive Mr. and Mrs. Reynolds, their rabbit represented by an insidious neighbor named Angel Harper—a thinly disguised figure for Adolph Hitler” (Will 2007: 346).

As Will notes, the horrific events of the Q story have parallels in Stein’s novel Mrs. Reynolds (1940), written in the same year, in which the Reynold’s couple’s paralysis is perhaps the closest Stein gets to writing an allegory about the war, alluding through the depiction
of the quiet couple not just to herself and Toklas living through the war in quiet fear but
even to the allied forces’ inability to stop Hitler’s early progress through defensive and
pacifistic strategies.

Will, however, extends this point in a somewhat radical interpretation of the oc-
currence of brutality in Stein’s children’s books. Noting, as I have also unfolded in my
reading, how the books play out the sometimes violent, disciplining inherent in alphabet-
ization, Will frames these elements as a didactic institution of Stein’s regressive, escapist
desire, in the face of the threatening war, to finally succumb to the paternalistic authority
that she has been fighting for so many years. In Will’s reading, the violent, yet inconclu-
sive, weird and ambiguous episodes are conceived as a conscious didactic strategy ap-
plied with the purpose of threatening children to submit to authority in extension of what
Will identifies as Stein’s own regressive, childlike response to the serious threats of war
that attracted her to the paternal authority of Marechal Pétain.

What speaks most loudly against this reading is the lack, in To Do, The First Read-
er and the three children’s plays also addressed in Will’s article, of present authorities
that anyone can submit to, and the lack of consequence in the fates of the wildly straying
characters. It is very hard to locate any didactic indication that anyone could or should
have behaved more appropriately and less independently, as Will suggests. The pet rabbit
appears to be an inexplicable, unsophisticated evil that is bestowed upon Mr. and Mrs.
Quiet, who sadly love their pet in spite of its faults, and there is no suggestion that they
could have acted differently. In To Do, the pleasure of the play with naming and identity
is closely tied to the danger of this play, especially given the threatening horizon of the
war. Stein is quite evidently not disciplining children in To Do, but she is trying to build
better readers for her own books, and in this endeavor, she is moving her point of focus
into the space between the book and the reader.

Due to its ambiguously dark ambience affected by the war and its relative neglect
in research on Stein, To Do is a suitable background against which to return for a moment
to an important discussion initiated in chapter two, namely the discussion about Stein’s
conservative political sympathies and how to deal with her war years, and not least the
relationship between her poetics/experimental writing and these questions. As suggested
earlier, one of many factors that seems to have raised the heat of the debate is the reluc-
tance of leading Stein readers with a background in formalism, poststructuralism and/or
language poetry to engage in closer examination of Stein’s wartime writings. Although
it should be stressed that philological scholars like Ulla Dydo and Edward Burns have
covered the œuvre almost in its entirety, and for instance can take credit for the first book
publication of Stein’s unfinished drafted introduction to her Pétain-translations. \(^{123}\)
Yet, the overall impression remains, that the preferred “Stein canon” of language poetry and
formalism does not include works like Paris France and Wars I Have Seen, and tends to deal

\(^{123}\) The draft introduction was published in the afterword to The Letters of Gertrude Stein and Thornton
Wilder 1996, edited by Dydo, Burns and Rice. The translation project was also addressed in Van Dusen
1996, but had not been much discussed prior to this.
selectively with Everybody’s Autobiography and other works from the 1930s and early 1940s and thus, whether the result of a conscious decision or not, avoids facing some of the potentially unpleasant – not least from a post-World War II perspective – political claims implied in these books.\textsuperscript{124}

The fact that these works have gathered significantly less interest has raised suspicion on the part of Stein’s fiercest critics that there was indeed a story being swept under the carpet. A similar point can be made for the late children’s books that had been virtually ignored in the corpus of Stein research, merely touched upon by scholars working with overviews of Stein’s work (such as Bridgman 1970), until they were taken up by Barbara Will in 2007 in a study leading up to her controversial monograph Unlikely Collaboration. In recent years, a few more studies have followed, but Stein’s late children’s books remain among the least discussed works of her oeuvre (Ardam 2011; Watson 2011).

As already mentioned, Will’s monograph is about Stein’s friendly relations with the French university professor Bernard Faÿ, who held the official position of head of the Bibliothèque nationale during the Vichy years, but in practice served as a strategic advisor close to Pétain and was responsible for the persecution of large numbers of French citizens, especially freemasons, who were killed in concentration camps. It sets up the foundational premise that Stein’s writings during the war years have to be regarded as a conscious propaganda effort on her part. Will sets out to uncover “the evidence of a propaganda project in support of Vichy France that Stein began in 1941, one she hoped would somehow sell to a skeptical American public” (Will 2011: xiii). According to Will, although various factors complicating the clarity of the case are discussed, Stein is fundamentally out to convince a reluctant American public that Pétain’s political model is a sustainable solution for France and should be respected as such. It is this premise that makes the book troublesome reading for the majority of the poetic and academic Stein community.

Direct propaganda for Pétainism may not be equivalent to fascism, but it comes close enough, and the controversy raised by Will’s book is not surprising.\textsuperscript{125} As stated, I

\textsuperscript{124} There certainly can be numerous, individually completely valid, aesthetic reasons for choosing to focus on some of Stein’s works over others. This, however, does not change the effect of raising the detractors’ suspicion that this de facto Stein canon has had.

\textsuperscript{125} Adding fuel to the fire, for instance, are rhetorical bad habits like the frequent, casual repetition of the premise about Stein’s consistent and convinced Vichy propaganda effort, even if it remains unconvincingly substantiated. A representative example: “Written for the Atlantic Monthly, ‘The Winner Loses’ is, like other propaganda pieces Stein wrote for the Vichy, a strained effort to appeal to an American audience…” (Will 2011: 103, italics mine). The plural address of “other propaganda pieces” mentioned in passing here is absurd, as in her book Will only has three textual examples that she openly claims to be Vichy propaganda by Stein’s hand. The key texts characterized by Will as direct “Vichy propaganda” are “The Winner Loses”, “La langue française” (published in La Patrie 1941), and the unpublished Pétain introduction. Of these, one was written in French exclusively for a French audience, one remained unpublished, and the third is, of course, “The Winner Loses” of which she is speaking, thus making this widening of her claim unfounded. There simply are no other published “propaganda pieces” appealing to an American audience, at least not in the material laid out in Will’s own otherwise thoroughly researched work. It is unfortunate that polemic manners like this cast a shadow over Will’s scholarly work, when her in-depth research into unpleasant political circumstances and historical source material is in fact rare in
agree with many critics that Will is fundamentally unconvincing in making this main point. As has been established by Bernstein and others, there are far from sufficient grounds for phrasing the story of Stein’s wartime years this polemically, and, given Stein’s persistent preference for open-endedness, ambiguity and complexity in her writing, it is simply very hard to make the label “propaganda” stick to anything she has written, no matter how hard one tries. However, there are some very important points in Will’s book that stand independently of this premise and that unfortunately have only reluctantly and insufficiently been discussed in serious Stein scholarship.

Most importantly, Will asks a basic question of the relationship between Stein’s poetics and her political views, as she zooms in on Stein’s persistent critique of concepts of post-enlightenment progress. This is a position that plays a dominant role from the earliest years, and that practically all artists and scholars who have worked with Stein agree not only on praising her for, but also on connecting to the richly demonstrated progressive, productive energy that her work contains. Her ability to disrupt and restructure stock narratives and hierarchies is key to her importance to artists from John Cage to Harryette Mullen.

But her skepticism towards progressive concepts of history is also something she shares with the conservative, dedicated pétainist Faÿ and likeminded thinkers. Furthermore, it takes on a more and more conservative political coloring, during the years of their friendship, as concepts like peace, daily living, habit, and tradition, become crucial values for Stein during the interwar years. Will substantiates her claims about Stein’s “political world view” through her reading of “The Winner Loses” with some persuasiveness when it comes to quotes like the following, where Stein explains her defense of the Armistice, from the perspective of daily living: “perhaps everybody will find out, as the French know so well, that the winner loses, and everybody will be too, like the French, that is, tremendously occupied with the business of daily living and that will be enough” (WL 132). These are values she shares with the ideology of the Pétain regime. Even if the way they are played out in her writing remains far removed from a fascist aesthetics, they are still the Stein literature.

Further, I agree with other critics who find the claim to propaganda somewhat forced. “The Winner Loses” is too nuanced and saddened a depiction of the endurance of war to pass as propaganda for any cause, whereas the political implications of the brief “La langue française”, about the pride that the French peasant people take in their language, remains indirect. Even if Will is correct in remarking how the ideas about a “true and pure language” that is connected to the rural population “in contact with the earth” […] blends in seamlessly with the Pétainist ideology of return, reaction and renewal” (Will 2011: 129), the piece is inconclusive in its revolving around the struggle between written and spoken language, and contains no direct connections to political questions or unambiguous ideological positions. This is perhaps why Will, apart from the one page devoted to an actual reading of the piece (Will 2011: 129-30), focuses her discussion of it on the outer circumstances of its publication in the officially Vichy-sanctioned journal La Patrie (to which Stein was invited to contribute), which does undeniably indicate Stein’s readiness to cooperate with the regime at this point, which in Will’s line of argument is incriminating enough, even if the piece itself hardly expresses positions that appear thoroughly shocking.

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relevant themes when reading her work, especially from the late 1930s onwards.

In *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein recounts an anecdote about her garden in Bilignin, where she planted corn sent to her by an American friend, the former doughboy William Rogers (by Stein called the Kiddie), whom she and Toklas had met when he was stationed in France during World War I. About her corn, Stein writes “the Kiddie who sends it to us says now we must not give it to any fascists but why not if the fascists like it, and we liked the fascists, so I said please send us unpolitical corn […]” (EA, 318). Stein’s reluctance to subject her everyday life to Rogers’ clear cut anti-fascism is a perfect example of the sometimes troubling implications of her pragmatism. Practically anyone reading this passage today would instinctively have preferred Stein to grow the “anti-fascist corn” her friend urged her to. However, in this passage from the mid-1930s Stein is openly distancing herself from the prejudices made by Rogers’ from across the Atlantic – although they clearly ended up on the “right side” of history. Instead, she is, at least hypothetically, associating herself with the could-be fascists geographically closer to her at the time, most likely hinting at the predominantly conservative French peasants she was living next to in the South of France.

But Stein’s attitude in this quote also urges to be connected to the conservative streams in her thought. When the Spanish Civil War broke out, Stein was instinctively on the side of Franco over the coalition of communists and unionists that appeared highly dubious to her. Her radical openness and stubborn opposition against organization and the restricting of individual freedom could occasionally fall into the tune of militarist heroism and nationalist nostalgia towards a quiet peasant life, even if we mostly hear it playing the riffs of radical experimentalism, the challenging of consensus and the disruption of normative gender roles. It depends on the context. In the previous chapter, Harryette Mullen’s work revealed the germs for a racially aware counter-language in the reckless, coarse and non-veiling aspects of Stein’s language, what I referred to as “dirty Stein” and much in the same vein, it appears that when it comes to Stein’s late politics and poetics, her progressive effects are in a sense grounded in the very same quality that also hosts her conservative convictions. Almost like a puzzle picture, one can make both emerge, but hardly ever at the same time.

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126 W.G. Rogers also writes about the corn in Gertrude Stein in *Gertrude Stein is Gertrude Stein*: “In the following spring I send them carefully selected seed. They planted some every year. I hoped that they would not let my good democratic corn get into the craw of any fascists. Gertrude Stein assured … perhaps a bit sharply … that it would not be served either to Spanish Fascists or French or Italian or German fascist.” (Rogers 1973: 201-202). The passage comes directly after his account of Pétain’s anti-democratic convictions and Stein’s ambivalent support for him.

127 And as she actually did in the final year of the war, when the political landscape appeared clearer to her. Now, when it was time to sow, she wrote to Rogers about the corn, lightheartedly overruling her former position: “And it is allied corn you may be sure” (quoted in Malcolm 2003).
Wars I Have Seen

The book-length work by Stein that is perhaps most central to Barbara Will’s argument, even if her close readings of it are not extensive, is Stein’s war memoir *Wars I Have Seen*. Again, this is a title that for years was conspicuous by its absence from most accounts on Stein’s work, even if it has – overall – been given more attention than the children’s books. It is a work that is completely permeated by Stein’s non-progressive, cyclical concept of history. In her memoir, Stein is quietly accounting details from the daily life of herself and her neighbors during the war. The fears and horrors are present but mostly the scarcities, the uneventful endurance and the waiting as it is filled by practical matters and smaller worries is what occupies the narrative. Hearty helpfulness as well as petty conflict between neighbors takes up the better part of the book’s polyvocal discourse, shifting in narration between the first person singular and plural, making voices from the village community and other provisional “we’s” heard. As the title indicates, Stein’s account of the war she was living through is infiltrated by recourses to other wars in her frame of reference, including World War I, the American Civil War and several more remote historical, mythical and Shakespearean wars.

Currently, Stein’s account remains close to her everyday life at the time of writing, and the reader can follow her convictions, hopes, and allegiances change as the war progresses. As I have suggested, in her book Will reads out the analogies between this approach to history as non-progressive, repetitive and cyclical and a conservative philosophy of history that she is able to connect to writings by Faÿ and Pétain. Further, she sees in Stein’s attention throughout *Wars I Have Seen*, to the civilian daily life, a conscious – propagandistically motivated – justification of the collaborative strategy of the Vichy regime and a veiling of both the direct atrocities of Pétain’s authoritarian regime and the indirect crimes deriving from the submissive collaboration with Nazi Germany, as well as a general reluctance to address the brutal military reality of the war. Even if Will has a clear and well-supported point in regard to the compatibility of Stein’s philosophy of history as it is articulated in this work, and that of a figure like Faÿ, her characterization of it as a work that “portrays the experience of World War II from the perspective of a valiant and optimistic survivor of its many atrocities and deprivations” (Will 2011: 72) appears as unsatisfactory and one-sided as her conclusion about the authoritarian didactic strategy of the children’s books to any attentive reader of Stein’s troubling, touching, and strange memoir. However, Stein’s war memoir is a book that the reception has had severe difficulties in getting a grip on, and whether or not Will’s critique of the many readings of this work that have “celebrated the book for its stoic tone and has had little to say about its unrepentant Pétainism” (Will 2011: 116) appears sufficient or not, it is safe to claim, that the critical and academic reception of *Wars I Have Seen* can hardly be said to exhibit a richness comparable to that of her early experimental writing or her other autobiographies.
Fully in accordance with Stein’s collaborative poetics, one of the most multi-facetted and sensitive unpackings of this troubling work to this date is the artistic remediation or adaption of it by the acclaimed German composer and stage director Heiner Goebbels, who composed, arranged and directed the staged concert *Songs of Wars I Have Seen* that premiered at London’s South Bank Centre in 2007. Goebbels has pointed specifically to “Gertrude Stein’s cyclical notion of history” as the initial impulse that instigated his piece (Goebbels 2015: xxiv). What interested him was Stein’s simultaneous, spatial conception of time, where Shakespearean wars intermingle with the world wars, in an implicit critique of the 19th century concept of history building on concepts of progression, linearity, and so on, that Goebbels has also worked to challenge in the field of (music) theater.

Thus, remarkably, in his treatment of Stein’s memoir, Goebbels dwells on exactly the same points that Will points out in her discussion of the work. Yet, their implications in Goebbels’ figuration become almost diametrically opposite to Will’s conclusions. In his staged concert, Goebbels unwinds the progressive potential in Stein’s approach in *Wars* related to her “realism of consciousness” as characterized by Lyn Hejinian. In his composite composition, Goebbels somehow manages to contain the complexity of the aforementioned puzzle picture – to frame its ambiguity and realize its politically liberal, democratic potential while still keeping it as open as Stein would have it.

**Heiner Goebbels and Stein’s political puzzle picture**

As a German composer and stage director, Goebbels has worked foremost in Europe, and *Songs of Wars I Have Seen* premiered in London. Thus, strictly speaking, this piece does not comply with the North American demarcation of this study. Yet I feel that the prominent role played by Stein’s English language in Goebbels’ concert, as well as the international format and distribution of Goebbels’ work in general (and this piece in particular), regularly performed as it is on at least five out of seven continents, in combination with the mere importance of his contribution to the reception of Stein in terms of artistic value and originality, fully justifies this exception. Moreover, on an anecdotic level, an American connection exists, as it was the American stage director Robert Wilson, who himself has directed several landmark performances of Stein’s work (*Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* 1992, *Four Saints in Three Acts* 1996, *Saints and Singing* 1997) that brought Stein’s work to the attention of Goebbels. Wilson sang a long excerpt from Stein’s novel *The Making of Americans* at German playwright Heiner Müller’s funeral, attended by both directors (Barker 2010). The anecdote reminds us – along with multiple other transnational and transatlantic relations that have marked Stein’s work and its artistic reception – of the transgressive nature of radical artworks that can rarely be encapsulated entirely within national or even continental boundaries. This is an important point to stress in relation to Stein, whose oeuvre was already transatlantic in its conception.
Since the experience at Müller’s funeral, Goebbels has taken up Stein’s writing on several occasions. In the piece *Hashirigaki* (2000), he constructed an assemblage between ancient Japanese music theatre, music by The Beach Boys and Stein’s *The Making of Americans*. Asked about the unlikely choice of material in *Hashirigaki*, Goebbels has interestingly stressed what one could call the ambient quality of the particular Beach Boys tracks from the 1960s album *Pet Sounds* that he applied in his composition (Gourgouris 2004). As a young man trained in a classical music tradition, Goebbels was very fond of popular music which he heard on the radio, taped and replayed for himself on his piano as an alternative musical space that was free from the obligations tied to his musical education and upbringing. However, a few of the tracks by The Beach Boys he knew and listened to, but was unable to catch and reconstruct, without completely understanding why. When revisiting them later in his life he found that they had “harmonies which just float, they never satisfy the bass register that brings them back to the ground, they keep on going, there is no resolution” (Gourgouris 2004). This “strange floating quality as if everything is being lifted from the air” that Goebbels attributes to the Beach Boys tunes comes strikingly close to definitions of ambient music as has been discussed earlier, as floating and not climax oriented. Goebbels claims to find the same inconclusive and ongoing quality in Stein’s long novel that just “keeps words going constantly by changing some elements in the repetitive language” (ibid.). Keeping in mind the connection between ambient music and Erik Satie’s concept of *musique d’ameublement* discussed in relation to Cage’s remediation of Stein, Goebbels’ observation points once again – albeit in a new vein and departing from completely different parts of Stein’s work – to the ambient poetics that permeates Stein’s writing and to its connective potential.

*Songs of Wars I Have Seen* is Goebbels’ third staging of Stein’s work, and in it he continues the postproductive aesthetics so dominant in *Hashirigaki* as well as the collaborative ideal set up for his practice. He claims never to start out with a united vision, but rather with questions approached and developed in collaboration with the musicians. He has thus described *Songs* as “an invitation to read this book of Gertrude Stein together with the musicians” (Goebbels 2011). In his concert, Goebbels embraces hybridity at every level imaginable: he chose a hybrid form – something in between a concert and a play – and based it not on one of Stein’s plays, or on any of her compositions made with musical accompaniment in mind, but on her 1945 memoir *Wars I Have Seen* – one of her apparently most conventional works of prose writing when it comes to language and style. The music is also a composite affair incorporating elements from English baroque composer Matthew Locke’s score for Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* into Goebbels’ own composition via analogue techniques of sampling, echoing those applied by Stein in her interweaving of the Shakespearean wars into her own depiction of the contemporary war she was living through. The concert is even performed by a hybrid ensemble put to-
together from two separate orchestras, one historical ensemble (in the original staging The Orchestra of the Age of Enlightenment) and one modern (The London Sinfonietta), that Goebbels chose to break apart and combine according to his own principles. He followed a quite uncommon procedure: first, he split up the two orchestras and combined them anew according to the musicians’ gender and the type of instrument they played.

The front stage of the concert is decorated as a living room reading environment with historical cozy-looking furniture and little reading lamps creating an enormous intimacy of ambiance. Seated here are all the female musicians who play string instruments from both the historical and the contemporary orchestra. They play the score – but they also read passages aloud from *Wars I Have Seen*. At the back are all male percussionists and brass players from both ensembles. All are standing, and are lit up by bright, cold bluish light whenever they play. In this way, Goebbels is holding on to the written quality of the textual material on the stage as he is trying to realize on stage the reading experience – and tying it closely to the musical performance by making the musicians read the words. The first person singular and first person plural (I and we) of Stein’s text revived in the mouths of a large group of musicians dissolves the unity of the voice – realizing the conversational, dialogical or collaborative stream present in Stein’s text and making any monologic claim about the ‘voice’ of Stein’s memoir, such as Will’s claim that it communicates the “perspective of a valiant and optimistic survivor,” appear thoroughly misguided.

The voices of the multiple speakers interwoven into the musical composition enhance the effect that is already in Stein’s text, where the voices of neighbors, the butcher and even the dog are heard, and no one stands above them to separate important from unimportant. They are reproduced as an unfocused murmur we experience on the same
level as Stein did. At the same time, the simple move of the gender segregation and spa-
tial organization of the two ensembles enhances the thematic focus that exists in Stein’s
text via its dwelling on the female, civilian experience of the war. The male brass players
and percussionists at the back of the stage wearing dark formal dress embody a milita-
ristic, formalized and more brutal ambience in stark contrast to the informal living room
reading time of the female string players, all dressed in regular daily clothes that, along
with the lamps and furniture surrounding them, connote a period circa the 1940s without
appearing theatrically striking (the ambience of history in the scenery recalls ‘thrift shop’
or ‘grandparents’ attic’ more than historical museum or correct reconstruction). This con-
trast has the effect of making the fragile, civilian perspective immediately recognizable
as well as difficult and frightening to witness. With the women at the front of the stage,
reading aloud from pieces of paper, not reciting, chanting or acting, the reading situation
is materialized on stage while the actions of the musicians are at the same time dramatiz-
ing the book’s semantic content: the situation of waiting and fearing that fills the daily life
of the country women enduring war. In a rather sophisticated way, Goebbels is overlaying
some of the different temporalities involved in reading (as pointed out by Lisa Robertson
in “Time in Codex” in chapter one) on stage. And, if the statements gathered from Stein’s
book are unfocused and not organized in hierarchies of importance, then, through the
formal choices in the stage direction of the concert, exploiting among other things the
three-dimensionality of the scenic space, they are all permeated by the threatening back-
ground of war, which makes their motley contents touching on another level.

On several occasions, Heiner Goebbels has stressed the affinity he sees between
his own theatrical ideas and the compositional logic of Stein’s landscape plays, where
every one thing is as important as every other thing. In a lecture about the influence of
Stein on his work, he returns to a statement from Stein’s lecture “Plays”: “anything that
was not story could be a play” (LIA 261), which coins the spatial and non-narrative idea
of the theater that Stein developed along quite similar lines as Bonnie Marranca’s idea
of the “ecologies of theater” addressed in the introduction (Goebbels 2014).129 Goebbels
experiences this principle in an extension of the floating, ambient quality described in
connection with Hashirigaki, and further sees it as an empowerment of the reader or
spectator: by denying the making of pre-valorizations, Stein is letting us think for our-

129 Also used as the title for Goebbels’ unpublished lecture on his Stein related works was given at A
Valentine to Gertrude Stein, Copenhagen 2014 (and, in a previous version at Cornell University 2010).
He uses the same quote to define the non-narrative quality of his general theatrical vision, “the theater of
absence” (Goebbels 2015: 1-7).
In her memoir *Wars I Have Seen* she succeeds in creating a similarly productive interplay between making sense and blurring meaning by contrasting various narrative methods; in doing that she effortlessly transforms the ‘landscape-principle’ into an exceedingly political perspective: in the year 1943 during the war, which she spent in France, she juxtaposes seemingly unimportant observations with very severe ones. She ceaselessly switches, mixing personal and public facts without pausing for air […] In Gertrude Stein’s work, then, we also find a rare balance between humour, cynicism, terror and callousness, provocative distance or provocative empathy. Is her beloved dog suffering from diabetes more important to her than the question whether the bombs aimed at Italy are appropriate? With this seemingly random coexistence of gossipy detail, sweeping global-historic assumptions and very accurate political observations she provokes […] the gaze/focus/assessment upon/of the events by the reader. Not shielding us from this is a particular quality of hers, which I also try to translate into my work in music theatre (Goebbels 2015: 12-13).

Goebbels’ reading of *Wars I Have Seen* and his musical and scenic processing of this reading in *Songs* are particularly interesting in relation to the judgment of the same work by Barbara Will. Where Will sees an attempt at depoliticizing the collaborative strategy of the Vichy regime and an implicit defense of authoritarian politics, Goebbels sees Stein transforming her experimental landscape principle into a poetics with concrete, non-authoritarian political implications.

In Goebbels’ staged concert, the reader-become-audience is confronted with the everyday reality of a harsh, frightening and dangerous but also quiet and occasionally cheerful life in the French countryside during the German occupation. As Goebbels says in an interview: “the nice thing is that when you read this book – and probably when you hear this composition – you have to decide yourself, what is your own focus, between this relationship of your personal point-of-view and the political and social point-of-view” (Barker 2010). By refraining from establishing a hierarchy between the advantages of using honey instead of sugar, the possible diabetes of her poodle and the bombing of Italy, Stein’s text as staged by Goebbels confronts its reader with the conditions of daily living at a time of crisis: you will worry and be afraid and occupy yourself with the humanitarian and political situation, with the dramatic fates of people you meet or hear about, but you will also try not to think about this and not to talk about it, try to keep life going, you will try to get food, cook, tend to your garden, walk your dog and laugh at your neighbor’s jokes. These things cannot be held completely apart, and this testifies to a complexity of existence that is almost constantly glossed over in art and political discourse dealing with such times of crisis but that Stein insists on keeping wide open. Thus, in the ‘daily living’ perspective that Will finds morally dubious – that she sees Stein using as a propaganda tool justifying the Armistice – Goebbels finds the political radicalness of Stein’s war memoir.
In his concert, Goebbels is in fact unpacking a stark conflict in the reception of this work by Stein. *Wars I Have Seen* has been regarded as deeply conservative and ethically problematic because of the relationship between its passive civilian interpretation of space and the aggressive, militaristic logic of war that it stubbornly refuses to take on. In it, the war frequently seems like an oddly cruel background for the intense preoccupation with everyday small stuff. This disposition has troubled many readers, who have interpreted it as a trivializing and a belittlement of the atrocities of the war. Goebbels realizes the troubling effects and the progressive effects simultaneously in his concert. Stein’s rejection of progression, her circular concept of history, is the core of his work. It is in this quality that he finds in Stein’s work an aid to his ambition of creating a durable form of political theater, because it resists the temptation of making judgments on behalf of its audience. Instead, it points out the unsure ground that any such prejudgment rests upon, showing us, like the troubling anecdote of the unpolitical corn, that no political autopilots will ever work for long.

**The composer as a reader of literature**

By a few very concrete technologically and socio-politically motivated moves – two orchestras, one historical ensemble, one modern, picked apart and recombined – Goebbels restages Stein in his production in a way that at the same makes her work appear historically weighty, complex and situated in the time of its writing, and taking it into the future by opening up its relevance to the potential spectator’s experiences of present and future wars, or, as we shall see an example of shortly, present experiences with past wars.

Via its musical staging of Stein in a living room environment, *Songs of Wars I Have Seen* makes references to Cage’s *Living Room Music* addressed in chapter one. But where Cage produced his living room experience via the percussionists playing on household items, in Goebbels, the percussionist element is separated from the living room ambiance, as the string players of the ensemble get to read Stein’s words and reside among the living

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130 That Goebbels obviously is highly familiar with Cage’s work is manifested by the fact that he, as artistic director of the *Ruhrtriennale* (2012-14), chose to stage several works by Cage. See <https://www.heinergoebbels.com/en/archive/works/complete/view/342> (last accessed 210617)
room furniture, while the percussionists are banished to the glaringly illuminated back of the stage. In Goebbels’ opposite positioning of the percussionists, I see a reclaiming of Stein from the formalist reading of her that can be attributed to Cage. A more existential as well as political tone that is quite different from the intermedia Stein reception of the 1960s is forwarded in Goebbels’ – equally intermedia – Stein adaption. Furthermore, *Songs of Wars I Have Seen* draws a line through Stein’s oeuvre showing how the domestic theme changes from the playful liveliness of *Tender Buttons* that Cage picked up in *Living Room Music* to later works like *Wars I Have Seen*, where the domestic space is still something crucial and precious but much more fragile, threatened as it is by the fearful horizon of the war.

In the piece, Goebbels releases the collaborative potential in Stein, and like Cage he does this while treating the words of Stein as a concrete material to play and compose with like any other material sound that can be produced by the orchestra, and not as “text” to be set to music as Virgil Thomson did in his scores for Stein’s portraits and operas. Yet, Goebbels still manages to hold on to the situated reading experience so that literature as a medium is felt strongly throughout the concert. The material reality of the reading situation is constantly present on the stage. In this way, even if he is not in the first place dealing with Stein’s words as an expressive or confessional poetic medium, this gesture does not at all rob the words of their relevance, meaningfulness. They remain acutely concerning and intimate to the listener of the concert as they also can in the secluded, intimate reading situation of a silent reader with a book.

The postproductive aesthetics as described in chapter three is a dominant feature in Goebbels’ entire production, both as a composer and as a stage director. In his compositions, techniques of sampling are crucial, both via mechanical and digital processes as in the processing of the Beach Boys tunes in *Hashirigaki* and via strictly acoustic techniques as in the incorporation of scraps of baroque music in the score for *Songs of Wars I Have Seen*. By Goebbels’ own account, he feels that “one does not need to invent new musical forms”; instead, he “want[s] to pass on the important aesthetic experiences [he has] had” (Schultz 2011, my translation). It is in relation to his aesthetic experiences with literature that Goebbels’ work really stands out. He has worked predominantly with literary works not originally written for the stage, not just in his work with Stein, but also in his production in general. Many of his productions can be described as musically dramatized and staged readings of literature that in various ways maintain its specific media qualities, staging the book as a particular, situated material thing that consists not only of a temporally organized chain of words, and nor as a two-dimensional plane covered with marks or a three-dimensional sculptural object, but most fittingly of an operating machine that processes an entire environment or ecology and constitutes a new world. In *Hashirigaki*, the handwritten pages of Stein’s “long book” have a material presence on stage, as projections of Stein’s floating handwriting repeatedly overrun the stage referencing the play’s title, which is Japanese for scrawling or scribbling and repeating the floating quality of the
Beach Boys harmonies. But the performance also insists on the world-making qualities of the material writing and its base of paper, as sheets of print paper are used by the actors on stage to construct scenery, props, and stage settings, and the book – in a manner recalling concrete poetry of the 1960s discussed in chapter one – becomes a spatial tool creating the “environments” in which the action takes place. In *Songs of Wars I Have Seen*, as has been discussed, it is the situated reading experience that the book entails that is materialized on stage by the reading female musicians.

Levi Bryant’s definition of linguistic machines can shed some light on the way Goebbels is addressing the functionalities of literature and reading:

Not all machines are material in nature. While all linguistic entities require a material body in the form of speech or writing to exist, they nonetheless possess an incorporeal dimension that allows them to remain dormant for long periods of time, only to begin acting on other beings at another time. A national constitution is not a being composed of fixed material parts like a cell phone, but is nonetheless a machine. A recipe does not itself have any ingredients, but is still a machine for operating on ingredients. A novel does not itself contain any people, rocks, heaths, animals, bombs, or airborne toxic events but nonetheless acts on other machines such as people, institutions, economies, etc., in all sorts of ways. Debt is nothing that we could identify as a material thing in the world, but is a machine that organizes the lives of billions of people (Bryant 2014: 16).

Both of Goebbels’s Stein stagings are examples of a staged materialization of the world-making and processing power of literature as machines, and at the same time the postproductive and collaborative execution of the productions indicates the turn towards participatory culture that will be discussed in chapter five where I will address the world-making of fan art communities and the like.
The poet in the audience – the feedback loop of *Hardly War*

In 1995, Goebbels directed the music theater production *Die Wiederholung / The Repetition / La Reprise*, interweaving motifs from the Prince song “Joy in Repetition” with writings by Søren Kierkegaard and Alain Robbe-Grillet. A few years after the production, Robbe-Grillet published his first novel in over twenty years, called exactly *La reprise* (2001), a work that became an important comeback for the author (Schultz 2011). This anecdote illustrates how the productive feedback loop between the page and the stage suggested by Goebbels’ work can move in both directions.

Obviously, Gertrude Stein is not going to enter into the feedback loop in an equally literal way by coming out with a new book anytime soon, but nevertheless further feedback loops between the stage and the page including *Songs* have taken place. In the illustrated poetry and closet opera book *Hardly War*, South Korean born and US resident poet Don Mee Choi is taking Stein’s war back to poetry via Goebbels’ intermediation. As the book’s endnote states, “Heiner Goebbels’s *Song of Wars I Have Seen* (2007), a musical composition that incorporates Gertrude Stein’s texts from *Wars I Have Seen*, was the initial trigger for *Hardly War*” (Choi 2016: 95).

Choi’s book is difficult to pin down in terms of genre, language and medium. It is written mainly in English, but with brief Korean parts that are not immediately accessible to the reader not competent in Korean and stand as graphic symbols insisting upon this indecipherability to some readers, like when, under a block of repeated Korean sentences, the sentence “I refuse to translate” is repeated – suggesting a conundrum. It is part collage of documentary photographs and reproduced artifacts like postcards and sketches, part poetry, part opera libretto and part prose memoir that deals with the narrator’s childhood memories of growing up in South Korea in the 1960s as the daughter of a war photographer travelling around the regional hot spots of ongoing conflicts and wars. Choi’s book is an ironic, critical rewrite of a Korean war history that, in spite of the substantial involvement of American military, has been so belittled in American history due to persistent racial and geopolitical hierarchies that it is hardly considered an actual war, hence the title, *Hardly War*, or “the hardiest of wars” as is repeated through the book. Framing this project in the book’s opening piece “RACE=NATION”, Choi writes:

> I am trying to fold race into geopolitics and geopolitics into poetry. Hence, geopolitical poetics. It involves disobeying history, severing its ties to power. It strings together the faintly remembered, the faintly imagined, the faintly discarded, which is to say race=nation gets to speak

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131 To the non-Korean reading reader: “I refuse to translate” could indeed turn out to be a translation of the Korean sentence above, and thus it exhibits a paradox by performing the act it denies. The Korean sentence could also mean any other thing and thus “I refuse to translate” would be a performative emphasis of the act the text performs.

132 The official American designation for the Korean War 1950-53 in which America was a belligerent power is still “the Korean conflict.”
its own faint history in its own faint language. Its mere umbilical cord is hardly attached to anything at all. Hence, hardly=war (Choi 2016: 4).

The vocabulary in this quote recalls immediately the ambience of Goebbels’ production and of Stein’s memoir as framed by Goebbels, the faint and discarded war experience of the people neglected by a militaristic and ideologically clear-cut writing of history. In her endeavor to rewrite history on different terms, Choi is empowered by the open political theatre of Goebbels that feeds on the allegedly apolitical prose of Stein, precisely because it does not deliver its messages as predetermined but instead, as Goebbels stresses, “you have to decide yourself, what is your own focus, between this relationship of your personal point-of-view and the political and social point-of-view” (Barker 2010). Like Harryette Mullen’s poetry discussed in chapter three, Choi’s book bears witness to how Stein’s practice can be empowering by giving voice to those not immediately positioned as authorities with the right to tell the story. As Stein refrains from adapting the stock narratives that draw up the war in militaristic and/or politically unambiguous language, Choi resists the stock narratives of American history and tells what is normally not told about the Korean wars. In a manner similar to Mullen, Choi is recycling several verbal techniques of Stein’s, for instance sonic repetition (“I was cheerily cherrily red and merely merrily washed my face”, Choi 2016: 11) and, also like Mullen, she conducts a re-politicization of these techniques, like when food lists recalling the index of Tender Buttons’ “Food” section reveal the scarcities of life during war so prominent in Wars I Have Seen, only to cross over to include napalm and pesticides, addressing how part of the strategy of US warfare in Korea included destroying crops with poison and pesticides. In the book’s final section, “Hardly Opera”, the turbulent history of the 1960s following the Korean student revolution are played through, and next to a “choir of the world’s dead orphans” Choi has her father’s old camera (“Elmar”) and various flowers and objects do most of the talking, much like the way animals, machines and other objects appeared as characters in Stein’s ABC or the way porcelain figurines of Spanish saints constituted the model for the leading parts of Four Saints in Three Acts. Hardly War is a work written on a geopolitical indignation, revealing how specific strategic maneuvers and weapons used by the US military were aimed at civilians, and thus that war crimes were committed in a war that is still remarkably belittled in American mainstream historical discourse.

If many of the verbal techniques applied by Choi relate to Stein’s punning, her operas and landscape plays as well as the interweaving of different voices speaking in Wars, it is in her use of postproductive techniques that the work speaks most directly with Goebbels. Choi recycles elements from many sources including historical news articles, radio broadcasts and propaganda material from the US army, as well as poetry, theory, films and children’s songs, but most of the time disparate components are combined in an assemblage without the edges showing. There are floating transitions in the text where pronouns, time, place and language will shift within a textual flow or even in the middle of a sentence, indicating that a jump or cut took place somewhere not immediately pos-
sible to pin down. In this practice, Choi is literally “disobeying history, severing its ties to power” as declared in the opening piece through her managing of the postproductive technique, where she decontextualizes the fragments to put them together in new ways that are independent of the dominant narratives they were originally part of.

When put into a new context that implies a historically potent situation, the technique of Stein and Goebbels works as a political, even identity political, wall breaker, much like we saw in the case of Mullen’s work. The collaborative poetics is animated, and becomes potent and political when entered by writers occupying minority positions. As stressed by Ansley Clark, *Hardly War*’s project remains strikingly clear for all its polyphonic and medially mixed technique and its consistently nuanced discourse: “Choi’s speaker desires to prove an existence – both her own and an entire history’s” (Clark 2016). Again, the similarities to Mullen’s poetic project as described in chapter three are striking. In her own phrasing, Mullen is also out to prove an existence that she has experienced as being negated, that of an experimental poetry tradition that is critical, avant-garde, based in and part of African-American literary history. Both poets are up against dominant discourses undervaluing their perspectives due to these discourses’ – more or less conscious and evident – ties to an ideology of white supremacy.

II. MACHINE FOR MAKING A SCENE: AMBIENT POETICS ON AND OFF THE PAGE

If Choi’s book-bound framing of the broad and open-ended practice of Goebbels’ *Songs of Wars I Have Seen* appears more semantically pointed than Goebbels’ concert piece, the postproductive techniques applied by both Choi and Goebbels on a formal level point towards a broadened attention to the remote functionalities of literature’s media ecologies as discussed in relation to Stein’s work with reading and paratext in the first part of this chapter. *A Prank of Georges* that appeared from the small print label Essay Press in 2010 is another work that, as much as Choi’s, seems immediately recognizable as book-bound literature, but which exhibits not just the formal and media ecological multiplicity, but also the semantic openness that Heiner Goebbels’ music theater brings forward in Stein’s work, while it returns to this work’s fundamental preoccupation with anthropotechnics.

Back on the page – *A Prank of Georges*

*A Prank of Georges* is the product of a collaboration between American poet, scholar, and performance artist Thalia Field and French poet, literary scholar and translator Abigail Lang. The work has grown out of an event originally scheduled to be a poetry translation workshop in the summer of 2008 based on both poets’ engagement with Stein’s work, but
ended up as a creative, collaborative writing and reading project and was performed in several live reading versions both before and after it was published in book form. The performances were all site-specific and scripted for and performed by two to four voices, but the focus was not on documenting these events, and the work thus comes to us primarily in the shape of the printed book (Field and Lang 2015 – email to the author).

There are, however, several immediate ways in which this particular book is pushing towards the limits of its medium without moving towards visual and sculptural artifact. Instead, I would suggest, it is extending heavily upon the theatrical qualities of the printed book as was suggested in Jerome McGann’s accentuation of its qualities of framing, staging and putting on display. Most immediately there is the title’s naming of the ‘prank’ as a sort of genre label. Contrary to the strictly verbal concept ‘joke’, a prank is a practical joke that involves an action when tricking or playing with someone using something more than merely words. A book that calls itself *A Prank of Georges* thus strongly suggests that when opening the book, we are entering a domain of playful action and not just of language.

Second, the idea of individual authorship that for hundreds of years has seemed inseparable from the book in its codex form is challenged by the book’s genesis in a collaborative workshop context. Further, even more dominantly than *Hardly War*, *A Prank of Georges* consists of postproductive material, some of it shaped and manipulated, and some kept as exact quotes cut out and used in raw form. Besides the main corpus of text coming from across Stein’s written works, the colophon lists the following authors as quoted: “H.L. Mencken, Charles Darwin, Ulla Dydo, Catherine West, A.S Kripke, A.J. Ayer, Walter Benjamin, Bertrand Russell, Sir James George Frazer, Robert Garapon, and the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*” (PG). This list gives a good hint of the book’s diversity of topics, genres and language, and its constant interweaving of scraps of poetry and theater with the natural and human sciences. Thus, the collaborative situation in this work is taking place on several fronts. There is a collaborative space between Field and Lang, the two poets working together, and the collaboration between Stein and the poets reaching forward to the concrete situated reader, as we have seen in the previous examples. But further, due to the collage techniques utilized, it reaches back to the multiple writers and thinkers who produced the recycled textual material in a complex ecology of dispersed authorship connecting conventionally segregated disciplines. More explicitly than in *Hardly War*, the work has a bilingual aspect as it fluctuates between English and French – magnifying the bilingual situation that Stein worked in as an American in France, but also loosening the ties between the codex and the constitution of national literatures, which, in spite of her long exile, is still strongly present in Stein’s discourse about her writing and its specific Americanness.¹³⁴

¹³³ One polyvocal reading carried out in Toulouse (without the participation of Thalia Field) was documented and is available online (Lang et. al. 2014).

¹³⁴ As with all claims about Stein this can also be nuanced. Stein’s equation of Americanness with the 20th century (in “Portraits and Repetition”, *Geographical History* and elsewhere) is already severing the
But perhaps most importantly, by creating the form of the “machine” Field and Lang are addressing the huge changes in the technology of literature. This move recalls Levi Bryant’s suggestion of machine-oriented ontology, in which all the world’s entities are considered as “‘machines’ to emphasize the manner in which entities dynamically operate on inputs producing outputs” (Bryant 2014: 6, italics in original). In this basic sense, *A Prank of Georges* can be described as a series of printed machines as they are designated by the individual titles of the pieces in the book, and as they are all operating on textual input (postproductive material) producing various outputs as the inputs are being cut up and spread out over the pages or run through various filters or operations. The entire work consists of such “machines” held together in three sections called “pulleys.” By name and game, this form deals with the technological circumstances of writing, thinking and staging, addressing (highly self-consciously) the material workings that constitute a written work, whether poetic, instructive, scientific or theatrical. Thus, there is a “Machine for making a scene” and a “Machine for making sentences”, as well as a “Machine for naming names”, a “Machine for finally”, a “Machine for finding a straight line”, a “Machine for compounding chimeras”, a “Machine for making spare parts”, a “Machine for seeing ghosts”, a “Machine for making marks” and a “Machine for spreading rumors.”

What is important about the term machine is the way it suggests technology and technical medium rather than literary genre. Mentioned in relation to Goebbels’ operating on literature as well as on Stein’s take on genres in chapter one, Bryant’s account of linguistic machines as entities that – via a material body (here, the printed page) and an incorporeal dimension that allows them to rest for years and then “begin acting on other beings at another time” (Bryant 2016: 16) – describes how these machines distribute time.
For this temporal distribution to take place, the incorporeal dimension of the machine is crucial, as it is defined by “iterability” and “potential eternity”:

The first great division between types of machine is between corporeal and incorporeal machines. A corporeal machine is any machine that is made of matter, that occupies a discrete time and place, and that exists for a duration. Subatomic particles, rocks, grass, human bodies, institutions, and refrigerators are all corporeal machines. Incorporeal machines, by contrast, are defined by iterability, potential eternity, and the capacity to manifest themselves in a variety of different spatial and temporal locations at once while retaining their identity. Recipes, scores of music, numbers, equations, scientific and philosophical theories, cultural identities, novels, and so on, are all examples of incorporeal machines” (Bryant 2014: 26, my emphasis).

Bryant’s definition of incorporeal machine frames perfectly the machinic qualities of literature that Field and Lang are exploiting in their work. The other central prop used, the pulley, points specifically, I would suggest, to the medium of theatre. But significantly, the pulley is not pointing towards the aspect of bodily co-presence or authenticity frequently theorized as an exclusive trait of theater as a medium but rather – once again – machinary.135 Pulleys control the kinetic systems that are used to take control of the performance space, like when set pieces are changed, stage lights controlled and stage tricks or special effects performed. In its effect of connecting the individual machines, the pulley also suggests the idea of the “machinic assemblage” crucial in Deleuze and Guattari as well as in Bryant. Machines are always interconnected in new larger machinic structures or infrastructures (Deleuze and Guattari 2004: 4; Bryant 2014: 75-77).

As already suggested, Gertrude Stein’s work is a crucial element in A Prank of Georges. The book’s epigraphs are picked from Stein, many machine titles have a distinctly Steinian sound, and when it comes to raw text it seems that almost one third of the book’s sentences consist of quotes and passages from her work, consistently marked through the use of bold italics. The title’s “Prank” – in combination with the plural “Georges” – recalls the playing with naming and counting so explicit in To Do. Many times, Stein has elaborated on the relationship between nouns and proper names and switched the functions of these two related grammatical units when treating and portraying nouns as individualized objects in Tender Buttons (for example “Book”, “A Carafe, That Is a Blind Glass”) or attempting to use proper names as ontological categories, particularly by conjugating them in the plural like she did in A Novel of Thank You (“We know three Emilys” NOT 63) and like the Georges of this title, highly familiar to Stein readers, especially from a whole series of George(s) texts dating from the 1920-30s.136

135 Both in classical theater studies and in more recent performance theory such as Peggy Phelan’s idea of the ontology of performance stressing “presence” (Phelan 1993) and Erika Fischer-Lichte 2008.
136 Evidently, Georges with an s can both be a plural conjugation of the English name George and the French version of the same name. Stein’s George(s) titles include: “Finally George. A Vocabulary of...
The theatrical feeling is present all along as the individual machines in *A Prank of Georges* are constructed by using dramaturgical strategies. The texts used are split up into voices and tracks that sometimes appear similar to characters in a play. Many of the techniques appear parallel to those applied by Goebbels when adapting non-dramatic text for the stage, splitting up and piecing together to adjust the text-based material to the theatrical and musical space. Only here, it is in some ways the other way around. The aesthetic technique of assemblage is similar, but if Goebbels is attempting to find ways of applying the medial qualities of the literary text to the stage (by building props out of pages or by realizing the reading situation on stage, as we saw) here, it seems that the medial qualities of the stage with its options for moving actors and props around in all three dimensions (with the aid of machines and pulleys), is transposed onto the flat spatiality of the page. In this process, Field and Lang draw up voices and tracks graphically on the pages, using different typographies, colors and spacing to interrupt the linear flow of textuality. The graphic organization of the individual machines seems inspired by the way Stein’s plays appear in print, always experimenting with folding the paratextual markers and lines to be spoken into each other, in a case of what performance theorist W.B. Worthen calls *mise-en-page* (Worthen 2005). But the technique is also taken further in terms of non-conventional typography, such as the use of red ink, making the text of the machines appear even more like a score for performance that invites collective interaction. In Stein’s work the question of being, as we have seen, is always a question of being there, being in position, and in *A Prank* this circumstance is translated to the space of the page, where figures, voices or characters appear momentarily as they are drawn up graphically on the page and vanish when their tracks run out.  

What *A Prank of Georges* exploits is that the cyclical conception of history that Goebbels perceived in Stein’s work has an affinity with the medium of the codex. As discussed in chapter one, the book’s relationship to time is equally complex and non-linear, and what Field and Lang do when moving words and thoughts around in the space of the pages is to use this medial quality to create a space where multiple temporalities coexist – bringing scraps of Stein’s work that were originally separated by decades together in new simultaneous constellations along with words and ideas from other centuries and disciplines (such as the history of Greek drama, 18th century French satire, the history of philosophy and natural sciences, new puns and bits of contemporary biology), thus exploiting in non-linear form the particular durational way that a book can be an event, a temporally dispersed event. The parts of the assemblage are not swallowed up by a unified poetical voice or discourse centered upon a single subjectivity. More, they are like choreographed interactions between ready-mades and, in a sense, Field and Lang are

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137 Accordingly, in all the following quotes from *A Prank of Georges* textual emphasis (for instance use of bold, italics, different font sizes, and red ink) are reproduced as in the original without further comments.
folding the ambient poetics implied in the theatrical space back into a bibliographic media poetics – they renegotiate the relation between page and stage once again.

“Machine for identifying individuals”

If we return to the perspective of cultural techniques as it was actualized in Stein’s children’s books, the implication of this concept is that it considers linguistic and numerical practices like reading and writing, and further, naming and counting, as something like ‘pranks’ in the sense that they imply action and effect, and are at the same time playful and unpredictable. As such, they can be considered machines producing individuals, discernable objects and places as well as relations between these entities. The anthropotechnics of Stein’s ABC, where names and birthdays are framed as tools of hominization, filtering the characters off from their surroundings, is a pivot in most of the machines in A Prank. The “Georges” run through the entire work as a concretion of the playing with names and identities. In the “Machine for identifying individuals” the cultural technique of naming’s problematic involvement in hominization is dissected via the example of George:

an abandoned infant
cannot be the same as the married adult
even if they’re both identified as George

(it’s the temporal parts of the machine which need fixing)

so individuals can be slowed
to the speed of their properties (APG 7; coloring, emphasis and font size in original, this applies to all the following quotes from this work)

The problem of the name as an identity marker is actualized both by the possibility of repetition – that the same name can be given to an infinite number of separate individuals – and by time – that the individual is not necessarily identical to itself over time (i.e. “What is the use of being a little boy if you are going to grow up to be a man”). The Stein passage that follows directly after this comes from the little-known piece “Birth and Marriage” (1924) which, like To Do, deals with the importance and the arbitrariness of birthdays and in “Machine for identifying individuals” leads into the following confusion of George with a sea-pen.

In this possible world George could be a little more a sea-pen, and the sea-pen a little more George. And then the machine makes another possible world in which the sea-pen is even more George, plays more the George-role, and George more the sea-pen-role – and on and on until
for practical and non-essential purposes, the sea-pen has taken the identity of George and George the pen.

With no essential quality to their individuality to anchor them, every enemy of the sea-pen now perceives only an enemy in George. (APG 8)

Sea-pen is a compound word assembled from the name of a man-made object (pen) and a natural element (sea), and it is immediately referring to a somewhat compound species: in zoology, a sea-pen is a marine coral, and thus a plant-animal hybrid that appears only in colonies, never as an ‘individual.’ Further, this particular sea-pen appears to be not only part plant and part animal, as it were, but also part pen and part George. This alignment of George and the sea-pen recalls the phenomenon of the alias, pseudonym or “pen-name” – of which George is a recurring example throughout the book, where both George Eliot and George Sand appear on several occasions.

George Eliot in particular was a pronounced influence to the young Stein when she began writing, whereas several observers have suggested the flamboyant and bon vivant persona of George Sand as a model for Stein’s self-fashioning in the early 1920s (Wagner-Martin 1995: 163). To female writers of the 18th and 19th centuries, pen-names provided a gender neutrality that was generally helpful in their struggle to achieve legitimacy as authors. The female literary Georges – which in Stein’s work may also refer to George Fleming, the pen-name for U.S. novelist Julia Constance Fletcher, who was Stein’s acquaintance and the subject of an early portrait – are particularly apt for the investigation of naming as a strategy of subcategorization, as they quote each other through their aliases, using the name George less as a proper name and more as a category or a noun implying ‘male novelist’ or rather, ‘female novelist posing as male.’ To Stein, the counting of Georges (as in the play The Five Georges) also plays on W.M. Thackeray’s humorous lectures on the four first British kings named George, The Four Georges (1860), but as is also promoted by the G section of To Do (and repeated in the “Machine for get me not”) the name George is interesting to Stein for numerous reasons, not least

138 Evidently Constance Fletcher picked her alias (i.e. George Fleming) in homage to George Sand.
the fact that it begins with a G, like Gertrude. Parallel to the functionality of George as a pen-name, it thus sometimes appears like a male version of Gertrude as a component in the performance of Stein’s disidentification with the role of the male genius.

The serious playfulness of the investigation of the borders between identity and non-identity that are intermingled with the practices of naming and categorization re-sembles what we saw in To Do, and if the brutality seems less dominant in A Prank of Georges, the possible dangers inherent in the lack of “essential quality to their individuality to anchor them” are suggested via the introduction of the “enemy” of George and the sea-pen.

In “Machine for making eggs”, the protectionist aspects of forming subjectivity and its relationship to naming (“George’s fifty year ego-trip”) are investigated further. Built up around scraps from Stein’s plays For the Country Entirely (1916) and Listen to Me (1936), the piece follows up on the unstable connection of naming to counting played with by Stein – in To Do as well as in Listen to Me (“His name is count” APG 39). While sticking with the name George, it becomes less and less evident whether this name designates an individual or a species. The relation between individual and species has to do with quantity, which is also a factor that comes up when the crooked connections between ideas of individuality and capitalist economy are traced (“Individual Property!” APG 38). Further, the machine tries to transgress the perspective of human perception as the only possible filtering of the world by mixing the poetic word games with perspectives from natural history as well as philosophy of language (“to a human, organisms can appear as discrete entities moving and living in space and time” APG 39 and “an individual subject is a logical subject of discourse” APG 38). Due to the score-like structure, and the effect that comes from the dialogic exchanges and the frontal clashes between disparate parts of the assemblage, it is almost impossible to paraphrase what happens in this rather whimsical machine, which is why I reproduce an extensive quote:

**Chorus:** And what of George’s fifty year ego-trip? Which George was that, and isn’t it a different kind of George than the kind that rides bicycles and rams walls?

**Chorus:** an individual subject is a logical subject of discourse, after all.

**Chorus:** (__________)

**Chorus:** it’s practically living. A living thing.

**Chorus:** All the sheets of paper in this room is an individual. They are not the same as blue, power, ancestry, or any other property. What is an individual and what is a property?

**Chorus:** Individual Property!

**Chorus:** Or as some point out, only individuals can be traced in space and time exclusively in one of each at once –

**Chorus:** or, you can point out that for years we’ve thought of members of a species as equivalent if they occupy the same niche ---

*Dear Mrs. Steele.*

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I like to ask you questions. Do you believe that it is necessary to worship individuality. We do.
Mrs. Henry Watterson

Chorus: But that’s just ridiculous. Of course individuals vary in resource, behavioral, and even ecological ways. But species are either individuals with organisms as their parts, or classes, with organisms as members.

And so counting is lugubrious.

Character. And everybody counts.
Second character. What is a count.
Third character. A count is a gentleman who has a name.
Fourth character. And what is his name.
Fifth character. His name is count.
All the characters. In this case is there a fifth character.
Fifth character. Yes, because he can count.

Chorus: Species are individuals, and specific organisms within them are… also individuals.
Chorus: Take a human…
Chorus: … relatively big. Duration relatively long.
Chorus: Perception a certain way (to a human, organisms can appear as discrete entities moving and living in space and time. Everyone sits on their own chair. Everyone is unique. Some can be virtually the same but still be in different chairs, so are still two individuals. And individuals do not casually pass in and out of existence, either.)

Chorus: Born, continues to exist, dies. Dead, and the same does not return. A new organism totally similar to another might appear, but without spatio-temporal relationship, it must be considered a new individual.

Is the resemblance among Georges similar to the resemblance among carafes? Platonic type? Imagine the ideal George. Family resemblance? Except Georges tend precisely not to be siblings.

George dies. And then George lives over there, as two Georges, moving through the stages of a butterfly. A pupa and a caterpillar have nothing obvious in common yet they are stages of the same individual, retaining unity and continuity (APG 38-40).

In “Machine for making eggs”, Field and Lang are setting in motion naming and counting machines and follow how they work on humans as well as other entities, in relation to the dimensions of time and space. Like Stein in the children’s books where being was
“being there” we find an immediate connection between position and identity. As long as “everyone sits in their own chair” they are “individuals.” Thus, being is not only being there, but being in one’s chair and the resemblance between the subject position and the theatrical role is accentuated.

Gertrude Stein as machinic assemblage

If Heiner Goebbels’ staged concert, as I claim, is one of the most nuanced readings of an underappreciated work by Stein, then A Prank of Georges fulfills this function for several other works, many of which have also been seldom and neglectfully read in the academic reception. Not least To Do, which is picked up in several machines. For instance, the “Machine for making cells” evolving lightheartedly around the anthropotechnic search for names and birthdays and the “Machine for get me not,” which borrows from the ABC’s section on V featuring a character called Van. The machine investigates Stein’s practice of making social bonds in writing, and binding others to her (“When this you see remember me” APG 109). In the case of Van (Stein’s nickname for her close friend Carl Van Vechten), it is evidently not only a pleasant social gesture but also a binding, almost threatening, one, as is displayed by this quote from To Do:

If you forget me what will I do I will bite with my big teeth all the way through to you.
A poem has to have big teeth
And a poem has to say forget-me-nots (APG 110)

Like many of the other machines, it examines the workings, the performative effects of Stein’s poetics when we think in terms of context more than content. The most evolved unpacking of To Do is perhaps the “Machine for spelling-bee and fire-fly”, where Field and Lang play extensively with the spelling games from To Do. The homonymic play of the names Marcelle and Marcel, that represent the letter M in To Do, is introduced via a quote, and enhanced graphically (using red ink) and continued via inter-linguistic play on the sounds of French and English. That the sounds of the same letters differ immensely in one language, Stein made perfectly clear in the lessons of the First Reader and the stories of To Do (“it takes an eye”). But the sonic functionality of the letters differs even more when another language is brought up – and this is an aspect much less obvious to a primarily English-oriented reader of To Do. Yet, as Field and Lang unpack in their assemblage piece, it is constantly present in Stein’s text. If the two l’s that visually separate the homonymic names from each other according to Stein’s text (“It takes an eye to see that a girl has a double l e and the boy has only one l” APG 84) are pronounced in French, they become homonyms in their own right, “2 L’s” in French sound like “deux ailes”—two wings. As the machine unfolds, these are taken up on the next pages of To Do where birds,
bats and an anthropomorphic airplane appears. The two e’s of Marcelle are also picked out and homonymically become “deux eoufs”, two eggs, turning in Stein’s text into the two children that Marcelle and Marcel end up having.

In this machine, Field and Lang take on Stein’s alphabetic wordplay (that “Alphabets and names make games”) and elaborate on and explicate them, as well as letting them connect to new meanings. What they find in To Do, is the linguistic equivalent of the bibliographical materiality discussed earlier. If Stein, in McGann’s argument, turned bibliographical tricks into linguistic ones, Field and Lang turn Stein’s linguistic tricks into bibliographical ones by making use of some of the tools not available to (or not embraced

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by) Stein – like changes in typography and print color – and via these tricks they disperse Stein’s text into tracks unfolding on the page.

As we have seen, Field and Lang’s book consistently treats Stein’s collected works as an open and entangled textual body and cut from all corners of it, letting new patterns and thoughts grow. What is important to note in relation to “Machine of spelling-bee” is how the machinic processes of alphabetization and their effects of hominization as they are played out in Stein’s work, is taken a step further out into the ecology in this machine, using material from the ABC and a handful of other works by Stein, but significantly, starting out by coupling with another machine operating outside of Stein’s strictly textual corpus. The text opens with an iconic scene in the construction of the Stein persona: one of her sittings for Picasso’s famous portrait of her.

Almost in profile, while her left eye, the ear and hairline pivot at each sitting, as well as the outline of the coiffure, Stein tells Picasso she hears with her eyes and sees with her ears (APG 84).

Thus, the question of constructing what “within a given culture is addressed as ‘a person’” (Siegert 2015: 11), which is investigated throughout *A Prank*, is here extended to the machinic construction of the author’s persona. What Field and Lang address by opening the machine with this scene is what McGann phrased as Stein’s “allowing herself to become transformed into a circus animal” (albeit an early phase of it), and by bringing it into this machine an assemblage is made between the general play with names and identities in Stein’s texts and her own construction of her artist’s persona at the other end of the ecology. The wordplay from *To Do* is taken up to create new relations in the Stein machine, by combining it with important attributes of the biographical mythology around Stein such as the friendship between Stein and Picasso and how it is staged in the mutual portraits they produced of each other. In this way, Field and Lang’s machine is making tangible why, as suggested in chapter one, we have to consider Andy Warhol to be collaborating with Stein just as much as John Cage is, although Cage’s commitment to her written works appears so much stronger. However, Warhol is taking another part of the media ecology as the point of departure for his collaboration, the construction of the artist persona; a part that is no less significant than the written works for understanding Stein’s contemporary relevance.

Further in this machine, the relationship to Alice B. Toklas, an even weightier part of Stein’s private and public persona, is suggested in a natural continuation of the ABC games via the letter B, Toklas’ third initial. As Stein referred to Toklas as her wife, the B from Toklas’s name is played out against the “marrying bee” that marries Marcelle and Marcel in the story of M, and in this context commenting on Stein and Toklas’ queered version of the bourgeois heterosexual marriage. What is unpacked by the machine here – by singling out the equivalence between “B” and “bee” – is how the marriage of a homonymic couple could resonate with the marriage of a homosexual couple.
Finally, the machine also processes the aspects of the media ecology discussed in the beginning of this chapter. The quote from a letter from Bennet Cerf, Stein’s current editor at Random House, recalls Stein’s failed attempts at publication of her ABC: “everyone at Random House was ‘as cold as a slab of alabaster’ about To Do” (APG 86). Thus, another level of reflection upon the materiality of writing is added as the writing’s access to readership and the conditions of readership are included in the machine. The struggle for publication was an immense source of frustration in Stein’s career, but what Field and Lang draw attention to here, is that this is also a fact that has contributed to making out of Stein’s writing this movable network that they are able to pick and choose from so freely.

As I discussed in relation to the media ecology of Tender Buttons, the standard expectation in the order of Gutenberg is that the concept of the literary work equates a singular title with a particular delimited book (that holds the material shape of a codex), thus constructing stable literary work entities tied to the book. But the delayed publication of almost every other work by Stein, along with her own extensive practice of intertextual (or intratextual) borrowings from herself, and her rewritings of and revisits to previous pieces, have worked to turn Stein’s oeuvre into a corpus of text in which the Gutenbergian literary work concept has been a lot less dominant than in the authorships of many of her peers. The relatively arbitrary assemblage of texts written at different points in time, both in Stein’s own published collections and in the posthumous collections from the Yale University Press, only enhanced this condition. Together, the dispersed publication and intratextual connections enhance the ongoing, floating or ambient quality – what Heiner Goebbels stressed in regard to The Making of Americans, and what Holly Melgard responded to in her algorithmic processing of Stein’s long novel – and expands it to the oeuvre in its entirety.

One might object that the possibility to keep returning to and rewriting a work of literature is a distinctive feature of the medium of literature as printed matter, as I have also addressed at the beginning of chapter one. Thus, all literature – due to the qualities of its medium – carries these opportunities. Further, it is indisputable that rewriting and revising old texts in new texts was a central strain in the media ecology of literature in pre- and early modern times. From this point of view, as has been framed with the expression “the Gutenberg parenthesis” (Sauerberg 2009), one could hold that the relatively stable fetishized work concept of modernity is a historical exception. Even with such factors taken into consideration, however, I still believe that the work of Stein – due to its particular poetics and publication conditions – more than most poetic oeuvres of its time invites its readers or collaborators to treat it as an entangled whole and cut across boundaries between individual works, as the case is in A Prank. This is significant for understanding Stein’s contemporary relevance because, as suggested by Goldsmith in the introduction to this chapter, we are approaching a situation where such an ambient and ongoing sense of textual abundance is the rule rather than the exception.
*A Prank of Georges* takes up Stein’s playing with words and names on a textual level, on an intratextual and an intertextual level and, not least, on the non-textual levels of the media ecology, including her experience of being a name, a brand name, and consequently the “Machine for branding” contains just one line: “*Everybody knows my name*” (APG 121). If Mullen’s work with Stein already exhibited dependency on the construction of Stein as a convergence figure, in *A Prank of Georges* this trait is taken even further, as the book revolves around Stein’s oeuvre as a corpus that consists of contextual practices as much as textual. ‘Gertrude Stein’ and her work are combined into a machine that can process all sorts of thoughts and ideas.

The name of George, and lurking behind it Gertrude, works as a common thread through it and makes pulleys connecting machines into assemblages that are fed with words and thoughts from disparate sources. Like Caroline Bergvall suggested, they are “doing a Gertrude Stein” on themes from science and natural history from the 16th century to today, on the history of naming and language, on theories of translation and pronunciation, on philosophy of human consciousness and language, on natural life and machine functionality. All these factors are collaborating in machines of questioning that are connected into multiple assemblages. Like in Goebbels’ work, the importance is on posing questions, not on making answers stick. As the book’s final Stein quote, from *Everybody’s Autobiography*, goes:

*Gertrude:* *This is what I mean. After all if you ask a question unless not even when you are very little the answer is not interesting, if there is an answer why listen to it if you can ask another question, listening to an answer makes you know that time is existing but asking a question makes you think that perhaps it does not* (APG 140).

In accordance with the name of their publishing label, Essay Press, the machines are essays in the sense that they are testing, experimenting and asking questions but never allowing an answer to stand long enough for it to stiffen. They investigate the themes of *To Do* as well as many other Stein works of hominization through names and numbers, organizing and socializing. And, in following the advice of Sianne Ngai that all engagement with art and cultural products needs to consider in aesthetic terms the circumstances of their production, distribution and consumption, they move insistently between several levels in the ecology – including publication (or the lack of it), conversations with friends, and the diverse scientific associations that spring off some of Stein’s characteristic moves, such as her treating objects and landscapes like human characters and treating given names of people like regular nouns, species or concepts.

That they work with the page and not the stage in this staging (or paging) of Stein is significant. The temporality of the collaborative impulse is differently conducted – it is temporally dispersed in another way. As discussed in chapter one, what Stein herself stressed in her lecture “Plays”, in regard to time, that the position of the silent reader is
freer than that of the theatregoer, and what Thalia Field elaborated on in Seneca Review: “books reveal themselves as events differently – both for the reader and the writer. Audience is dispersed, sometimes separated by centuries” (Butler et al. 2008: 6).

As discussed, the book that Field and Lang construct through postproductive cut, copy and paste techniques is exploiting this sense of temporality in a particularly explicit way, creating a non-linear temporal space where many voices speak at the same time, thus assigning a different path away from the materially seamless book of the Gutenberg Galaxy than that suggested by cultivating the book as artifact, picture, sculpture or object otherwise implying stability. Instead, they use Stein in an attempt to promote a version of the book as a score – or as the title of the book’s first machine states, as a “Machine for making a scene.”

The potential range in this temporal long-distance collaboration – this eventness over time that is made possible through reading – is crucial for this study. That literature in print can carry out aesthetic and social interactions across long stretches of time and across the globe is the essential precondition for studying the artistic reception of Gertrude Stein. If one ties the performative situation or the collaborative potential exclusively to a traditional theatrical situation of physical co-presence between the collaborating parties, then one is cut off from the many ways that a book can be a performance or event – because it generates responses and opens up new collaborations that are constantly challenging its stability and its status as an artifact. But equally importantly, if one cuts the experience of reading literature off from the theatrical components of the media ecology, how our reading is framed, staged and displayed, one misses defining parts of this ecology – how, when it comes to the reading of literature, in many ways “context is more important than content” as the poet Tan Lin, whose work I will now approach, has stressed.

In their collaborative hybrid, Abigail Lang and Thalia Field consider reading and writing collective endeavors. They pick, choose, assemble and put the fragments in conversation with each other, exhibiting literature or writing (since they include as much non-fiction as “high” literature and poetry and operate without making formal distinctions between these genres) as an active thinking machine that, possessed by Stein’s particular reading technology, functions like an entire ecology of connected words and objects where the letters exchanged between Stein and her discouraged editor, the reflections of Stein scholar Ulla Dydo or the speculations of language historian H.L. Mencken on the problems of naming equal value to Stein’s lines of poetry. The different ways that context and paratext stages the text are reflected upon, restaged and renegotiated. In a manner that is pointing towards Tan Lin’s practice, they experiment with the spectrum of reading and non-reading that our reading skills cover.
Tan Lin: “Reading is a kind of integrated software”

In a 2000 essay, American poet Tan Lin draws a line between innovations in encryption, telegraph and radio technology and modernist literature, dwelling on the writing of Gertrude Stein as a practice of coding and uncoding messages, leading up to digital code and information theory. In the same essay, Lin claims:

The time for reading and especially for reading individual works is over. Individual works can only be sampled, and subjected to statistical analysis. A massively parallel computing system could have a field day with the collected writings now being assembled within this computing device or poem (Lin 2000).

This statement recalls Melgard’s piece and resonates with the rise of the internet as a basic living condition, creating out of all text and information an interconnected rhizomatic network structure not organized in organic work units, but most of all it reads like a post-human radicalization of the way Field and Lang read Stein’s work as an entangled corpus of text, not to be read contemplatively, but rather to be sampled, and replayed, even if they did stop short of automated processes of computing and statistical analysis suggested by Lin.

Tan Lin speaks of “Literature as Space with Language Attached to It” (SCV 76), and as already introduced, he is one of the sources of my concept of ambient poetics. As also addressed earlier, the idea of an ambient poetics holds a connection to musical forms, like the musique d’ameublement of Satie and the extensions upon these ideas developed by Cage and other minimalist and concrete composers of the 1960s, as well as later forms of popular music like the Beach Boys songs taken up by Goebbels and the literally “ambient music” of Brian Eno. Lin has also been highly preoccupied with the relation between experimental literature and various forms of ambient and electronic music and noise. As suggested by the anecdote of Heiner Goebbels’ first encounter with Stein through Robert Wilson singing passages from The Making of Americans, and as confirmed by the many interesting sonic processings of Stein’s work that thrive on the internet, 139 an ambient, floating, quality of Stein’s language can be experienced when it is listened to, as Bernard Heidsieck did in his Gertrude Stein composition Respirations et brèves rencontres. Lin is also making this connection:

139 Not least the monstrous 2008 performance of The Making of Americans in its entirety by American artist Gregory Laynor, who passes through various rhythmic modes in his reading to end up chanting the last chapters. Laynor’s performance is available in its entirety on ubuweb (Laynor 2008) where many other sound adaptions can be found, including a series of sonic adaptions of Geography and Plays (Soft palate 2005). Especially interesting for the point here are Ergo Phizmiz’s sonic contextualization of “Sacred Emily” (2005) and Warren Burt’s “Miss Furr and Miss Skeene” (2005) for computer-generated voice.
Let me pretend for a minute to be Gertrude Stein, who is no longer living or thus speaking to you but exists now like a former president, i.e. an endless sound recording, a transgendered or homoerotic gramophone of herself speaking to herself, especially in her monstrously long book called *The Making of Americans* which Edmund Wilson said was very queer and very boring and confessed to having not read […]. The greatest poems are psychotropic poems that cannot be read but only listened to (Lin 2000).

But, like Stein, Lin is also continuously interested in the process of reading with the eyes, not just listening with the ears, and in his pursuit of an ambient reading practice he has experimented widely with digital formats up throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. For instance, he was one of the first to excel in the genre of floating digital poems created as Flash videos (for instance “Dub Version”, 2002), where words appear in combinations accompanied by electronic music, turning their reading or contemplation into an ambient trance-like consumption that prevents the reader’s mind from dwelling long enough to begin interpreting or decoding the content, forcing the words to function more as a sort of electronic wallpaper than as coded messages. In his continued poetic practice, Lin’s skepticism towards the self-evidence of reading has taken the shape of an investigation into the diversity of phenomena that the word reading seems to cover and, in this process, he has returned to the book format, but is using it in a highly innovative manner. As Lin points out, there are so many different genres of reading: the word ‘reading’ includes practices like reading a recipe, reading an Excel sheet, and reading a poem, and in his mind all these practices deserve our attention.

Lin is approaching the whole paradigm of literature, or poetry, through a relativizing and problematizing of the different platforms, like the book, the Word file, the TV screen or the Google search, that can be carriers of these practices. Lin’s *Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking* published in 2010 is a book that approaches some of the automated processes that Field and Lang refrained from. It is a book almost like an anti-book, as it fails to comply with demands almost ridiculously fundamental for a book. For one thing, it has its back cover on the front, thus starting with a machine generated masthead and banishing the title and name of author to the back side of the book. Second, Lin has snatched paratextual elements like its index and foreword from other books (in particular, the snatching of an index from another book completely undermines the functionality of an index), and the book is filled with pictures and reproductions of all sorts of things that can be read, from book covers, manuals and packet inserts, to subway tickets, price tags and bar codes. What also leaps to the eye on a first leaf-through is how several systems of titles and especially numerals and codes seem to compete in the organization of the texts, and if page numbers at the bottom of the pages are consecutive they are often contradicted by other indications of (page) numbers elsewhere on the pages and something that looks like program commands to move or edit text around in the document, thus activating other practices of reading than those we would in-
stinctively associate with the reading of poetry. By all means it rejects our expectations of the poetry book as a medium while at the same time being completely a book. Speaking of *Seven Controlled Vocabularies*, or *SCV* as he abbreviates it, Lin said in an interview:

Reading is a kind of integrated software. Some of its functions are textual, some paratextual, some visual, although the line between these does not really exist in my mind. *SCV* is fundamentally an examination of that blurring. Some of the reading is clearly authored by me, some is machine algorithms or library systems, some is by others, as with the Barthes index or the Laura Riding foreword. The Object ID system, also in place, is Getty Institute software. Numerals are closely linked to the publishing industry and the origins of (alphanumeric) writing (Saunders 2010).

What Lin is trying to do, it seems, is to raise awareness of the entire infrastructure of reading. If reading is a “kind of integrated software”, Lin performs a media poetic gesture upon reading to undo the seamlessness surrounding this software, and make available for our inspection and reflection some of the parts of the integrated reading process that we normally do not see. If Stein’s active work with the paratextual elements in *The Plain Edition* and *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* showed an awareness of the weight of the theatrical framing and staging of the reading situation and an inclination to include the shaping and manipulating of these aspects into her aesthetic practice, Lin is taking this awareness to its final consequence, claiming simply that in reading (as the marketing slogan goes) “context is more important than content.” In the book’s manifesto-like argumentative prose pieces, such ambient ways of reading are pursued:

What are the forms of non-reading and what are the non-forms a reading might take? Poetry = wallpaper. Novel = design object. Text as ambient soundtrack? Dew-champ wanted to create works of art that were non-retinal. It would be nice to create works of literature that did not have to be read but could be looked at, like placemats. The most exasperating thing at a poetry reading is always the sound of a poet reading (*SCV* 16).

This reading as ambience entails a confinement of the work of art to reside in the surroundings or environment: “poetry (like a beautiful painting) ought to be replaced by the walls that surround it and the doors that lead into empty rooms, kitchens and hypnosis. A poem should be camouflaged into the feelings that the room is having, like drapes, silverware, or candlesticks” (*SCV* 26). In extension of these claims, it seems relevant to point to the recurrent interest in cookbooks in *SCV* as another model for a different reading practice, suggested by title element “The Joy of Cooking” (this is also the title of a classic American cookbook that Lin grew up with). As also suggested in Levi Bryant’s account of linguistic machines quoted earlier in this chapter, recipes are an interesting illustration...
of how a non-corporeal linguistic machine is able to instigate the processing of corporeal non-linguistic material in its surroundings (ingredients, the smell of the room, and so on). By promoting this ambient form of reading as “integrated software,” Lin is outing parts of the otherwise seamless infrastructure of reading that are constituted by paratextual conditions not normally controlled by either author or reader. Normally, important parts of the reading have simply taken place long before we pick up the book, even if this is rarely recognized. By focusing on this spectrum of reading and non-reading, Lin is attempting to remedy this omission and, with his idea of camouflaging the poem into a room, “like drapes”, he joins Stein in her resistance against an increased “fetishism attached to the book as object” to instead move his attention towards the way the book meets its surroundings.

There is a lot of fetishism attached to the book as object, so I was interested in the book as dispersed ambient textuality, meta-data, or maybe just the allusiveness of the bibliographic that is referenced by a title, which I suppose is the book itself and its ecosystems of reading. So I was interested in non-print forms of reading: architecture, paintings, strip malls, potted plants, spoken words, the back stitching on a Margiela blouse, traffic lights, WD50, reality TV (Saunders 2010).

Thus, Lin in SCV investigates the commodified aspects of reading (“novel = design object”) but also decenters these by including a number other activities performed while reading (cooking, shopping, moving around in an airport, watching the Weather Channel), thus examining how reading combines with other things “like restaurants, yoga mats, poems, former boyfriends or girlfriends, wives and husbands (and their photographs), and of course other books (and their photographs and the photographs they contain within them)” (Saunders 2010). Throughout SCV, Lin is preoccupied with sites where elevator music and other contemporary equivalents to Satie’s musique d’ameublement are at home. If Lin’s preoccupation with the shopping mall recalls Harryette Mullen’s with the supermarket, then Mullen’s harsh criticism of the all-encompassing consumer culture in S*PeRM**K*T is not retrievable in Lin’s book where the centerless mall environment is investigated as an omnipresent, ambient condition that most of all appears relaxing (if there is an irony to it, it is not a particularly harsh one):

Airports, shopping malls, and golf courses are the most pleasing, crisis free, and logo-ized landscapes. They are mood-inducing delivery systems, schematas of unimposed identifications that make irrelevant the distinctions between pre- and post-consumption (SCV 73).
Technically, this contextual reading strategy is mobilized by virtually drowning the book’s content in threshold texts like multiple prefaces, introductions, editorial notes, acknowledgements and all sorts of digital and bibliographic metadata that have no transparent hierarchy among themselves. Some prefaces are dated, suggesting that parts of the book were written and issued earlier, some of it as part of post-doctoral research project, but which parts remain confusing. Even the composite title of the whole work seems to include at least three separate titles and a year, that is confusingly different to the year of publication, all contributing to make the work as a unit highly debatable. But Lin takes this even further, as the book itself as a unique object category (or, with Bryant an incorporeal machine characterized by its iterability and potential eternity) defined by a title, an author’s name, a publisher, an ISBN number and a specific place and year of print is picked apart by the continued production of a whole range of “ancillary products” to Seven Controlled Vocabularies and Obituary 2004. The Joy of Cooking.

These are other publications with the same or related titles that Lin has issued in various other media, forms, and genres that all somehow relate to the original work, most of them also issued in 2010. One of them, Blurb, recalls Stein’s Descriptions of Literature examined in chapter one, as it consists of sixty pages of blurbs about SCV ranging from the beautiful: “Seven Controlled Vocabularies imagines a world creating itself with a combination of bold, boring, and broccoli” (Lin and Snelson 2010: Blurb, no paging)

140 Record and full download of the eleven related releases from Edit Publications, see Lin and Snelson 2010.
to the final “The best way to become acquainted with 7CV is to write a book about it” via several blurbs in drawing, some in Chinese and various programming languages. The blurbs are written by forty-eight different people invited by Lin, identified in the book not by name but by small photo portraits that take up the second half of the book. The Selected Essays About A Bibliography also has close to fifty contributors, many of who were involved in a poetry workshop or “Edit event” with Lin and editor Danny Snelson, and consists of short essays about technical appliances implied in the media ecology of SCV from software features like Microsoft Word, Adobe InDesign, Facebook, and Font library via hardware appliances like the artist’s book, Xerox, Selectric, and the visual archive, and on to human relations like dissertation advisor and poetry workshop. The Appendix takes the metadata and processual documentation already dominant in SCV a step further by including several indexes, new prefaces, Google Analytics reports, working documents from the cover design process, statements from the publisher’s reader and editorial comments.

A whole series of ancillary products that are almost completely untouched by interference from human intentionality are the Chinese Google translations of the work that appear in several editions – even an edition of a Chinese-English Google translation, translating the second Chinese edition back into English. All these books disperse the book SCV to a point where it is no longer possible to pin it down to one specific title with a specific content, and they further disperse the authorship of SCV out in an intricate

141 “Edit” was the title of an event series hosted at Kelly Writers’ House running between 2009 and 2013. The series was “programmed by Danny Snelson featuring editorial practices in contemporary writing technologies.” The editing and publishing event featuring Tan Lin and SCV took place on April 21st 2010 <http://dss-edit.com/series/>
network of human and non-human agents, but because they also stick with completely common features that (if often unnoticed) are part of any book’s metadata they become a strong statement about the dispersed nature of literature’s media ecology in a digital age. An auto-collaborative poetics reigns in Lin’s ambient textual world. Like in Field and Lang’s work, there is an exchange springing from a live situation in a literary context, with workshops and seminars and face-to-face exchanges, but in Lin’s case he is also going beyond this to feature digital exchanges and computer algorithms at work. Lin continues the interest in reading as a physical, technological process from Stein, as Field and Lang did, but he takes it in an even more loose, floating and ambient direction. Ambience is a novel with a logo is the title of a 2007 chapbook by Lin addressing the connection between ambience and novels as a matter of visual coding. In Seven Controlled Vocabularies, Lin fantasizes about being able to read a book instantly, like a logo, in a manner recalling Gomringer’s vision discussed in chapter one of the poem as constellation, which the concrete poet also compared to an instantly absorbed airport sign,

the most powerful texts function like logos, a code wherein words and reading are synthesized into looking and staring, i.e. they become primitive and unmoving structures for the channeling of static information. As such they can be read as styleless or exemplars of a fonctionnalité absent. Such texts aspire to the furniture – like logos of multinational corporations […] which can typically be read bidirectionally or rotationally (SCV 70).

Here, Lin is referring back to the “fetishism attached to the book as object” addressed in the equation “novel=design object,” which points out an obvious way in which a book can “aspire to the furniture.” Yet this vision of a text containing its metadata as an immediately visually available code, and thus of books that function like “circular logos” which “in their L -> R and R -> L orientation […] mirror interior or exterior spaces” brings to mind the way Stein uses her circled rose line as a vignette on the cover of her printed works, starting with the first printing of The Autobiography of Toklas, on which the rose sentence, Stein’s logo if she ever had one, replaces the title and the name of author on the front cover of the book. As Lin continues, “a logo like text is text and reading instructions as one” (SCV 70). The idea of the text as logo superimposes all the dispersed paratextual markers and the text they are designed to mark. If, in the case of Stein’s rose logo, and the book that carries it on its cover, this does not in the first place seem to imply the instant simplicity suggested by Lin (his examples are the Bible, and Dogs that Know When Their Owners are Coming Home), his idea that logo-like texts function as “open source reading codes” that lend themselves to readers’ appropriation and application fits rather well with the world constituted by Stein’s life and writing as it appears after the publication of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas and as it is continued in the broader sphere of art and popular culture today, as we shall look into in the final chapter.
Stein’s rose vignette as it appeared on the cover of the first British printing of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

This composite construction is at the same time immensely complex and simple enough to be crystalized in the logo-like recurrence of Stein’s tagline “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose.” Used on the hardcover of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, where it replaced both the title and the author’s name, two crucial markers for inscribing the book into the bibliographic framework of the commercial book market (the infrastructure for distributing books in space) and the library system (the infrastructure for distributing books in space and time). By playfully replacing them with the logo, Stein was already lifting her forged autobiography out of the regular infrastructure of books and into a multimodal media ecology that transgresses the book-bound. As we shall see in the final chapter, by way of the logo Stein lets her work travel other roads, and spread through channels other than the bibliographical ones. Through the widely applicable logo that is not bound to its printed materiality, the reception of Stein leaves the compartment of art and literature, but without letting go of a core of “unalterable, static information” which the logo always carries, according to Lin. As we have seen through all the appropriations and collaborations visited in this study there is always a remainder left, something that cannot be brought to fit the designated purpose, something like a waste product or a noise, that says ‘Gertrude Stein’, and this unalterable information can be materialized in the logo.
A postliterary condition

Lin’s practice demonstrates the arbitrary nature of the boundaries traditionally drawn by various threshold texts and textual metadata and dreams of their final collapse, dispersing the experience of reading and of literature in ambient space – or into the instantly readable logo-like text that is text and reading instructions in one. In her collection of essays *Postliterary America: From Bagel Shop Jazz to Micropoetries* (2011), Maria Damon attempts to sketch the conditions for language-based art after this collapse, in an era where we can no longer expect paratexts to protect and contain literary text against the context of the outside world in a present situation in which the occurrence of poetic and literary language outside the literary enclosure must be recognized.

Because the extant analytic lexicon of literary theory inadequately describes the ragtag, generative edges of poetic production that compose this field of inquiry, these investigations into the nature of the poetic have led to new coinages such as “micropoetries”[…], “écriture brute” (outsider writing), and “postliterary poetics” (by which is meant not digital or postliterate poetics but rather an aesthetics that embraces the entire range of poetry, including what lies beyond literary or fine-art poetry) (Damon 2011: 5).

Through concepts such as “micropoetries” and “postliterary poetics,” Damon is trying to indicate how the dominance of the codex/book is challenged from many sides, even in the field of literature where it has been all-encompassing. Taking as her starting point an anecdote about jazz band leader Dizzy Gillespie heartily introducing the members of the band to each other in the middle of a concert situation instead of the traditional formalized “band introduction” of each member directed towards the audience, Damon uses the parallels between poetry and jazz music as an aid to conceptualize the social aspects of this changed media situation:

Thinking of poetry or jazz as a social practice, of Diz’ playful reminder of the specificity, the particularities of knowing […] that make expressive culture a social enterprise, we can move into a poetic space where shtick, side effects, ephemera, the paratextual and paraliterary – the postliterary in these times – are as charged with significance as the main event, the standards, the readings, the displays of skill that people have come to consume (Damon 2011: 2).

In poetry as in jazz, Damon claims, drawing the traditional arbitrary boundaries between artwork and non-artwork is no longer possible or meaningful. As Gillespie’s playful introduction is as much part of the improvisational and social concert experience as any note played by the band, so occurrences of literature and poetry seem to involve relationships
between the work and its environs, that are often the site of this new literature’s innovative or subversive potential. The general framework for a contemporary literary situation that Damon established thus resembles the media ecology I am proposing in which the environs of the artwork comes to matter more; how it is institutionalized and talked about becomes an integrated part of the story for the media ecological reading.

Just as in every piece of clothing a story of labor and exchange is embedded, a book, poem, or word reifies a set of relationships that can be rendered fluid and mobile again by the hermeneut, the attentive and curious critic, the co-poetic conspirator, the archeological and attitudinal snoop. In particular, the syncretic cultural emanations that crystallize into poems and other verbal quirks, especially those that emerge from a matrix of unseen and fraught power relations, hold special interest for the scholar investigating poetry as a social formation (Damon 2011: 4).

It is important to stress that a media ecological or a postliterary perspective is not about the end of literature or the end of a literary way of reading. However, it is about reading differently and widening the palette of material we are inclined to consider significant when we read. Thus, the movement resembles that suggested by Kenneth Goldsmith of an extension of reading way outside its immediate site of origin. In Goldsmith’s phrasing, the internet has led us to a condition where now we read and write more than we have done for at least a generation. We read tweets and Facebook updates and many other things “in ways that aren’t yet recognized as literary, but with a panoply of writers using the raw material of the web as the basis of their work it’s only a matter of time before it is” (Goldsmith 2016: 4). In *The Geographical History of America*, Stein writes:

I found that any kind of a book if you read with glasses and somebody is cutting your hair and so you cannot keep the glasses on and you use your glasses as a magnifying glass and so read word by word reading word by word makes writing that is not anything be something (GHA 428-29).

Even if Goldsmith’s new type of literary reading is described as “skimming, parsing, grazing, bookmarking, forwarding, and spamming language” (Goldsmith 2016: 4) and thus seems directly opposed to this “reading word by word”, the two claims are not far apart. The literariness of the text is determined by the literariness of the type of reading we apply to it. Like the ambient textuality of Tan Lin, Stein’s reading practice includes letting go of the organization into work units, to instead experience each word as it comes into view in a continuous present. As Stein continues: “So that shows to you that a whole thing is not interesting because as a whole well as a whole there has to be remembering and forgetting, but one at a time, oh one at a time is something oh yes definitely some-
thing” (GHA 429). The major difference is that Stein finds this discovery “very regrettable but very true” and Goldsmith generally considers it a benefit that may give more people than ever before access to the pleasures and benefits of literary reading. However, in the following chapter I will take this reading practice into an even wider space than that suggested by Goldsmith, as the parts of the ecology we are entering has let go, not only of the infrastructure provided by books and controlled by their paratexts, but also of the centrality of the verbal to move about in a broader landscape and center on other types of visual and corporeal communication.
CHAPTER 5:

THE ECOLOGY OF DEVICE, INTERFACE, INFRASTRUCTURE: ICONIC STEIN IN A NEW MILLENNIUM

In November 1934, Gertrude Stein had just arrived in New York by steamship, on American soil for the first time in 30 years, and Bobsy Goodspeed, the industrious organizer of the Chicago rerun of her surprise Broadway opera success, *Four Saints in Three Acts*, wanted her to come to the opening of the show. She managed to convince representatives of the nascent passenger aviation industry that flying with Stein was a unique opportunity for publicity, and a special airplane was provided to fly Stein and Toklas – neither of whom had ever set foot in a plane before, and their friend Carl Van Vechten “to hold their hands when they got frightened” (Watson 1998: 297) – from New York to Chicago to attend the performance.

Stein and Toklas and local business magnate Harold McCormick at Chicago premiere, November 1934. Chicago society gathering with Charles Barney Goodspeed, Bobsy Goodspeed, Gertrude Stein, Fanny Butcher, Richard Drummond Bokum, Alice Roullier, Alice B. Toklas, and Thornton Wilder (and Bobsy’s portrait on the wall). (Photo: Yale Collection of American Literature, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library)
Four Saints in Three Acts was the one great overtly collaborative work that was actually both realized and immensely successful in Stein’s own lifetime. When it played in New York City, it had received an unusually large amount of public attention, becoming the longest running Broadway show of its day, and almost all of this attention was channeled via Stein’s name, which was already everywhere due to the recent publication of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas – even if it was the composer, Virgil Thomson and his friends and connections who completed the staging of the opera, raised the funds and made everything happen, while Stein was in France, insisting stubbornly on her 50% of royalties.

I. THE LOGO (DEVICE)

The director of Stein and Thomson’s opera, John Houseman, recalls in his memoir how the trip to Chicago was staged by Harry Moses, the play’s commercial producer and impresario:

There was one element which had been missing in New York – the presence of Miss Stein herself. She was in America lecturing and arrived with Miss Toklas in a specially chartered plane which our impresario had filled with American Beauty roses and a sign reading “A rose is a rose is a rose” (Houseman 1972: 126).

There are no photographs documenting this arrangement and Stein does not mention it in her own otherwise generous accounts of the trip. She is far more preoccupied with her excitement about the new experience of flying, of seeing – in her native land of Pennsylvania from above – the broken lines of cubism. But notwithstanding the lack of documentation for this anecdote (and hence, its potential historical inaccuracy), it remains a striking illustration of the transmedia nature of Stein as a public figure that I will address in this chapter.

It departs, of course, from Stein’s most famous phrase that also adorned the cover of the bestseller that had made her name, and which I, inspired by Tan Lin, would suggest considering as an “open-source reading code” lending itself to readers’ appropriation and application. As with Lin’s instantly readable logo-like text, it has a structure resembling that of a commercial slogan. Stein’s sentence was even borrowed for advertising purposes in the wake of her lecture tour, like in the newspaper advert from the 5th Avenue department store Bergdorf & Goodman reproduced in chapter one, moderating Stein’s line into the slogan “rose is a pose is a rose is a pose…” which was, according to Alyson Tishler, “highlighting the similarity between the circularity of her writing and that of advertising language” (Tischler 2003: 22), the same qualities that were also explored by Haryette Mullen.

Tishler argues that the marketing strategies drawing on Stein’s work benefitted from the hip avant-garde capital associated with Stein’s name in the mid-1930s, but that Stein’s writing also benefitted from...
A Rose from Emily

The phrase “rose is a rose is a rose is rose” was first written in the heavily erotic 1913 word portrait “Sacred Emily” where it is part of a climatic sequence, immediately followed by the lines “Loveliness extreme. / Sweetest ice-cream.” In this context, the visual equivalence between the rose, with its circular layers of rose colored petals folded around each other, and the female sexual organ is highly relevant, and enhanced by the circular structure created by the line’s repetitions. But in accordance with Lin’s point about the logo’s appropriability, the line’s productiveness in terms of diverse interpretations and re-circulations has been unsurpassed. One often highlighted aspect of the line is that it plays out the auto-referentiality of language and demonstrates how poetry can be an art form closed in upon itself, or as Stein explains in “Poetry and Grammar”, in composing this line: “I made poetry and what did I do I caressed completely caressed and addressed a noun” (LIA 327). Yet, Stein also famously claimed that, with this sentence, she made the rose red for the first time in English poetry for at least 100 years, thus calling upon the relationship between language and sense experience (Wilder 1947: vi).

Surely, one should not miss the homonymic play: When Stein said the rose was “red” we should hear both the color and the past tense of read. With Stein’s sentence, the rose is both red and read for the first time since the romantic poets, thus the sentence is simultaneously pointing stubbornly towards a concrete, actual red rose and a poetic rose made of language for us to read. What is particularly striking in this embrace by Stein of a noun, or of a name, is that in this very embracing movement she is putting the word’s grammatical status into serious doubt. When the third part is added to “rose is a rose”, an unresolvable syntactical confusion is introduced – it becomes impossible to determine whether the second part is the end or the beginning of a clause – but as the fourth part is introduced, both the sounds and the grammar of language start dissolving and transform into genuine play. And every time the words “a rose” – the article and the noun – are repeated and “caressed”, they sound more like a verb – arose. What seemed like an ultimate insistence on the reality of a noun is suddenly transformed into a verb – what appeared to be pure substance is turned into action.

The line is revisited by Stein herself in numerous later works – plays, poems, meditations, biographies, lectures – always with new variations and inclinations, adding them, as they served as a mediating factor between Stein and the American public, helping to explain her more difficult writing by showing off its immediate similarities with the most common and simple language of advertising (Tischler 2003: 12-27).

143 Female body parts and particularly the vulva are frequently referenced throughout the text, for instance in lines like “Push sea push sea push sea […]”. The word “pussy” could indeed refer to the vulva in 1913, although it also had the connotation of cat or kitten, and was, as it still is, fairly common as a term for endearment for a girl or woman. Further, notebooks, letters and many biographical accounts reveal that Pussey or Pussy was indeed one of Gertrude’s nicknames for Alice. But as always with Stein, the pun (or double meaning) would be completely intended.

144 Stein’s statement was made orally during the questions session after a lecture, and is recounted by Thornton Wilder in his preface to Four in America.
new twists and new meaning. Stein’s own revisiting of the line can be regarded as a case of “radical intertextuality”, where an element is repeated and extended across different, individual works, much like the term is established by media theorist Henry Jenkins. Radical intertextuality is one of the elements that needs to be present for Jenkins to speak of “transmedia storytelling”, a term that he coined in relation to the film franchise *The Matrix* in his book *Convergence Culture* (2006) in which he elaborates on the contemporary media situation in terms of a relationship between “media convergence, participatory culture and collective intelligence” (Jenkins 2006: 2). In a 2011 article, revisiting his transmedia concept, Jenkins suggests that “it is possible to find historical antecedents for transmedia which predate the rise of networked computing and interactive entertainment” (Jenkins 2011), in the context of which he has coined his concepts. As Stein elaborates the rose line into a “device,” as she has herself called it, it becomes evident how her work constitutes exactly such an historical antecedent, as it keeps transgressing not just individual works but also media platforms and the essential division between producers and consumers of art.

Indeed, most of the insights that Jenkins’ theory presents are already contained within the theoretical framework of media ecology, and it shares its grounding in network and systems theory. Yet, there are strategic reasons for bringing a theorist of popular culture like Henry Jenkins into this final chapter which, in its choice of material, moves outside of the sphere of high art and literature to include both more commercial and popular cultural products and the products of delimited communities not necessarily aspiring to be art (or to be circulated to a wider audience). His work is closely connected to the hypothesis of a rise in contemporary culture of a participatory mode, where certain narratives, worlds or characters transgress questions of copyright, defy individual authorship and constitute a model for an increasing overlap between the consumption and the production of art and cultural products. Jenkins examines the cultural situation of YouTube, Vocaloids, and other networked media phenomena where the enjoyment of art or cultural products is inseparable from the sharing, quoting and copying of this product on other platforms and the production of new cultural products, such as memes and fan art. One way of framing the contemporary media situation as addressed by Jenkins is as a sort of mass dissemination of a collaborative poetics comparable to that which I have described in Stein’s work to introduce a similar demand for participation in the processing of information and the consumption of cultural products both within and beyond the traditional sphere of art and literature, and consequently I will suggest that the structural parallels between this technological and cultural condition and Stein’s collaborative poetics as it is played out in the material taken up in this final chapter are among the most important

explanations for Stein’s rising relevance and her work’s particular affinity with our present media situation.

If the previous chapters of this study have developed the tradition of revisits to Stein’s poetry in avant-garde art and high culture that her collaborative poetics has instigated, it is the purpose of this final chapter to map how such practices connect with the more popular dimension of Stein appropriation in contemporary culture that has developed. And further, to trace how this dimension is, in turn, tied to the intermedial qualities that have continuously surfaced from Stein’s seemingly modernist and media exclusive written oeuvre when confronted by the artistic reception examined in the previous chapters. Even more than in the previous chapters, what is at stake is the mapping of a highly diverse media ecology in which the Gertrude Stein figure as well as her poetics circulate. Thus, the material to consider does not restrict itself to the sphere of art and cultural entertainment, but is entangled with multiple aspects of everyday life and public institutions.

As many critics have observed, an excessive exaltation about participatory culture has occurred in academic as well as public discourse, not least about the value of the real-time interactive opportunities offered by digital media and the empowerment of the individual user through social media platforms. In the 1990s and early 2000s, when enthusiastic research on “New Media” flourished, many accounts represented digital forms of interactivity as uniquely liberating and democratic. On this issue, I will align myself with Marjorie Perloff asking (rhetorically) in what ways the predetermined click interaction in (certain types of early) digital poetry is necessarily more freeing and interactive for the reader than book-bound poetry reading, or than playing Sims for that matter (Perloff 2006: 143). Likewise, I am skeptical about any automatic valorizations attributed to this media condition. Clearly, the interactive dimension of social media does not automatically create a space for the release of free collaborative energy, and any sufficient analysis of social or political agency in contemporary social media would need to imply attention to the omnipotence of the global tech giants controlling such media.

Evidently, the structural equivalence between the concept of ecology and structural models for boundless capitalist economy in its globalized form are actualized more directly by the relations that will be traced in this chapter than by the more “high-brow art” material of previous chapters. However, it is outside the scope of this study to deliver a full-blown power analysis of late capitalist tech culture. I will merely stress that the corpus of material I am basing my study on makes manifest a rise in postproductive practices and participatory culture that I understand as closely connected to our media situation as dominated by digital media. Thus, my claim about the increased relevance of Stein today is closely related to the existence of such a condition, notwithstanding its possible affinities with capitalist economy. Also, inspired by Félix Guattari’s work on the so-called postmedia condition, I hold as a premise that media poetics, ambient poetics and collaborative poetics are available strategies that can produce change in the ecology, for instance by generating alternative forms of subjectivation that resist the power of machin-
ic capitalist economy, and thus restore some degree of agency to all parts in the ecology.

Jenkins’ points about a rise in participatory culture are compatible with the analysis of several theorists discussed in previous chapters, such as Bourriaud’s, featuring the DJ as the model for the contemporary consumer-producer. What Jenkins’ theory adds at this point is its specific attention to a plurality of media not tied exclusively to the (modernist) work concept or to the institutions of art and literature. For Jenkins, a crucial element in convergence culture is the presence of multimodality, as is the case where a work, story or “world” extends itself onto various platforms or media and adopts different modalities. In the airplane anecdote, Harry Moses’ gesture extends the outreach of Stein’s verbal line into a complex multimodal space, as actual ‘American Beauty’ roses filled the airplane cabin along with Stein’s words on a banner. As a gesture made by a commercially attentive impresario who was the financial backer of the Broadway staging, and had made his fortune from ladies’ underwear, it indeed resembles any banal tribute to a Hollywood celebrity – drowning the star in fresh roses – but there is more to it than that.

According to Virgil Thomson’s memoirs, Moses picked up the enterprise of *Four Saints* not for financial gain, but because he was quick to realize the amount of intellectual credit he could gain from it. Frankly, he had the money to be an important Broadway producer, but urgently needed to extend his cultural capital in the theatre world. And Moses’ flower arrangement marks something that is very particular about Stein’s fame from this point in time and up until today: the co-presence of the opaque poetry and the immediately recognizable Hollywood persona. As Stein explains to her publisher Alfred Harcourt in *Everybody’s Autobiography*:

> Harcourt was very much surprised when I said to him on first meeting him in New York remember this extraordinary welcome that I am having does not come from the books of mine that they do understand like the autobiography but from the books of mine that they do not understand and he called his partner and he said listen to her and perhaps after all she is right (EA 6).

According to this analysis, the mesmerizing effect of the persona, its mystery attraction, is linked closely to the “incomprehensible” poetry.

**The collaborative origins of the device**

Returning to the rose, it is evident that the radical intertextuality of Stein’s line extends its complex relations beyond Stein’s own writings. “Sacred Emily” has been read as (also) a portrait of the poet Emily Dickinson (Aji 2016), and thus the line as referencing the roses in Dickinson’s poetry (such as “I’m a rose” and “Nobody knows this little rose” (Dickinson 1979: 21; 31)) as well as the roses of Romantic poetry and its later, more or
less kitschy imitations, and, most obviously perhaps, Juliet’s famous lines about the name of the rose from Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* (“What’s in a name / that which we call a rose / by any other name would smell as sweet”). Thus, Stein’s rose was already at its first conception an appropriation of a literary symbol so loaded that it was more than ripe for deconstruction. On top of this, the line became one of the most mocked and repeated in American newspaper history. Endless numbers of columns, verses, sketches and jokes played with this line, starting from the publication of *Geography and Plays* in 1922, and as we saw, by the 1930s it was so well known that it could be used for pure advertising purposes without any direct relation to Stein, literature, or the theater.

Stein’s interest in the rose figure also surfaced in her art purchases from the time the sentence was first coined. For instance, the first painting she bought in 1914 from the young cubist Juan Gris, who was also the first new painter Stein started sponsoring after she and her brother Leo had divided their art collections, was Gris’ colorful still-life composition *Roses*. But it was in collaboration with Alice Toklas and Carl Van Vechten that Stein initiated the transport of the radical intertextuality of her signature line into multimodality. In *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, the responsibility for lifting the line to its particular status as a “device” is skillfully spread out between the three participants. Talking about Carl Van Vechten, the narrator Alice, states:

> It was he who in one of his early books printed as a motto the device on Gertrude Stein’s note-paper, a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose. Just recently she has had made for him by our local potter at the foot of the hill at Belley some plates in the yellow clay of the country and around the border is a rose is a rose is a rose is a rose and in the center is to Carl. [….] Speaking of the device of rose is a rose is a rose is a rose, it was I who found it in one of Gertrude Stein’s manuscripts and insisted upon putting it as a device on the letter paper, on the table linen and anywhere else that she would permit that I would put it. I am very pleased with myself for having done so (ABT 798).

The book by Carl Van Vechten referred to is the essay collection *Interpreters and Interpretations* that came out in 1917 – three years before the first published printing of “Sacred Emily” in *Geography and Plays* (1922) – but the account stresses Van Vechten’s appropriation of the line as sprung more from Toklas’ placing it on the letterhead than from its original context in “Sacred Emily”, and it is unclear whether Toklas’ singling

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146 Stein bought three Gris paintings from the gallerist Kahnweiler, one of them being *Roses*. Marjorie Perloff also suggests interesting relations between Stein’s rose and Duchamp’s female alias Rrose Selavy (Perloff 2012).

147 A collection of essays on prominent professionals of opera, dance and music theater (“Interpretators”) and broader reflections on the field of compositional music and opera (“Interpretations”). The rose motto occurs on p.57 introducing an essay on the Scottish opera soprano and actress with the flowery name Mary Garden. Karen Leick confirms that Van Vechten’s use of the line was the first time the line was printed in a book (Leick 2009: 72).
out of the line preceded Stein’s incessant intertextual repetition of it in early pieces like “Oval” (1914) and Lifting Belly (1915-17). All of Stein’s own accounts about when the first famous stationery with the rose in the ring was produced are curiously imprecise, and the rose wax seal in the archive at Beinecke is undated, but when Stein and Toklas started using the logo for almost all their outside correspondence sometime between 1913 and 1914, they accomplished two things: First of all, they extended the media ecology of the rose motto beyond the materiality of the book (several years before it even appeared in a book), and thus transformed it into a multimodal “device”, its multimodality not least effectuated by Toklas who (very much apropos of Tan Lin’s ideal for the ambient poem) also embroidered it on placemats, napkins and handkerchiefs, in different colorings and styles, with and without the image of the rose in the middle. Second, they invested into Stein’s logo sentence a social dimension. This last gesture is important, since it extends the phrase’s “caressing” of a noun to another type of caress, the caress implied in a social exchange between individuals. The emotional effects produced by the rose are concretized in the letterhead, if we take emotions, in Sarah Ahmed’s sense, not as interior entities located inside individuals, but as dynamic relational quantities that “do things”, such as “align[ing] individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments” (Ahmed 2004: 119). In this way, the rose logo in Stein’s work becomes a device tied unceasingly to correspondence, friendship, exchange and collaboration and producing emotional effects, since emotions are at work “to bind subjects together” as Ahmed has it. It is part of the strong relational orientation in Stein’s work, including the “sticky effect” that characterizes emotional or affective economies (Ahmed 2004: 4). In the affective economy of Stein’s work, written correspondence was an important tool, already difficult to separate cleanly from the rest of her literary practice as in the case of her occasional poetry and portrait writing and the appliance of the rose device is one of the things that bind these spheres even closer together to the point where they become almost indistinguishable.

The zaniness of the Stein and Toklas ménage

The Autobiography’s open crediting of Toklas with the idea of the stationery is a clear indication of Toklas’ role as a crucial part of the staged persona, as we also saw it played out in Field and Lang’s “Machine for spelling-bee and fire-fly”. As is well established, Toklas also handled a good deal of Stein’s correspondence. Several accounts have even established the two of them as practically merging into one – in accordance with the climax of Stein’s first portrait of Alice Toklas, “Ada”: “some one was then the other one” (SR 103)

148 From the account in The Autobiography you would assume that the idea of the stationary was introduced before World War I and the letters to Carl Van Vechten confirms this, as it appears here for the first time in a letter dated July 1914, but it may have existed earlier also, as all correspondence dating 1913-1914 mainly consists of brief telegrams, notes and calling cards (Burns (ed.) 1986).
– when it came to reading and writing letters, as both would potentially read and respond to letters addressed to either one of them, with Toklas predominantly, but not exclusively, fulfilling a secretarial function. As I have addressed in earlier chapters, the importance of Toklas as inscribed reader, listener and collaborator in Stein’s writing is hard to overstate. In *Gertrude Stein, Modernism and the Problem of “Genius”*, Barbara Will frames Toklas’ part in the particular dialogism of genius as “talking and listening at the same time” that was developed in Stein’s poetics throughout the 1910s and 1920s. But Stein and Toklas appearing as a couple is also crucial to the public image of Stein consolidated in the 1930s around the American tour. If Stein’s rise to fame came with *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* and its brilliant grasp of letting the voice of Toklas tell the tale of Stein’s glorious genius, thus freeing the author from the often tiring false modesty of the autobiographical genre, then it is worth stressing how this fame is inextricably tied to her relationship with Toklas. The presence of Stein and Toklas as a couple appears equally crucial for the gay and lesbian audience, for whom they were queer role models, and for all the middleclass Americans who entirely overlooked these signs. Rather, they contented themselves with the platonic language in which the relationship was described in *The Autobiography* (and which was smoothly adapted by American media) in which Toklas is referred to as the dedicated companion, friend, cook, secretary and typist of Gertrude Stein. The steps taken by Stein herself as well her friends and advocates to purge the language surrounding the “companionship” between Stein and Toklas, and in some ways to conventionalize their queer appearance in order to avoid offending the more narrow-minded sections of the American public, does superficially confirm the conservative effort to build up around Stein a clean, public image and to secure her legacy suggested by Catharine Stimpson and discussed in chapter one.

Yet, as many scholars have pointed out, the lesbianism in the late autobiographies and public performances of Stein is incredibly open and obvious for its time, for those who choose to see it, while being completely invisible to those who do not (Will 2000; Bay-Cheng 2004; Coffman 2017; Solomon 2017). It is almost like the puzzle picture of the political implications of Stein’s writing discussed in chapter four; depending on one’s perspective, one can make both stories emerge, but hardly ever at the same time.\(^{149}\)

However, no matter which of the images one settles for – the explicit, proud and happy queer couple or the platonic, governess-like friendship and working partnership – the importance of Toklas’ presence remains strong. And pretty independently of its veiled lesbian implications, the quirky Stein figure that emerges from the Toklas autobiography and becomes incarnated in the American lecture tour has striking similarities to the “zany performer” described by Sianne Ngai in *Our Aesthetic Categories*, and foremost illustrated by the character of Lucy Ricardo played by actress Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*.

\(^{149}\) Many works in the later Stein reception are specifically preoccupied with the “outing” of the veiled homosexuality in *AABT* and other works, see for instance Filip Noterdaeme, *The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart*, Anne Bogart’s play *Gertrude and Alice*, and Tom Hachtman’s comic book, *Gertrude’s Follies*. 

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the 1950s American TV show. Ngai’s claim is that major aesthetic categories like the beautiful and the sublime in post-Fordist society are becoming replaced by minor ones, the cute, the interesting, and the zany, where the latter is the weakest and most ambiguous as an aesthetic judgment. Stein’s zaniness arises with the surprise expressed by representatives of the American media when confronted with the warm, well-spoken and witty Stein whom they had expected to be mysterious and obscure. When asked by a reporter “Why don’t you write the way you talk,” Stein’s cheeky response was “Why don’t you read the way I write.” The quirky, charming and slightly crazy Stein figure that stood out can be exemplified by the notorious exchange in her first appearance on American radio, immediately after she arrived in New York. After having read aloud a passage from her second Carl Van Vechten portrait (“Van or Twenty Years After”, 1923), followed by the reporter questioning the intelligibility of the piece, Stein replied:

Look here. Being intelligible is not what it seems. You mean by understanding that you can talk about it in the way that you have a habit of talking, putting it in other words. But I mean by understanding, enjoyment. If you enjoy it you understand it. And lots of people have enjoyed it so lots of people have understood it. But after all you must enjoy my writing and if you enjoy it you understand it. If you do not enjoy it why do you make a fuss about it. There is the real answer (transcribed by Reed 2007: 105).

The lighthearted way in which Stein performs the essentially modernist argument about her writing, that engagement with it should take the form of an earnest sensual experiencing instead of a hermeneutic decoding, negates the claimed dichotomy between popularity and experimentalism by way of a stubborn, and almost goofy naïveté.

The comic potential in the Stein figure is a delicate question, as it has frequently been overstressed by unsympathetic critics and in combination with the dismissive criticism evoked in chapter four, claiming her experimental writing as a hoax. Vicious parodies or mockeries of Stein as a ludicrous figure have certainly hampered and delayed her serious reception. However, just as I would suggest regarding the parodies of her style as examples of a (negative) realization of her collaborative poetics, I would make a similar claim about the parodies of her persona. And if Stein’s author performance in its entirety does not come out as cogently zany when approached from a contemporary point of view, then many parodies as well as benevolent appropriations stress this quality all the more.

An obvious example is Tom Hachtman’s late 1970s comic strip Gertrude’s Follies that ran weekly in Soho Weekly News until the early 1980s. In its entire conception and design, from title and visual style to crazy comic story lines, Gertrude’s Follies stresses the eccentricity or zaniness of Stein as a writer – through numerous jokes about her repetition and alleged experiments with automatic writing or, as in the page shown below, let-

150 Sound recording on Penn Sound’s Gertrude Stein page.
ting Stein’s inclination towards media poetics (pointing out the materiality of the channel) and her critique of narrative continuity contaminate the technical execution of the comic strip by concretely making the missing panels between the frames the pivot point in the strip’s joke. Even more so, Hatchman’s comic plays on the zaniness of Stein as a personality by picturing her unconventional lifestyle, drawing on the colorful crowd of people around Stein and Toklas, most dominantly Picasso and Hemingway, and through repeated jokes about Stein’s flair for the commercializing of modernist art by adapting it to new media and modalities (selling “Guernica T-shirts in front the Modern”151), the connection between being capable of producing and appreciating cubist and abstract paintings and eating the notorious hashish fudge from Alice B. Toklas’ cookbook,152 and, finally the issue of the couple’s homosexuality, like in the final strip below, playing on the anecdote about Hemingway’s shock when he discovered the sexual nature of Stein and Toklas’ relationship, outlining precisely the mentioned ambiguity in the couple’s simultaneously veiled and unveiled public performance of their romantic relationship (“Larry, Phil, Dusty, Bernie, Everybody knew but Ernie”).

Despite the title, practically all of Hatchman’s strips are built up around not Gertrude’s follies alone, but predominantly the follies that occur in interaction between Stein and Toklas, who he pictures as a “kind of vaudeville comedy couple” (Kozlowski 2012). Something that Sianne Ngai stresses is exactly how the zany performer most often appears as part of a pair:

The zany performer’s zaniness is most acutely brought forth in social situations, which is why one rarely finds a zany acting zany alone. Rather, zanies tend to be paired with or against other agents: often a minder (Don Quixote with Sancho Pancha) or others to be minded (Mrs. Doubtfire with his or her chargers), although the chaotic nature of the style often makes it unclear exactly who is minding whom. In any case zaniness often entails action by multiple zanies: Lucy and Ethel, Bouvard and Pécuchet, and Wakko, Yakko and Dot […] (Ngai 2012: 182).

151 This joke also evokes Toklas’ embroidery of Picasso paintings on the Louis X chairs (see image in chapter one) as well as the adaption of the rose signature to everything from pottery to placemats.
152 The “Hashish Fudge” recipe was included in Toklas’ cookbook (Toklas 1954), but provided by her friend, the British artist Brion Gysin. Although Toklas never used the recipe herself, and, on her own account, did not realize the controversial nature of one of its ingredients until after the book was published, her association with this groovy snack was marketed during the drug experimental 1960s. For instance in I Love You Alice B. Toklas a 1968 romantic comedy about hippie culture starring Peter Sellars, and in the Harpers Bizarre’s hit theme song by the same name. It was in the movie that the recipe of the hashish fudge was first transformed into the, today, iconic brownies (that also appear in Hatchman’s stripes) although Gysin’s original recipe did not contain chocolate.
To Ngai’s list of zany couples, one could surely add Stein and Toklas in Hachtman’s interpretation, but even in the soberer historical documentation of the lecture tour, like the photographs and newspaper stories from the time, it is striking how the two always appear as a fixed pair, both carefully costumed and engaged in ongoing dialogic activity, whenever Stein was not directly addressing her audience. Even if Toklas primarily stayed in the background she was always present as a “minder”, personifying the couple’s ties to the femininely gendered “service economy labor” that is another crucial aspect of Ngai’s aesthetic category of the zany.

What is also relevant in Ngai’s discussion of the zany is the category’s connection to a slippage between roles and occupations of art and everyday life. In The Lucy Show, “cultural performance and job performance, two modes of activity that seem separated by a number of sociological divides, are [...] revealed through Lucy Ricardo’s zaniness – her particular style of incessant doing – to be more alike than different” (Ngai 2012: 181). This inseparability of “cultural and occupational performance, acting and service, playing and laboring” (ibid. 182) is also at play in the Stein-Toklas constellation as it appears in the 1930s public representation. According to Ngai, it is the shifting between Lucy Ricardo’s extreme inflexibility in the various roles she is forced to shift between – and always fails to perform successfully – and Lucille Ball’s extreme flexibility in performing these situations that secures the show’s comic effect. As Ngai puts it, the zany is: “Intensely affective and physical, it is an aesthetic of action in the presence of an audience that bridges popular and avant-garde practice across a wide range of media” (ibid. 182). This description fits Stein and Toklas’ journey across the American continent well, as it can be traced in news stories and Stein’s own accounts such as Everybody’s Autobiography.

Ngai concludes that the zany blurs the borders between the aesthetic field and other fields extensively. Accordingly, when the lecture tour media performance hooks on to a zaniness that the broad American public immediately responds to, it relieves them not just from dealing with the controversial issue of homosexuality, but perhaps more importantly from making strong aesthetic judgments of the classic type about Stein’s work. Instead, the weaker affects produced by the zany performance permit the audience to enjoy the playful alliance between laughter and wisdom, sensibility and craziness impersonated by the Stein-Toklas ménage, without being forced to pass judgment on the radical nature of Stein’s writing. Yet, the very same performance also publicizes Stein’s critical disidentification with the discursive image of the male genius as well as the unashamed monog-

153 The temporal range of Ngai’s examples illustrates that the aesthetic category of the zany is hardly exclusive to the post-industrial societies that are her focus. Thus, like Don Quixote and Sancho Panza and Bouvard and Pécuchet, the case of Stein and Toklas in the 1930s is also an earlier occurrence of the pattern prior to its breakthrough in the post-war society of “network capitalism.” Once again, this trait points towards Stein’s anticipation of qualities in our contemporary cultural condition.

154 Stein herself as an isolated figure is often framed as the antithesis of the labor economy – her cultivation of bodily enjoyment (cheerful company, food, sex) and claims like “It takes a lot of time to be a genius, you have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing” (EA 72) – but her indolence is clearly made possible by Alice’s diligence. Also in this way, they are a match.

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amous homosexual relationship between Stein and Toklas, and a subversive potential is tied to the appropriation of Stein’s persona by marginalized groups, as we have seen examples of with writers of racialized origins (Haryette Mullen, Tracie Morris, and Don Mee Choi) and as we shall see with the circulation of representations of and references to the Stein and Toklas couple in queer communities.

This pondering in Stein’s persona between conventionality and non-conventionality mirrors that between celebrity culture and avant-garde art. But in the material visited in this chapter, the mainstream and the marginalized reception share the blurring between aesthetic and non-aesthetic fields pointed out by Ngai or, more precisely, the lessened importance of aesthetic judgment as we know it, in regard to aesthetic experiences:

Postindustrial zaniness is not just an aesthetic about the shrinking distinction between work and play but also the shrinking of an aesthetic capacity caused by it. More specifically, it seems to be an aesthetic not so much about the waning of aesthetic perception as about the waning of aesthetic judgment’s role in that perception. We might therefore say that zaniness is an aesthetic about the erosion of an older mode of aesthetic experience or relation to the aesthetic in general […] (Ngai 2012: 231).

To Ngai, this condition is one that distinguishes “the spirit of post-Fordist ‘network capitalism’ from the spirit of industrial capitalism analyzed by Weber” (ibid. 234). In contemporary network capitalism, the “clear distinction between personal and even leisure activity and professional activity” has ceased to exist, and the aesthetics of the zany is a response to this that integrates art and everyday life in a way that is “very different from the way in which the modernist avant-gardes imagined it” (ibid.). This condition is also a partial explanation to why it has become inevitable in this final chapter to leave behind any ontological distinction between art and non-art. This recalls Maria Damon’s suggestion of going beyond the paratextual boundaries of literature to study phenomena like “‘micropoetries’ […] and ‘postliterary poetics’”, by which she means “an aesthetics that embraces the entire range of poetry, including what lies beyond literary or fine-art poetry” (Damon 2011: 5), and even Kenneth Goldsmith’s discussion of our readings of tweets as potentially poetic or literary. In the contemporary media ecology of Stein’s reception, we can read every case aesthetically, but the role of the aesthetic judgment is blurred: it is becoming less meaningful to attempt to separate art from pop.

The fluctuation between flexibility and constancy that bridges popular and avant-garde practice can be rediscovered, not just in Stein’s popular appearances in radio and newspapers where her statements (such as “if you enjoy it you understand it” and the like) are at the same time completely stubborn and completely open, but even in Stein’s rose monogram as a constant, a brand that instantly says “Gertrude Stein” like any good logo would, yet at the same time occurs as completely flexible, adaptable, and able to contain almost anything. And in this quality, the popular impact of Stein’s slogan seems to reside.
The cute rose

Ngai does not mention Stein and Toklas in her account of the zany that she primarily describes as dominant in post-war America, but nevertheless I have found that important parts of the category make sense in relation to the couple’s performance and its obvious appeal to a contemporary audience, which I will return to shortly. Ngai does, however, explicitly reference Stein’s work as well as Haryette Mullen’s work with Stein in relation to another of her aesthetic categories, the “cute”, which she finds to be a crucial part of the appeal of Tender Buttons as well as the two poetry collections that Mullen produced in extension of her reading of it, discussed in chapter three. The ambivalent category of the cute is also highly relevant in relation to the rose device, as it is here Ngai develops the intricate relationship between avant-garde and kitsch and that between aesthetic experience and the consumption of commodities. The cute object is experienced as harmless and often infantilized or feminized. For an object to evoke the aesthetic feeling of cuteness, it is crucial that there is an imbalance of power between the perceiver and the object. The cute object cannot harm you, but you have potential power to harm – or alter – it, which produces ambivalent feelings of both tenderness and contempt.

Through examinations of cultural products from language poetry via Andy Warhol to the kawaii aesthetics of Japanese pop culture, Ngai traces the “already thin line that separates art from commercial merchandise in a market society” (Ngai 2012: 80) and the aesthetics of the cute falls along this line. A characteristic of the cute object is that it is able to incarnate helplessness and aggression at the same time. Thus, the cute appears sweetly mendable and bendable like the “tender buttons” of Stein, and “the pleasure offered by cute things lies in part in their perceived capacity to withstand extended and unusually rough use” (ibid. 88). Yet, the object can also carry a monstrous resistance to
this, such as the choking and violence, that occasionally surfaces in the transformative processes going on in *Tender Buttons*. Relating the category of the cute to Adorno’s also highly ambivalent concept of kitsch aesthetics, Ngai positions the cuteness in the poetry of Stein, Mullen and more poets associated with the community of language poetry as

a kind of fetishism that protects against fetishism, in part by coinciding with a kind of reification. Although the cute object is an animated object, its exaggerated passivity and malleability suggest an extreme form of thingification (Ngai 2012: 103).

In this context, Ngai makes a relevant observation about the “surprising affinity between Stein and Andy Warhol” in terms of their “relationship to commodity culture” (ibid. 271). As we have seen in chapter three, in *Tender Buttons* Stein is practically glorifying the realm of things, sensualy portraying consumer objects like clothes, knick-knacks and furniture, not to mention the feasting on foods that takes place all over her writing. Similar points have often been made for Warhol’s prints of consumer objects like the Brillo boxes and Campbell’s Soup cans. Ngai is in line with my reading of Haryette Mullen’s inclusive appropriation of both Stein and the language of commercial culture, as she formulates the mutual attitude of Stein and Warhol:

Unlike other avant-garde artists in their cohort, both lacked antagonistic feelings towards consumer culture as such […] although it could be argued that Stein’s interest was in how poetry might be driven by commodity culture’s positive affects without necessarily becoming affirmative” (Ngai 2012: 271, my emphasis).

In both Stein and Warhol, what is at stake is not just the reproduction of consumer objects but also the appropriation of the style of commercial language and the aesthetics of commercial imagery155 – and in Stein’s case an interest in tapping into the “positive affects” of commodity culture, that can also be witnessed in her early window shopping pieces (“Mi-Careme”, “Bon Marché Weather”, “Galleries Lafayette”, “Rue de Rennes” (all 1911)). Thus, the cuteness of *Tender Buttons* is also “a kind of fetishism that protects against fetishism.”

Anticipating Warhol’s uncanny knack for making art capable of commenting on the quality of decorative prettiness while simultaneously being pretty (*Flowers*), on a kind of bovine cheeriness while also being cheery […], *Tender Buttons* manages to trope on cuteness while also being cute (Ngai 2012: 271).

155 Which, in Stein’s case was just demonstrated by the “Rose is a pose” advertisement – and is obvious in most of Warhol’s brightly colored visual styles appropriating the imagery of advertising.
It is no surprise that such positive affects of commodity culture exploited by Stein in her poetry in turn have effectuated not just collaborative responses from poets and artists reading her and engaging with her collaborative poetics as a space of appearance calling upon them to collaborate and create new artworks in dialogue with Stein’s, but also the many kitschy appropriations of her ‘cute’ logo and other isolated sentences or fragments not necessarily springing from a close reading of and extensive engaging with her poetry, but more from an instant decoding of the logo-like text, like that referred to by Tan Lin. Either way, the effect is relational: the effect of cuteness is creating an emotional adherence in the reader not unlike the way the collaborative poetics works – the difference would be in degree rather than in kind.

A trail of roses

Stein’s rose appears as a trademark or logo in the sense that it works as an easy short cut that can be applied by anyone to instantly bring about the aura of Stein’s writings and the Stein figure. Thus, the diverse media ecology of Gertrude Stein’s reception is traversed by the rose line in numerous incarnations. It has, as we have seen many examples of during this study, been used by artists and poets – as well as Broadway impresarios – wanting to associate with her. As we saw, the vignette “a rose, a pause something on paper” opens Lyn Hejinian’s autobiographical poem My life, and is revisited several times in the context of memories regarding the poet’s father, who had, as Hejinian has accounted, in fact written a letter of admiration to Gertrude Stein in his youth, receiving a nice reply from Alice Toklas, on a piece of the infamous rose stationery, that is now in Hejinian’s possession. As addressed in chapter two, this letter and its history, condensed by the phrase “a rose, a pause, something on paper” is a significant nodal point in Hejinian’s own choice of career, as she described the fact that her father had held such admiration for Stein, considering her a literary genius, as having a part in making the path of being a writer walkable for her as a woman. The already feminine coded rose device here takes on surplus value as a mark of female creativity through Hejinian’s (partial) identification with Stein as a corporeal person, sharing bodily circumstances with herself from a basic, feminist point of view.

As Tania Ørum has demonstrated, the rose sentence runs through the 1950s and 1960s Stein reception of Fluxus, concrete poetry, minimalism and Pop Art (Ørum 2015). Ørum focuses on the reception in Germany and Scandinavia, particularly Danish painters John Davidsen and Stig Brøgger, as well as Fluxus composer Henning Christiansen, who wrote the minimalist composition A rose for Miss Stein (1965). Here, Christiansen wrote Stein’s line directly on the score, thus dissolving the alphabetically dictated sounds of the letters creating instead, in his own words, a “cluster sound effect reflecting the tautological content-structure of the sentence” (quoted in Ørum 2009: 267, in Danish, my translation).
tion). Christiansen orchestrated it for 28 string players and it has yet to be performed in its entirety. In this context, it is also worth mentioning the concrete poetry of Stuttgart poet Reinhard Döhl paying tribute to Stein via modulations of the rose sentence, which in the 1990s was transformed into early experiments with hypertext poetry. But as American minimalist poet Aram Saroyan’s 1971 little artist’s book *I am rose* from exemplifies, the “trail of roses” that Ørum uncovers extends both beyond northern Europe and beyond the 1960s. Saroyan’s piece plays out a quote from Stein’s first children’s book *The World is Round*, also a small collaborative success of hers, as it came out to some esteem in 1936 illustrated by Clement Hurd. Hurd’s visual style and coloring is also quoted in Saroyan’s piece. But as suggested, the rose as a trademark also has the potential to travel beyond the spheres of high art and literature.

Vignette from Lyn Hejinian’s *My Life* and device from Stein’s stationery


Stein and her associates were treating the line as a slogan of her work and person seen as one entity, and via the stationery it was already extended onto platforms outside the realm of what we traditionally consider literature and art, into the social sphere of correspondence. But Stein’s transmedia branding enterprise encroached into the realm of

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156 Recreation of the hypertext versions can be experienced online (Döhl 1996).
the social in other ways as well. When the young poet and university professor Samuel Steward – who was a friend of Stein’s from 1932 until her death, and who later became a gay pornographer and tattoo artist – created an elaborate rose tattoo as a posthumous tribute to her and a sign of their friendship, he took the multimodality of the rose a step further, inscribing it on the medium of the physical body. Steward also authored several memoirs recalling his friendship with Stein and Toklas, as well as two murder mysteries featuring Stein and Toklas as characters. His subcultural and bodily appropriation of Stein’s rose points out a still productive stream of art and culture expressing explicit queer sexuality and referencing Stein via the rose motive.

What’s in a name? The story of Francis Rose

The story of Francis Rose, another of the younger artists that Stein befriended in the latter part of her life, contributes to the rose assemblage in an even more fuzzy way, entailing affective personal friendship relations, but linking back onto the realm of art through the practice of patronage. Stein herself, of course, never suggested such a thing, but I am far from the first observer to speculate that when Stein and Toklas took a liking to the British neo-romantic painter Francis Rose in the 1930s, this was not unrelated to the fact that his last name was Rose. Investigating the actual motives and occasions for the development of friendships between individuals long gone obviously lies way beyond the jurisdiction of this study, but regardless of any (real or imagined) intentions of the agents, the materializations of the relationship between Stein and Rose in the media ecology of Stein’s reception actualize the convenient coincidence of his name with Stein’s signature line, recalling again the subtext of the rose sentence, the question of Shakespeare’s Juliet: “What’s in a name?”

A brief recourse to the framework around Stein’s friendships in the late 1920s and early 1930s when the relationship with Rose developed will be useful. Several chronicles of Stein’s salon at Rue de Fleurus make note of a change in its constitution in these years, where a younger crowd of friends and admirers, predominantly bisexual and homosexual, started frequenting the salon (Wagner-Martin 1995: 186; Dydo 2003: 221-22; Will 2011: 25). As Linda Wagner-Martin has observed, at this point Stein’s “feeling in the salon

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157 The Stein-Toklas literature by Samuel Steward includes a memoir followed by all the letters he received from the couple, Dear Sammy: Letters from Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas, 1977, the two Stein-Toklas mystery novels: Murder is Murder is Murder, 1985 and The Caravaggio Shawl, 1989, and finally a miniature memoir about Stein and Toklas with three verbal portraits of Stein, Pair of Roses, 1993.

158 A recent example in the sphere of augmented reality is the group ATOM-r (Anatomical Theatres of Mixed Reality) a “provisional collective exploring forensics, anatomy, and 21st century embodiment through performance, language and emerging technologies” constituted by, among others, poet and code artist Judd Morrissey, which has done extensive artistic research and performances on Steward and Stein in their project “The Operature” (2014).
[...] was that people came to hear her, and thus she needed to perform” (Wagner-Martin 1995: 189). This offered a significant change from the ambience of the salon in its earliest years when it was dominated by the cubist painters and their friends, but also from the years directly after World War I when young American writers like Sherwood Anderson, F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway sought Stein’s support and advice in relation to their own writings. The new crowd was somewhat younger, and there was a larger share of Frenchmen, not so fluent in English but eager to promote and publish Stein in France. According to Wagner-Martin, the dominance of “lively conversation” of the salon’s earlier years was being replaced by Stein taking on a more dominant role as center of attention, enhancing the performance aspect of salon life. Aspects of Stein’s life, such as her sexuality, that before were tucked away behind the professional “shop talk” of the salon, also surfaced as Stein and Toklas started acting more openly as a lesbian “hostess couple.”

As Barbara Will suggests, the new crowd was more invested in Stein’s person, not least her “queer aura”, and to them “Stein was a combination of a mother, saint, star, and diva: an icon of triumphant self-sufficiency, a survivor of ridicule and disdain, and a consummate, electric performer” (Will 2011: 25). The social affectivity of the salon was thus becoming aestheticized in a new way, and, accordingly, the boundaries between affective social behavior and aesthetic professional behavior were blurred. As Sianne Ngai suggests, such a blurring in turn makes it more difficult to separate aesthetic from non-aesthetic judgments (Ngai 2012). Thus, the transgression of the sphere of art into everyday life and consumer culture that can be found in the media ecology of the reception when it comes to appropriations of Stein’s motto and persona can be traced back to the ambiguity of the affects produced by Stein in the salon context.

Stein was at this point famous as a patron of legendary modernist art, and already considered among the makers of the modernist canon (Leick 2009). She never hesitated to repeat the stories of how she discovered Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, the geniuses of modernist painting, along with her brother Leo in her early Paris years, but at this point she no longer had the means to buy paintings from any of her old friends whose recognition had grown exponentially. The tastes in visual arts that she cultivated in the latter part of her life, with Francis Rose among her main protégés, has often been criticized as sentimental and uninteresting in comparison to the revolutionary paintings she had been buying in her youth. But what this change in Stein’s preference also reveals, is how we

159 As Dydo notes, many of the new young men of Stein’s salon during these years were Georges. Most importantly, the French poets and publishers Georges Hugnet and Georges Maratier and the American George Platt Lynes. This was also the period in which Stein’s controversial friendship with the later Pétain official Bernard Faÿ developed.

160 Wagner-Martin and others uncover that the issue of lesbian sexuality in the salon was a significant concern to Toklas and Stein in early years, where they felt they needed to veil the nature of their relationship to many, especially American visitors. Wagner-Martin interprets the practice of separating the guests (that Toklas “sat with the wives” of the visiting artists as described in “her” autobiography) as part of this veiling scheme. (Wagner-Martin 1995: 188).
need to think of her art collecting as a relational practice, just like her producing it (in the form of writing), and how both practices were integrated parts of the larger media ecology that she, in collaboration with her circles of friends, was constructing around herself. In this context, many factors other than the immanent qualities of the artworks were of relevance. Such qualities could for instance be the personality of the painter, his ability to fit into the salon context, his possible contributions to the concurrent production of the salon’s ambience and reputation, and, why not: his name. “Alice’s” account in the *Autobiography* expresses more than a tone of doubt when it comes to an aesthetic evaluation of Rose’s paintings, but represents him as very eager to please in his choice of motives:

Since then we have seen a great deal of Francis Rose but Gertrude Stein has not lost interest in the pictures. He has this summer painted the house from across the valley where we first saw it and the waterfall celebrated in Lucy Church Amiably. He has also painted her portrait. He likes it and I like it but she is not sure whether she does, but as she has just said, perhaps she does (ABT 910).

Certainly, the intrinsic brilliancy of the paintings as autonomous artworks did not seem to be the main issue to Stein when she, in her lecture “Pictures”, attempts to describe her passion for painting:

> Once an oil painting is painted, painted on a flat surface, painted by anybody who likes or is hired or is interested to paint it, or who has or has not been taught to paint it, I can always look at it and it always holds my attention. The painting may be good it may be bad, medium or very bad or very good but any way I like to look at it (LIA 225).

In both *Alice B. Toklas* and *Everybody’s Autobiography*, Stein includes several elaborate passages about being unable to decide on the genuine quality of the paintings by Rose, to justify her continued acquisition of his work, and in the end Picasso’s comment “at least they are less bêtes than the others” (ABT 910) sums up the general evaluation pretty well. Notoriously weak aesthetic judgments like those formulated by Stein, – who is otherwise known for her innumerable cocksure declarations about which were the most important artworks of the 20th century – on Francis Rose also recall Sianne Ngai’s characterization of post-industrial society as a context in which strong aesthetic judgments are becoming more and more difficult to maintain, and thus supports my claim that Stein, in

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161. It would appear that Stein moderated her wavering judgment of Rose’s work as she, in a portrait of Rose dated 1939 writes: “I believe that Francis Rose is the most important painter among the young painters painting to-day” (RAB 60). However, even in this and other appreciative texts on Rose that Stein wrote for various exhibition catalogues there is an amateurish touch to the aesthetic judgments she proposes, for instance: “Francis Rose could speak of himself as a young man who loves to paint. He loves to paint. He does love to paint. He is happy when he paints, he paints with both hands, he paints, he just paints” (“Sir Francis Rose” 1934).
the latter years of her career, was anticipating this condition.

It is of course always debatable when a general condition like the “post-industrial society” addressed by Ngai occurs, as something like that will always happen gradually, and arguably Stein’s radically changed situation with her late experience of fame exhibits traits corresponding to it. By associating with Rose, promoting him and buying his work, developing a genuinely warm friendship and having him stay with her in her French country house, portraying herself and Toklas, and letting him illustrate *The Gertrude Stein First Reader* and thus contribute to her brand, Stein was in a sense already opening up to the massive commodification of her persona that happened to a larger extent after her death. Along with Toklas and Carl Van Vechten, Rose was intensely involved in securing Stein’s immediate legacy. For one thing, he was appointed to design her tombstone at Père Lachaise cemetery. As is demonstrated by the marvelously kitschy Stein scarf designed and sold by Rose immediately after her death (1946), in his treatment, the Stein figure evoked by the rose can be as sentimental and banal – and tied up to unsubtle hagiography – as it can be (homo-)erotic, minimalist or avant-garde. An unbroken connection runs from Rose’s tributes like the tacky scarf and his plans for a pompous Stein mural to the Stein mugs, buttons, T-shirts and decorative pillows that circulate today.\(^{162}\)

Section of Francis Rose’s tribute scarf, 1946. The original Gertrude Stein porcelain mug by Fitz and Floyd, 1976 (Photos taken at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library).

This is not to contradict that the friendship between Stein and Rose was most likely both heartfelt and dedicated (this, obviously, is not something I wish to speculate about or pass judgment on), but to stress the continuity in the affective economy of Stein’s practice between the affects produced by gestures of friendship and those produced by art and publicity. The effects of the emotional adherence so central to Stein’s collaborate

\(^{162}\) For examples, see <https://www.redbubble.com/shop/gertrude+stein#> (last accessed 25.02.2018)
poetics can play out with equal conviction in social, aesthetic and commercial contexts. Such circumstances challenge the attempt to establish stable hierarchies between serious, critical artworks, glorifying tributes and simple references eager to tap into her cultural capital through appropriations of her work and persona. Further, the story of Francis Rose and his position in the Stein media ecology demonstrates how people and their names can function as devices in the ecology much in the same way objects, books and signature sentences can.

II. THE PERSONA (INTERFACE)

As I have already touched upon in previous chapters, the obvious social element in the Stein persona was grounded before the coining of her motto and even before she began publishing her writing. At the heart of Stein’s mythic, modernistic space, the salon, she initially established her own artist persona, her name and image, on the basis of her art collection while writing word portraits of the artists that surrounded her, passing them around to their subjects as gestures of friendship, and thus building up her relationships with the actors of the Paris avant-garde scene. In this way, through her artists’ portraits that were often circling around the intermingling of the person and his or her creation, she was establishing a relational situation at the core of the modernist tale of autonomous genius creation.

It is important to avoid romanticizing this social dimension. As Timothy Galow has stressed, there are strategical promotional implications to Stein’s practice of portraiture. Galow points out how her portraits of for instance Mabel Dodge and Henry McBride resulted directly in the subject’s private printings of their own portraits as well as in their continued effort to explain, promote and disseminate Stein’s writing (Galow 2010: 223). One could add that this is a dimension that has been present in the entire tradition of portraiture in Western painting: portraits of patrons and their relations were often a necessary genre for a painter to master in order to survive. In chapter four we saw how Field and Lang, in their “Machine for get me not”, brought forward the underlying currents of dominance and potential violence that also run through Stein’s implication of friends into her poetry. Although they used quotes from Stein’s To Do that were not originally framed as portraiture, the lines were directed towards Carl Van Vechten (“Van” or “Papa Wojums” to Stein), who became one of Stein’s most dedicated friends, advocates

163 When Mabel Dodge had “A Portrait of Mabel Dodge at the Villa Curonia” printed and bound in Viennese floral wall paper in 1913 it had a major impact on the making of Stein’s name in New York, where Dodge resided. The case of Henry McBride is a little less clear cut, as the “portrait” referred to by Galow, is in fact Stein’s 1917 piece “Have They Attacked Mary. He Giggled. (A Political Caricature)” in which the line “Who is Mr. McBride” appears. Henry McBride had the piece privately printed in 1917 and helped place it with Vanity Fair, where it was published later the same year. The last point in particular proved significant, as the initiated contact with Vanity Fair paid off for Stein, who had several pieces published in the magazine over the following couple of years.
and collaborators in the construction of her public persona.

If the hundreds of portraits, appreciations and greetings Stein produced of friends and acquaintances, as I have suggested, were occasional poetry with a clear social function, they were also functional as publicity agents. From the very beginning of Stein’s portraiture there is a sliding transition between the social and the promotional or public endeavor. Stein’s gesture of tying people to her work and herself via mutual portraiture is also part of her effort to circulate and promote her own work. This practice follows a logic of sharing that comes strikingly close to that of early 21st century social media, where ‘friends’ and ‘followers’ function as potential channels for the further distribution of one’s messages. What makes Stein’s example so interesting in this context is not just its early historical origins in the first part of the 20th century, but also how the effort towards promoting and distributing as socializing is completely integrated into the work itself. In her work, there is no clear-cut borderline between the artwork and the publicizing of that artwork via other affective and social practices. Again, this anticipates the situation in contemporary post-war consumer society sketched by Sianne Ngai, where boundaries between aesthetic and non-aesthetic judgments are becoming more and more difficult to maintain.

A factor also stressed by Sianne Ngai in her aforementioned comparison between Gertrude Stein and Andy Warhol is how both artists are known for their extensive engagement in celebrity portraiture, a genre not at all common among their peers. Aside from the functional quality of Stein’s portraits just addressed, I would also like to stress the continuity Ngai identifies in Stein and Warhol’s not overtly antagonistic depictions of consumer objects and their portrayals of artists and celebrities in similar ways. This continuity strongly underlines the commodification of the artist or celebrity – and at the same time participates in this commodification. Accordingly, the contemporary impact of Stein does not come exclusively from readers engaging directly with her writing and responding to the affects evoked by it, whether they are tied to its logo-like cuteness or its collaborative poetics, but just as much from readers and non-readers alike appropriating her both commodified and participatory persona, and that may in turn produce new affects and generate identification and alternative subject positions.

In the earliest salon years, where the salon guests where predominantly visual artists, Stein had her body, face and appearance shaped by the portraits painted and sculpted of her. As was suggested in Field and Lang’s “Machine for spelling-bee and fire-fly”, the most significant of these moldings of her persona was Picasso’s 1905 portrait of her, which she revisited again and again in her writing of the preceding decades, recounting the anecdote about how he wiped out her face after months of sittings, then left Paris.

This factor is even more obvious, when Stein occasionally portrayed influential semi-antagonists like T.S. Eliot, who she was on no friendly terms with, but whose portrait “A Description of the Fifteenth of November. A Portrait of T.S. Eliot” she, according to the account in The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas wrote and mailed to the poet after they had met in Paris on this date, as an explicit response to his exclamation that if he was ever to publish anything by her in his journal Criterion it would have to be “her very latest thing” (ABT 857).
for Spain, came back and repainted it without seeing her again, in the style of an Iberian mask. In the Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas “Alice” recounts how Picasso, when the conversation fell to his portrait of Stein, used to shrug his shoulders and say, “Everybody says that she does not look like it but that does not make any difference, she will” (ABT 669).

With this phrasing, Stein (via Picasso) is turning the dependency around; it is she who needs to look like her portrait, not vice versa. And of course, Picasso’s prediction came true, both to Stein herself – as she asserts in Picasso, “he gave me the picture and I was and I still am satisfied with my portrait, for me, it is I, and it is the only reproduction of me which is always I, for me” (P 502) – and to posterity – today, this image remains the most iconic image of Stein. This is indeed how most people think of her. Man Ray’s photograph of Stein in front of her portrait makes it obvious that to Stein this painting, however autonomous it appears today, hanging on a wall in the Metropolitan Museum in New York, was loaded with functions that go beyond the intrinsic aesthetic qualities it holds. It is a crucial node in the media ecology of Stein’s persona, or to speak in Jenkins’ terms again, it is a part in the social and multimodal convergence culture that constitutes Stein’s transmedia persona.165


Thus, already in her own lifetime, Stein’s persona was a commodified construction shaped and appropriated by her friends and protégés. Accordingly, her transmedia persona was always a collaborative product, shaped, in Jenkin’s terminology, by the “col-

165 Jenkins stresses that of the concept of transmedia persona is independent of fictitiousness, Barack Obama and Osama Bin Laden can be regarded as transmedia personas just as well as Harry Potter (Jenkins 2011). In reference to Stein, this recalls Tan Lin’s statement quoted in chapter four, that, as deceased Stein “exists now like a former president.” (Lin 2000).
lective intelligence” of a number of participants. Today, it stays open for intervention and appropriation as it lends itself to endless impersonations just as the rose line lends itself to endless replays. In this way, there exists a sort of “convergence culture” within the media ecology of Stein that was initiated when she invited friends and acquaintances to contribute in various ways to the construction of her persona as an open assemblage.

**Gertrude and Alice on stage**

The cultural diversity of this convergence culture can be witnessed by Tom Hachtman’s comic *Gertrude’s Follies* that lives off the iconicity of the Stein figure and the nostalgia for the epoch in which she lived. In 1978, when Hatchman started the strip, he recalls that the aforementioned Museum of Modern Art exhibition *Four Americans in Paris: The Collections of Gertrude Stein and her Family* had recently been shown, and the catalogue had reproduced the famous Man Ray photograph of Stein and Toklas seated on each side of the fireplace in the salon (1922):

This photograph was on my mind when I first thought of doing Gertrude and Alice as a kind of vaudeville comedy couple in a comic strip. I was half asleep. I sat up. I thought of their circle – Hemingway and Picasso. I knew of Alice and her brownie recipe. I got out of bed and headed for the drawing table with the thought, ‘Art. Literature. Marijuana. Homosexuality. Paris. Fun’ (Kozlowski 2012, no paging).
But, unsurprisingly, this very theatrical persona has been especially important to the reception of Stein in the theater. Thus, in her study of Stein’s reception in American theater, *Staging Gertrude Stein*, Leslie Atkins Durham regards Stein’s life story as the “first staging” (Durham 2005: 9) of her, as Stein’s self-staging, especially in the 1930s, also took place in front of an audience. As she phrases it, “before several generations of the American avant-garde staged Gertrude Stein’s writings, Gertrude Stein took great pains […] to stage herself” (ibid. 8). As Durham also suggests, the practice of putting a Stein figure on stage in a theatrical production was already initiated by Stein and Virgil Thomson in their last collaboration, the opera *The Mother of Us All* (1946), where Stein herself introduced “Virgil Thomson” along with other friends and associates like “Donald Gallup” (of the Yale archive) as characters in the libretto, with Thomson later adding a “Gertrude Stein” character to match the “Thomson” character in the final version of the libretto that was completed after Stein’s death (ibid. 98).

As discussed in chapter two, the biographical Stein figure appeared on stage in the late 1970s and 1980s in popular biographical pieces such as Marty Martin’s monologue *Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein Gertrude Stein* (yet another title exploiting the simple slogan-like effect of Stein’s practice of repetition) Win Wells’ *Gertrude Stein and a Companion* (1983) and the first of American stage director Frank Galati’s four Stein related plays and musicals *She Always Said, Pablo* (1987). But Durham even traces the presence of Stein’s persona in productions such as the Judson Poets’ popular 1968 musical production *In Circles*, where the reviewer from the *New Yorker* was far from the only observer to notice how the director, Reverend Al Carmines, who played a dominant part in the opening of the performance, “looked just enough like Picasso’s famous portrait of Gertrude Stein to get everything off to great start” (quoted in Durham 2005: 89). Durham’s point in stressing this likeness between Stein and Carmines, who actually ended up playing the role of Stein years later in the Judson Poets’ staging of Leon Katz’s stage adaption of *The Making of Americans* (1989), is to determine the impact of the image of Stein as a figure in her mid-century theatrical reception. Normally, “when a famous star is cast in a particular role, we inevitably see elements of his or her off-camera exploits and traits infiltrating and reshaping the scripted character,” Durham explains and continues:

In the case of Gertrude Stein’s plays as they were produced at mid-century, it was not the renown of the actors playing the parts that augmented the written text, filling its spaces and absences, so much as it was the fame, selected tastes, and philosophy of Stein herself that affected what audiences saw produced on stage (Durham 2005: 92).


167 Another staging that decided to add a Stein figure on stage, to deal with the issue of the pronounced voice of the narrator in Stein’s text.
Thus, according to Durham, the ensembles playing Stein in the 1960s already “emulated and improvised on particular aspects of Stein’s image and/or her aesthetic theory and techniques in order to steal perceptual, political and artistic freedom from dominant mid-century American culture” (ibid. 92). The “dominant mid-century American culture” Durham evokes here is equivalent to the conservative intellectual climate described by Catharine Stimpson that I addressed in chapter one, and in which Stein’s work according to Stimpson was at real risk of being forgotten, until it began to be revived by the avant-garde movements that needed her as a liberation figure to build an alternative canon around.

Durham’s observation about the weight of Stein’s staged personality lent to these avant-garde movements is an interesting one, and one that also resonates with the gestural elements in Richard Foreman’s Stein reception I touched upon in chapter one, but which is not so well covered in the reception. Other scholars working with Stein’s theatrical reception, including Sarah Bay-Cheng, have treated posterity’s appreciation of Stein’s strong persona, as it is manifested by Stein as a biographical character appearing on stage, with more skepticism than Durham. Bay-Cheng criticizes an article by theater critic Celia Wren about the increasing frequency of the appearance of Stein as a character in American stage plays for not acknowledging the influence of Stein as a playwright: “Despite numerous recent productions of Stein’s plays, Wren focuses solely on productions in which the character of Gertrude Stein appears, but largely ignores the presence of Stein’s own work in American theater” (Bay-Cheng 2004: 117).

The opposition set up by Bay-Cheng here is one that is already performed in Wren’s own text, but from the point of view of this study, this opposition can be pronounced a false one, as the appearance of Stein as a character in a host of different plays can also count as an example of the presence of Stein’s “own work” in American theater, even if it is not derived explicitly from the textual material she produced as a playwright. Obviously, there are grounds for Bay-Cheng’s critique. Wren explicitly continues the long tradition of applying a superficial mode of mockery as a response to the opaqueness of Stein’s avant-garde writings and the marginality of their outreach. But Bay-Cheng’s criticism could also be turned upon herself, since she herself, by paying no serious attention to the way American theater practices the staging of ‘biographical’ Stein as an icon, is ignoring some of the impacts of Stein’s work examined in this chapter by maintaining an unhelpful dichotomy between avant-garde and popular culture in Stein productions.

By the late 1990s, the popularity of the biographical Stein on stage had increased enough for Wren to claim that “In theatre circles […] the woman who coined the phrase ‘there’s no there there’ is turning up, increasingly, everywhere” (Wren 2001: 30). Many of the performances of later years treat Stein’s writings as an entangled corpus of text that lends itself to cutting and pasting via a technique that has evident overlaps with

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168 Curiously, “Loving Repeating” – the Stein cut-out title of Wren’s article – predicts the title of a later example of the stream of plays putting Stein on stage that she is describing: Frank Galati’s musical Loving Repeating: A Musical of Gertrude Stein that premiered 2006.
the technique identified in *A Prank of Georges*, but it is safe to say that it appears less unconventional in a theatrical context. In relation to Stein, it was already introduced in Galati’s *She Always Said, Pablo* and to a lesser degree Marty Martin’s monologue. But, as already suggested, the collective compositional process that defines the theater as an art form – featuring the director reigning as authority over the realized performance, if the author or playwright is considered the authority over the text – as well as the inscribed possibility for long temporal dispersion between a theatrical performance and the making of its textual support, has made the theater depend much more openly on cut-and-paste techniques than poetry and other literary genres in book form. The creation of mashups and collages of different dramatic texts thus has a long tradition in stage art, where it has not been marginalized or disparaged the way it has in literature due to the medium’s doctrine of originality.169

Anne Bogart’s *Gertrude and Alice: A Likeness to Loving* (1999), which has had several reproductions, is such a potpourri show made from scraps of Stein’s writings that are combined around a biographical narrative or, more precisely, around biographical imagery. A small curiosity is that Stein philologists Ulla Dydo and Edward Burns both worked as dramaturgical consultants on Bogarts production since shows like these are in a sense actively undoing the “decontextuation” of Stein’s writing that is so central in Dydo’s scholarly discourse on Stein. This circumstance indeed also suggests that Dydo’s concept of decontextuation is not normative when it comes to reading, remediating, and enjoying Stein’s work, but only so in terms of the scholarly reading of her. Plays like *Gertrude and Alice* make free use of Stein’s experimental language, but re-territorialize it by re-situating it in biographical-historical context. Bogart’s performance, which is based on a script by the actresses Lola Pashalinski and Linda Chapman, who also played Stein and Toklas in the original version (and were a couple in real life), depicts the relationship between Stein and Toklas, focusing particularly on a comic “outing” of the veiled descriptions of lesbian sexuality in both early experimental texts and later (auto-)biographical narrative by both women.

In Frank Galati’s most recent Stein related production, the largescale musical *Loving Repeating: A Musical of Gertrude Stein* (2006), the same technique of mixing and matching Stein’s words from a range of texts in new ways is used to recount a story focused on the relationship between Stein and Toklas. Unlike Bogart’s performance, in which sets and costumes were held in rather cool, minimalistic and timeless style, in Galati’s musical, the costumes and set designs invoke a semi-nostalgic ambience around the Stein figure and her environment comparable to what Marjorie Perloff detected as part of the sentimental affectivity of Martin’s monologue. In later years, several more pro-

169 Thereby I am not implying that such techniques cannot be applied in innovative ways in contemporary theater. The Wooster Group’s production *House/Lights* (1997) is an aesthetically challenging, radical example of mash up – combining Stein’s *Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights* (1938) with Joseph Mawra’s soft S/M sexploitation film *Olga’s House of Shame* (1964) – that in the terminology of Hans-Thies Lehman dissolves the “fictive cosmos” of traditional theater in terms of classical plot, world and characters (Lehman 2016).
ductions in theater, opera and musical theater productions have followed in this vein. Generally, such biographical explorations of Stein on stage, even if they are based on her own writing, reinstate the immediate setting, context, and everyday life that was originally abstracted from Stein’s writing through the nostalgia of the salon ambience and the characters on stage embodying Stein, Toklas and friends as vessels of audience identification. I will not engage further in these productions, but merely establish that the repeated occurrence of such, often relatively large, commercial ventures rests on the assumption that the audience of theater and musicals are indeed interested in this, and thus confirms the Stein figure’s growing presence in a contemporary media ecology.

Fan culture as media ecology

Outside the spheres of public cultural production, communities much like the fan cultures analyzed by Henry Jenkins exist where readers and posthumous “friends” of Stein, including collectors, fans and admirers, many of whom are associated with queer communities, cultivate Stein as an icon and a personality. These communities have constituted a small but passionate and highly productive collaborative audience to Stein, even if they often constitute a space that is only semi-public. As Lucy Daniel remarks, “a large part of Stein’s cultural significance as a gay icon is due to her 40-year monogamous relationship with Toklas, because it was both so groundbreaking and so obvious and unembarrassed” (Daniels 2009: 97) and accordingly, in this dedicated reception, the figure of Alice Toklas is at least as important as Stein herself. A lot of this activity takes place online on social media and in blogs like Hans Gallas’ “Gertrude and Alice” that has been active since 2002 and can still be trusted to recount Stein and Toklas-related events in all media. These practices also include extrovert public activities such as lecturing and exhibiting Stein memorabilia and first editions, and producing fan fiction in the shape of children’s books like Hans Gallas’ Gertrude and Alice and Fritz and Tom (2011) illustrated by cartoonist Tom Hatchman, Jonah Winther’s Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude is Gertrude (2009) and Monica Kulling’s Happy Birthday, Alice Babette (2016).

Even drawings, photo collages and other types of decorative fan art circulate the internet as seen in more obvious cases of participatory culture such as fantasy novels, Disney princesses and comic strip franchises. In his study of the media ecologies of the fantastic, Per Israelson has shown how participatory communities, for instance around popular works of fantasy fiction like J.R.R. Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings, are functional as

170 Examples are The Marriage of Alice B. Toklas and Gertrude Stein, a play by Edward Einhorn, premiered New York in 2017 and, 27, an opera by Ricky Ian Gordon and Royce Vavrek, which premiered in St. Louis 2014.
media ecologies, and accordingly, a transmedia persona like Stein’s can also be functional in a similar way (Israelson 2017).

In understanding these parts of the media ecology, the pondering between conventionality and non-conventionality of Stein’s late public performance discussed above is crucial. As Daniels suggested, there is a groundbreaking effect in Stein and Toklas’ appearance as a public couple, yet they also satisfy conventional ideals enough for them to pass through the prejudiced American media practically unchallenged.

Disidentification and the infrastructure of LGBT democratic rights

In this context, it will be helpful again to consider Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, with which he aims to describe different practices of identification in relation to the dominant culture. As already outlined, three modes of identification exist: a “good subject” who identifies with discursive norms, and a “bad subject” in open opposition to this, rebelling against and attempting to counter such norms. Clearly, Stein and Toklas’s performance of gay sexuality occupies neither of these positions, but is much closer to Muñoz’s third option, disidentification, which is a strategy “that works on and against dominant ideology […]” and “tries to transform a cultural logic from within” (Muñoz 1999: 11). As discussed earlier, Stein’s strategy for adapting to the dominant cultural form of the male, literary genius, while in the same movement queering this category from within by occupying it with her deviant body, can be described in terms of such a disidentification process. Muñoz attributes a transformative political potential towards the dominant ideology to the strategy of disidentification, especially in his writings about cross-gender as well as cross-racial (dis-)identification, like gay male performers’ experimentation with the drag figure. As Mette Tranholm stresses in her discussion of the political implications of Muñoz’s concept: “disidentification is a simultaneous rejection and acceptance of the dominant ideology. We must acknowledge it to change it” (Tranholm 2017: 15).

Obviously, the rise in public acceptance, recognition of civil rights and democratic influence experienced by LGBT communities in America since Stein and Toklas
as a queer couple chose lifelong expatriation in order to live their life as they desired constitutes a significant change in the dominant ideology in regard to homosexuality. The degree to which Stein and Toklas function today as role models to American LGBT communities can serve as an illustration of the transformational potential in the way the couple publicly performed their homosexuality via strategies of disidentification. As Tranholm stresses, “disidentification as a mode of performance is meant to dissolve the dominant codes and present utopian possibilities, make new worlds, and show how the world should be” (Tranholm 2017: 15-16). Today, the importance of Stein and Toklas as symbols of the cause is not only illustrated by frequent references to them in the discourse of sexual minorities, and in collaborative appropriations of their words and images so common in LGBT counter culture, but can also be traced in the official, democratic infrastructure of the LGBT communities.

In this vein, two of the American Democratic Party’s oldest and most influential lobbyist/interest clubs focusing on LGBT issues are the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club of San Francisco and the Gertrude Stein Democratic Club, of Washington DC, which constitute a concrete testimony to such a utopian force. Such examples are evidence of the potential importance of symbols founded in art and culture in the complex process of altering the patterns of political infrastructure. If Stein and Toklas did not act as outspoken activists of LGBT rights in their own time, their life and art can still function as a crowbar for those who come after, as it delivered imagery and language to openly depict and live queer sexuality in a way that appeared combinable with socially acceptable public behavior. Through the collaborative engagements with Stein and Toklas that later members of an LGBT community have performed, the couple’s original, partly coded, performance of queer sexuality has been transformed towards the more outspoken ideals of today’s queer communities. The particular combination of the queer and the conventional performed by Stein and Toklas provided a prototype for changing the relational infrastructure of democratic culture in order for (certain) sexual minorities to gain access to formalized channels of lobbyism, or structures for protecting and advancing their political interests. Thus, if the collaborative appropriation of Stein and Toklas as positive role models does not, in the first place, result in cultural products that have a complexity inviting deeper analytical engagement, this very practice remains politically effective on an infrastructural level.

172 Founded in 1971, the Alice B. Toklas LGBT Democratic Club is “the first LGBT focused Democratic Club in the United States” according to the club’s website. Likewise, the online description of The Gertrude Stein Democratic Club states that it “is the voice of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) Democrats in the District of Columbia. Established in 1976, Gertrude Stein is one of the oldest Democratic clubs in the District.”
Queer identity and avant-garde capital

Further, as suggested above in the Stein reception, the boundaries are blurred. This also plays out in the obvious parallelism between the cultivation of Stein as a role model for lived homosexuality in public and the way Stein is also cultivated as an icon for avant-garde art. The definite community addressed by the passionate Stein-Toklas cultivators and lovers and the audience addressed by the avant-garde Stein lovers both have a limited reach and little concrete aspiration to reach beyond this community.

Stein’s avant-garde currency was already suggested in the highly appreciative work on Stein carried out by language poets like Charles Bernstein, but it becomes even more central to the way she is conceived by later generations of American poetry. The conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith, founder – in 1996 – of the pioneer avant-garde internet archive UbuWeb, which makes available to the public massive amounts of previously unobtainable avant-garde art and hosts plenty of Stein resources, has referenced Stein and appropriated her work numerous times, producing works such as the chapbook tribute Stein on punctuation (2000). The book reproduces three self-assured pages on punctuation from Stein’s “Poetry and Grammar”, followed by “Gertrude Stein’s punctuation from Gertrude Stein on punctuation”, which is three pages where only Stein’s punctuation from the same passage is printed, thus her scattered commas and periods float airily over three white pages. Witty, curious and graphically tasteful, Goldsmith’s chapbook does not necessarily appear more complex or critical in its treatment of Stein’s heritage than does Hans Gallas’ 2016 digital Christmas card. Both celebrate Stein as an iconic authority – one on unconventional use of language and the other on exhibiting an unconventional...
When asked by Belgian Stein scholar Sarah Posman about *Stein on punctuation* in particular and his relationship to Stein in general, Goldsmith replied:

We love her primarily because she’s so American. She writes in the most American of Englishes; it would be impossible to imagine the simplicity and reduced vocabulary she uses if she was, say, British. She’s also a great figure, anticipating our condition of ‘intermedia’ by positioning herself at the nexus of so many fields. We love her because she was a woman; we love her because she was an open lesbian; we love her because she was a pop icon before the idea of popular culture was invented; we love her for the many permissions and freedoms she grants us by the example of her life. For us Americans she really is ‘the mother of us all’ (Posman 2010).

In this quote, it is obvious how many of the aspects of Stein’s work come together in the collaborative reception of her by a poet like Goldsmith. He is clearly coming from experiences with Stein’s most experimental avant-garde work as featured on UbuWeb and canonized by language and post-language poets. On a dispatch for conceptual poetry on the Poetry Foundation website that he authored, Goldsmith explicitly accentuates “Gertrude Stein’s densely unreadable texts, John Cage & Jackson Mac Low’s procedural compositions, and Andy Warhol’s epically unwatchable films” as the primary influences of the movement (Goldsmith 2007). In the quote above, he also starts out with her language and the intermedia quality of her work but almost instantly jumps from such formal observations to his appreciation of her as a pop icon, the way she appears, especially in the light of the collaborative engagement with her performed by Andy Warhol, another announced foreparent of conceptual poetry.

Observers of Goldsmith’s own poetic practice will be quick to note that it also has its strong performance aspects. Since the 1990s, when he began his passage into the poetry world coming from a background as a visual artist, he has invested his body and person in his works and their presentation. First, with works like *Fidget* (2000), which records every movement made by the poet’s body in an entire day, and *Soliloquy* (2001), transcribing every word spoken by the poet in the course of a week. In later years, in line with his literary practice becoming more and more dependent on copying and other post-productive techniques in works such as *Day* (2003), *Traffic* (2007), and *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013), the vulnerable and potentially embarrassing bodily exposure of the earlier pieces has given way to a more explicitly showman or trickster-like performance dimension. If his physical, private body is less featured in the later works that gather their material from a depersonalized public sphere consisting mainly of news

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173 Both pieces are tributes, both communicate a general message that boils down to: “I am a fan of Gertrude Stein and look at this: isn’t she just the best?” By this I am not implying that purely postproductive appropriations of Stein’s work in the manner of conceptual poetry are not able to contain interesting points and eye-opening processings of Stein’s work. One example is Holly Melgard’s piece discussed in chapter four.
media (such as The New York Times and various radio stations) Goldsmith’s own brilliant, oral performances of these works remain central components in their media ecology. Accordingly, Goldsmith has become a public figure and provocateur within and outside the poetry community, elaborating intensely on his performance techniques and his flamboyant wardrobe. Thus, when he calls Stein “the mother of us all” and stresses how “she was a pop icon before the birth of popular culture,” it is because this aspect of Stein’s work is central to the way Goldsmith operates his own artist persona. Both writers have become iconic figures functioning almost like marketable brand names in ways that are ultimately inseparable from capitalist commodity culture. The coexistence of an exclusive avant-garde capital and a broader, more glamorous popular capital that is implied in the Stein figure is clearly liberating to an artist like Goldsmith. One of the many “permissions and freedoms” Stein grants him is the permission to cultivate such a popular persona, to play along with mainstream media in his artist performance. Yet, just as Stein’s Hollywood persona generated affection and following, it also generated antagonism and anger, and this response pattern is one that Goldsmith has also experienced.


Much has been written in later years about the complex relationship between modernism and celebrity culture, as both phenomena grew strong in the consciousness of the American public in the first half of the 20th century. Several contributions to this body of research deal directly with the case of Gertrude Stein, as she is exemplary in the way she travelled from European (ex-patriate) obscurity to her brief period of American stardom in the course of a few years. In the 1930s she entered the scene of the rising modern celebrity cult, touring the US, lecturing, speaking on the radio and talking to newspapers, magazines and people all over the country. Renowned for her character, appearance and cultural performance, her fame was comparable to that of movie stars and other fashion-

able personalities. Yet, as she, according to her own account in Everybody’s Autobiography, said to her publisher Alfred Harcourt, the experimental writing remained the essential quality of this public persona. As evoked in the introduction, Stein’s public persona was constituted through her popular writings and performances in interaction with her more experimental ones, as the later work appropriates, contextualizes and restages the earlier and invites readers to revisit it. As Gertrude Stein became a literary star, her public persona also became an integrated part of her work, and highly commodified, a fact she experienced as involving high personal costs, causing, by her own account, her first real experience of writer’s block.

As addressed in chapter one, Logan Esdale, in his preface to the workshop edition of Stein’s Ida. A Novel, has developed how Stein made conscious use of the assembling archive of her papers at Yale in the careful and complex composition process of Ida. As Esdale notes, the establishment of Stein’s archive at Yale takes place at approximately the same time (1937) as Stein was struggling the hardest with her concerns about publicity after having enjoyed the great attention and warmth that she encountered from the American public, while at the same time experiencing serious bewilderment towards the simplified caricatures of herself that appeared in the American media. Thus, Stein was experiencing concern in regard to two competing images of her: one was that of the literary genius and the other, the insubstantial celebrity stunt. A 1938 press release on Ida, either co-written or dictated by Stein, coins the concept “publicity saint” in relation to the aviator Charles Lindberg, the greatest American celebrity at the time:

Never in the whole world has anybody occupied the peculiar status that Lindberg occupies, Miss Stein believes. He is publicity saint No. 1. He is a saint with a certain mystical something about him, which keeps him a saint: he does nothing and says nothing, and nobody is affected by him in any way whatsoever […]. Miss Stein admitted that she, herself, is a publicity saint, but of a minor order (Quoted in Esdale 2012: xvii-xviii).

When Stein includes herself in this order, it is because of her concern about her fame being insubstantial and based on her personality and not her work. The equivalence between the publicity saint and Stein’s concept of genius, also frequently connected to the figure of the saint, is striking. Both rely on a conception of inactivity: the publicity saint “does nothing and says nothing,” and as far as the genius goes, as evoked above: “You have to sit around so much doing nothing, really doing nothing.” (EA 72).

Potentially troubling, however, was the proximity between the genius and the fraud that made Stein feel vulnerable about caricatures depicting her as an insubstantial media phenomenon. According to Esdale, “the archive offer[ed] a complexity that de-

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175 Another favorite example of Stein’s that was also a partial model for the character Ida, is Wallis Simpson, the scandalous divorcée who married the British crown prince and later (briefly) King Edward who eventually abdicated for her sake. In the 1930s Mrs. Simpson was a scandal media icon of the dimensions of Lady Diana in the 1980 and 90s.
bunk[ed] caricature” in part because it, through documentations of drafts and revisions, made Stein and her work appear more meticulous and “ordinary” and, thus, “free of the reductive ‘genius or charlatan’ binary” (Esdale 2012: xii). Stein’s work with *Ida* in combination with her engagement in the construction of an archive of her life’s work proved to Stein “that she was no publicity saint” (ibid. xxiv). The purpose of Esdale’s essay is establishing Stein as an intertextual writer who is connecting her own writing in a close network that runs across her career, a process that becomes visible to herself and to her audience through her simultaneous engagement with her own past writings through the establishment of the archive. Thus, Esdale demonstrates how Stein in her own practice anticipates the way Field and Lang treated the bulk of her written works as an integrated corpus of writing to be continuously rearranged:

Through her archive and through *Ida*, through incorporation and rearrangement, Stein delineated her identity as an intertextual writer so that we would consider how closely networked her writing was across her career and she gave indisputable evidence of her commitment to the creative act (Esdale 2012: xxxvi).

Esdale is convincing in establishing Stein as a serious craftsman in *Ida*, and the archive as a publicly accessible documentation of the working process that debunks the “genius or charlatan” binary and leads Stein out of the creative crisis she experienced with the coming of publicity. Esdale uses his own archival studies of the intratextual contexts to *Ida* tracing the work’s highly “composite identity” in connection with a sharp reading of the novel’s theme about identity and publicity to demonstrate that Stein was indeed the meticulous craftsman, the working artist, and not the publicity saint, and to show how she explored and expressed this self-image in her work on *Ida*. But, in debunking the “genius or charlatan” binary, Esdale in conclusion ends up transposing it into a new binary, one between being a “publicity saint” and being a “serious writer.” I would certainly align with Esdale that Stein herself, in terms of her own self-image, dwelled in this same binary, especially when it comes to her own accounts of the traumas of publicity. Yet, as I will indicate, via a recourse to the case of Kenneth Goldsmith, this second binary will also need some debunking if we are to understand Stein’s longer running impact in our contemporary media ecology.

Esdale’s argument for Stein’s craftsmanship is indeed an important one, because it also helps transgress some of the simplifications implied by the ways Stein herself verbalized being a genius (“you have to sit around so much doing nothing” and her insisting that some people – for “no reason” – are geniuses while most are not, EA 72). It is related to the way Marjorie Perloff has repeatedly argued in defense of Stein’s linguistic brilliance and the complexity of her work, countering the regularly reoccurring imposter/hoax accusations against her, as already discussed in chapter two. But even more strikingly, it resembles the way Perloff has countered the fierce criticism of Kenneth Goldsmith’s
practice as superficial, gimmicky and blind of male white privilege that gained momentum after his controversial performance of the piece “The Body of Michael Brown” in March 2015 as an independent appendix to his *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*.\(^{176}\) In her writings on Goldsmith’s work, Perloff goes beyond his own deceptively simplistic presentation of it as pure, easy and arbitrary copying. As Goldsmith repeatedly claims, the joke of his work is solely conceptual, and thus, actually reading it is a waste of time. Contrary to this, Perloff, both in her book on conceptual and related poetics, *Unoriginal Genius*, and in a 2015 lecture following up on the Michael Brown scandal, shows off the sophisticated mimesis of late capitalist society at play in a work like *Traffic* and how it comes about through the poet’s skillful manipulation of his linguistic material, in this case the traffic reports of a New York local radio station, in ways that are neither simple nor automatized.\(^{177}\)

As suggested, this line of argument is an important one for widening the understanding of what literary mimesis can be, and how a conceptual poetics can go hand in hand with skillful artistic practice, just as any other serious poetics can. But, to my mind, it provides only a partial explanation that misses a crucial part of the great attraction, and no less, the great provocation, of both Stein’s and Goldsmith’s work. When Goldsmith provokes such agitated responses to some of his work, it is certainly related to his use of appropriation of various types of material (written, spoken) produced by others. Working with the theft of text which he did not originally conceive will appear to critics with a more romantic or psychological concept of authorship ‘too easy’ or even ‘fake’, and this would motivate such critics to construct him as a fraud doing what anyone could do if they set their mind to it. This is certainly also part of the consciously provocative self-image he is promoting in his own discourse about his work. These are the accusations that Perloff successfully defends him from by showing the complexity of his work and making

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\(^{176}\) A very brief recapitulation of the event: In 2014, the 18-year-old, unarmed black man Michael Brown was shot and killed by Darren Wilson, a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The killing and proceeding trial gave rise to riots, protests and civil rights activism such as the Black Lives Matter movement. On March 4th 2015, Wilson was definitively cleared of civil rights violation by the US Department of Justice. At the poetry conference *Interrupt 3* that was hosted by Brown University on March 13th 2015, Kenneth Goldsmith went on stage with the performance “The Body of Michael Brown”, which consisted of the poet standing in front of a huge projection of Michal Brown’s high school graduation photo (that had already been iconized by the Black Lives Matter campaign), reading for about thirty minutes from a piece in which he had remixed the contents of Michael Brown’s autopsy report (the contents of which he had retrieved online where it was publicly accessible), thus stating all sorts of physical details about the body of the deceased teenager, ending on the rather brutal line “The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable.” Already during the performance, a stream of angry tweets started pouring in, even if the open responses to the performance in the auditorium were not agitated. The aftermath of the reading peaked in the spring/summer of 2015 where a heated debate on Goldsmith’s alleged racism and the potential connection between conceptual poetry (in general) and white supremacy took place. For account of the debate, see for example Steinhauser 2015.

\(^{177}\) See Perloff 2010, and particularly her 2015 lecture “Simulating Authenticity: The Conceptual Poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith and Sophie Calle” on Goldsmith’s *Traffic* and “The Body of Michael Brown” and works by Sophie Calle. Delivered at the University of Copenhagen and at the festival “Where were we” in Aarhus, December 2015 (Not published).
its unique realist accomplishments visible.

But more inciting, also to critics with a less authenticity-fixated view of literature, and thus also beyond those who are generally opposed to “cultural appropriation” in any form, is the constitution of the entire personal brand that has grown around Goldsmith’s poetic practice and of which the trickster discourse is only one part. As already suggested the performative dimension is extensive, also in Goldsmith’s recent works, although the relationship between the embodied poet and the contents of his conceptual poetry seems less reflexive in later years. But Perloff’s analysis does not address this part of the media ecology of Goldsmith’s practice as important. She reasonably rejects his own superficial discourse on the matter, but only to concentrate her attention entirely on the composition of the writings. Yet, in its wider media ecological conception, it is evident that Goldsmith’s massive personal ‘poetry brand’ and how it is wired into institutionalized infrastructures of experimental poetry is of determining importance for the way his practice is constructed and conceived.

As discussed above, one of his declared debts to Stein is the permission he derives from her practice to combine avant-garde capital and pop iconicity in his practice and in terms of this particular aspect, Stein is clearly more of a liberating figure to poets of Goldsmith’s generation than she was to herself, struggling as she was with the distorted image of the publicity saint. This is not unlike the way the collaborative engagement with Stein and Toklas from contemporary LGBT communities manages to turn the couple into a more liberating iconic constellation than they were in their own lived experience, where issues about veiling their sexuality were certainly very much present.

But contrary to the implicit jarring that permeates the Stein persona with the coming of fame, the smoother impression that Goldsmith’s persona, at least in later years, seems to make, is striking. While conceptual poetry has become widely canonized by academia, the performative dimension of the movement in general and Goldsmith’s work in particular has been less talked about. Rather than addressing this dominant aesthetic strategy, the (sympathetic) reception has followed the track suggested by the movement’s auto-discourse (for example Goldsmith and Dworkin 2010) and focused on questions of conceptuality and technology, such as algorithmic or “uncreative” strategies of text production. But at the same time, Goldsmith’s poetry is inseparable from himself as a very present, embodied performer exhibiting humorous showmanship and disruptive, avant-garde strategies. He has obtained substantial amounts of counter-cultural avant-garde capital via his association with UbuWeb’s abundance of subversive art, and on the grounds of his own merits in the art and poetry world. But in line with the growing institutionalization of conceptual poetry, this symbolic capital is also cashed in in more concrete ways, providing him with what his critics, not unjustly, conceive as a “tenured position of security and cultural power” (MacGabhan et al. 2015).  

As formulated in The Quietus.com, hinting at Goldsmith’s professorship at University of Pennsylvania and honorary positions like poet laureate of the MoMA and so on.

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178 As formulated in The Quietus.com, hinting at Goldsmith’s professorship at University of Pennsylvania and honorary positions like poet laureate of the MoMA and so on.
Accordingly, what most of all fueled the uproar against Goldsmith in particular and conceptual poetry in general\textsuperscript{179} seems to have had little to do with his merits as a poetic craftsman and all the more to do with the fact that it appears to his critics that he would be able to feed his ‘poetry brand’ by ceaselessly appropriating the death, pain and suffering of others.\textsuperscript{180} As one critic wrote, he “had reappropriated an act of violence which it is very difficult to imagine happening to somebody from his background. In doing so he appeared to subordinate a human life to a literary experiment” (MacGabhan et al. 2015). From this point of view, it would be the clash between the almost Coca Cola-like massiveness and smoothness of Goldsmith’s avant-garde poetry brand as it appears when wired into an institutional infrastructure and the gravity of the (negative) feelings that demographic groups not including him have invested in the concrete fate he appropriated that resulted in the explosion of the negative responses against him.\textsuperscript{181} The combination between the counter-cultural glow of Goldsmith’s persona and his secure position in the infrastructure provokes the critics, who consider themselves less fortunate than him in terms of access to these institutional infrastructures, to call out his bluff.

Once again, the confused condition diagnosed by Ngai, specifically in relation to the category of the zany that Goldsmith’s persona, like Stein’s, also has its investments in, is demonstrated. In Ngai’s analysis, the performative aesthetics of the zany is a symptom that the boundaries between art and life are no longer clear, which causes a zone of uncertainty to arise. In this case, the uncertainty does not primarily spring from the fact that Goldsmith used a textual document few people would consider art and framed it as art. In isolation, this act could follow more or less directly from Duchamp’s urinal. Rather, it springs from the fact that this document – the autopsy report of an unjustly killed teenager – is already invested with much stronger emotional implications than the imprecise, confused, awkward and highly unpleasant affects Goldsmith’s poetry framing of it are able to awaken in the audience responding to his performance. And thus, the institutional boundaries of “art” are not at all able to fence in the responses to the performance. In turn, this also demonstrates how the subculturalism of the avant-garde community alluding to

\textsuperscript{179} Goldsmith’s performance in combination with the subsequent Twitter intervention by another prominent conceptual poet, Vanessa Place, who has been tweeting brutally racist passages from Margaret Mitchell’s \textit{Gone with the Wind}, has resulted in numerous devastating critical accounts from critics and poets such as Ken Chen (2015) and Kathy Park Hong (2015) calling out the very grounds of conceptual poetry as racist. Openly aggressive initiatives have also emerged, such as the anonymous writers’ collective Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, which led a campaign against Place’s membership of a participant selection board for the Association of Writers and Writing Programs’ conference. As of October 2017, the group’s main website <http://gringpo.com/> is no longer open, and its Twitter account is protected, but writing signed by the collective can still be retrieved from mainstream poetry sites where it was featured extensively when the debate was at its highest. See Tamayo (2015) on the Poetry Foundation site.

\textsuperscript{180} In the concrete case, the late Michael Brown and the African-American community who mourned him, and for whom he at this point served as powerful icon of the Black Lives Matter movement and related civil rights campaigns on the rise.

\textsuperscript{181} As clearly seen in this heavily ironic quote from the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, extending the attack to anyone defending him: “GOLD STAR FOR DEFENDING KG AND VP DUE TO INDIFFERENCE TO POC BODIES AND SELFISH CAREERIST CONCERNS” (Tamayo 2015, KG=Kenneth Goldsmith, VP=Vanessa Place, POC=people of color).
Stein can be considered as equally semi-public in its reach as the applauding LGBT fan cultures addressed above.

Cases like Goldsmith’s “The Body of Michael Brown” performance highlight – independent of whatever intentions its author may have had – the limits of this community, as it does not (in effect) include those who have stronger identity investments in “POC” communities than the male, white avant-garde poet himself. The subculturalism of these different communities in the collaborative Stein reception places them side by side without one automatically being more sophisticated, interesting or universally relevant than the other. Rather, there are more and less sophisticated contributions to each community. Interesting, complex, collaborative artworks address the gay and lesbian heritage, like visual artist Deborah Kass’ Chairman Ma (Gertrude Stein) (1993) from her “Warhol project” and The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart which I will address shortly, and there are pieces that come closer to mere tributes like Samuel Steward’s memoirs, Hans Gallas’ holiday greeting cards and Francis Rose’s silk scarf. The same goes for the contemporary postproductively conceived avant-garde reception: there are interesting collaborative pieces like A Prank of Georges and more straight up tributes like Stein on punctuation.

Certainly, this is not a bad thing; there should be more than enough room in the media ecology of Stein’s reception for all these contributions. But what needs to be called to attention is the infrastructure that automatically favors the product of one community over the other. A tendency towards routine valorization of the products of the first community as unsophisticated “identity culture” and the second as critical, sophisticated artworks is a factor that must be reckoned with, as it is equivalent tendencies that the poets, critics and activists calling out Goldsmith’s position of “security and cultural power” are responding to.

However, as already suggested, this response pattern is a demonstration of the effects of Ngai’s condition of the dissolving borders between art and non-art, and the general weakening of the aesthetic as an independent, autonomous regime governed by different laws than social and political reality at large. The intensity of the 2015 conceptual poetry wars would seem to suggest that the infrastructures regulating the American poetry scene are under restructuration in these years, perhaps turning some of the routine valorizations around. Such indications, I would suggest, increases the demand to highten our attention upon other strings in the media ecology, such as the embodied artist persona, that appear to be gaining higher impact in these new infrastructures, and to develop the critical vocabulary we use to address it.

What also makes it important to revisit this highly controversial discussion in an exploration of the media ecology of Gertrude Stein is that, just like in Stein’s case, it is impossible to segregate this aesthetics of iconic publicity from Goldsmith’s artistic practice as a writer, as it is part and parcel of this practice. Goldsmith’s own suggestions that one should not waste time reading conceptual poetry takes up the division in the
reception of Stein between those reading her work and those praising her personality and postulates its resolving in the image of his own avant-garde poetry that can be decoded in an instance, like Tan Lin’s logo-like text.

Of course, one should not accept these claims about the end of reading at face value. Perloff and many other critics have shown how rewarding actually reading conceptual poetry, including Goldsmith’s own, can be. But such a reading practice should not divert attention from the trickster-persona effect that Goldsmith creates with statements such as these, as the aspect is as crucial to his work as it is to Stein’s. In this way, Goldsmith is in some ways exploding the binary between serious writer and publicity saint that Stein’s oeuvre both sets up and challenges. However, there are other elements, such as the collective and collaborative aspect at the core of Stein’s persona, that are less present in Goldsmith’s, at least as it has come across in later years.

Crafting the publicity saint

In extension of these complex connections between Goldsmith and Stein, I want to suggest a post script to Esdale’s account of Stein as choosing the path of the skilled writer over that of the publicity saint when confronted with her archive. If one looks beyond the written material in Stein’s archive, Esdale’s (and Stein’s own) dichotomy is challenged by the archive’s documentation, not just of Stein’s hard work with writing, but equally with her – and her friends’ – work of establishing her writer’s identity. Thus, the archive invites its users to take part not just in Stein’s intertextual writing practice as framed by Esdale, but also in the way she and her friends crafted, molded and shaped her persona, through joint efforts. That is, in the collaborative poetics implied, also in her iconicity.

“What’s next!!” was the cheerful, surprised exclamation of archive curator at Beinecke, James Babett, in a letter of receipt to Carl Van Vechten’s wife Fania Marinoff in 1951, confirming the arrival of two embroidered vests that had belonged to Gertrude Stein. But, as one can easily convince oneself from a quick browse of the archive’s finding aids, the two vests were only the beginning. Browsing through the archive with its various pieces of clothing and photographs documenting how it was worn, the furniture and kitsch items from the Stein-Toklas household, and its rose stationery and the custom made rose logo wax seal, as well as the pottery plates Stein had made for Carl Van Vechten with “rose is a rose is a rose”, and other artifacts documenting the construction of the Stein persona, it becomes evident how these collections are carrying out, not just the upheaval of the reductive binary between genius and charlatan, but also that between serious writer and publicity saint.

Even when it comes to the textual material that constitutes the major part of the

collections, it is remarkable how they are almost all marked by relations and exchange. This goes without saying for the large amount of correspondence, a relational genre entirely social in nature, but most of the printed books, by Stein and others, that are part of the collection also contain written dedications of friendship, personalized book stamps and other comments singling them out as parts of situated exchanges between people. Even the large quantity of notebooks in the archives, a corpus of source material one would intuitively expect to exhibit an author’s most personal, inner dialogue with herself, if it is to be considered dialogic at all, are in Stein’s case entirely permeated by collaborative exchange and sociality. For one thing, the notebooks contain sketches for correspondence, and the edges between these and sketches for poetic compositions are often porous, but, more importantly, they are filled with exchanges and messages between Stein and Toklas, everything from love notes and erotic doodles to shopping lists, instructions for typing and comments and suggestions for writing. These booklets also bear witness to Stein’s own appropriative and intertextual practices, as the reader can follow her playing and composing with words and phrases from the dialogic exchanges about practicalities and other parts of her daily life and reading, sometimes including them in completed word compositions that were later typed by Toklas and thus appear to us today as “works,” and sometimes letting them stay in the notebooks.

Thus, the written documents of the archive testify in multiple ways to the collective and social forces operating in Stein’s collaborative poetics and how the influence of these relational forces defy the establishment of strict borders between art and non-art, work and non-work, individual achievement and collaboration. Hence, it becomes impossible to maintain the author subject of modernism-romanticism as the ultimate source of the oeuvre as the double names of the collection – *The Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers* – also indicates.

In this way, it seems logical that the establishment of the archive, as Esdale observes, would contribute to Stein’s coming to terms with her own work in its specificity after decades of struggling to achieve more conventional publication and thus be incorporated into a bibliographic infrastructure based on completed, titled and printed works that appear demarcated, individual and without porous borders between them. The archive provided Stein with an alternative infrastructure not merely organized around the book titles that she only produced so relatively few of in relation to the magnitude of her life’s production of writing. This structure could contain the textual fluidity and reflect the instances of collaborative authorship and relationality, and further, it was able to contain modalities other than writing. Thus, even if it is the institutional infrastructure of a distinguished university archive that governs the media ecology of the Stein collection, its inner logic is also permeated by relational, affective and queer energies of such particularity that even the archive’s earliest curators seemed to notice it, as testified by the amused surprise of James Babett’s note to Fania Marinoff.
The infrastructure of the archive

In her archive at Yale, the transmedia promise of the work of Gertrude Stein is realized in a very concrete manner – all the different material forms that Stein’s work takes are present in the archive. Indeed, it would make sense to think of the archive as a controlled media ecology, governed by the institutional infrastructure of the university library. Just like the auto-archival valises of Duchamp contain a controlled, miniature catalogue of his ready-mades, Stein’s archive lends an organized structure to the entire Stein oeuvre of writings, art collection and persona as one. Where Esdale stresses Stein’s willing inclusion into the archive of the drafts and rewritings of *Ida*, I would add her frank disposition towards “using everything” in the archive, for instance by transferring the bulk of her correspondence (Gallup 1947) to the archive and the continuation of this practice after her death through Toklas and Van Vechten, shipping iconic and everyday items and clothing across the Atlantic.

The social nature of the collaborative poetics that permeates Stein’s work, both with her writing and with her persona, is evident in the archival collections. When, in the description of the *Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Papers*, curator Timothy Young states that no attempt has been made to systematically separate the donations of Carl Van Vechten from those coming directly from Stein or Toklas, as the relations between the three were so close that a distinction is of no scholarly value, this statement clearly frames how in the case of Stein’s oeuvre it is very difficult to draw strict boundaries between collaborative works and gestures and individual ones.183

Further, the frontier between contemporary and posthumous collaborations is entirely fluid, as is personified by Toklas and Van Vechten who both collaborated closely with Stein in the construction of her writing, its typing and printing, its keeping, framing and distribution and – no less – in the construction of her public persona. Both of them continued this work meticulously after Stein’s death in what they believed to be her spirit, and for the rest of their lives. A second Stein and Toklas collection at Yale, *The Gertrude Stein and Alice B. Toklas Collection*, was initiated after Stein’s death and evolved entirely around donations from Stein’s friends. The second collection contains some drafts and letters from Stein’s hand, but all have been in the possession of other people until their arrival at Yale. A large part of the collection consists of materially diverse items and curiosities – like the memorabilia kitsch/artworks by Francis Rose – that pay tribute to Stein or her work, and that are fundamentally selected according to social or affective criteria. The premise for an item to be included in the collection is the existence of a social or professional relationship between Stein and the donor. The constitution of both archive

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183 One could claim that if we dig deep enough into the contexts and the texture of almost any writer’s work we would find similar blurrings and be able to trace similar collaborative processes running as streams beneath a seemingly monological author’s voice. What makes Stein’s case special is that these qualities permeate her work on all levels and are not contradicted as strongly by bibliography and the canonization of certain titles as one would find it in the case of many of her peers.
collections mirrors the continuum in Stein’s poetics between her literary practice and the friendly and/or loving exchange always ripe with effects of increased distribution and publicity, as discussed above.

The perspective I am suggesting, in considering Stein’s heritage as illustratable through a spatial archival structure rather than a historical narrative, was also adapted in the 2012 exhibition by the San Francisco Jewish Museum Seeing Gertrude Stein: Five Stories that was a pioneer in its inclusion of both Stein’s experimental and popular sides in its composite mosaic of Stein as a cultural phenomenon. It contained massive amounts of biographical items and documents, photographic documentation from Stein’s whole life illustrating family relations, friendships, professional achievements and an impressive number of original artworks alongside colorful tributes and imaginative mockeries. The artworks range from those collected by Stein to contemporary pieces dealing with Stein’s various legacies. The show brought together all the different aspects of Stein’s heritage that have been treated as separate or even opposing for years, and emphasized and documented the connectivity between all the different ‘Steins.’ Organized under the five story headlines Picturing Stein, Domestic Stein, Art of Friendship, Celebrity Stein, and Legacies, the exhibition catalogue is perhaps the best transportable and accessible resource for material on the extended reception of Stein available to anyone not close to Stein’s archives at Beinecke, at least until the digitalization efforts of the Yale Collection are completed. The Seeing Gertrude Stein exhibition adapted to the infrastructure of the cultural history museum and that of the book as exhibition catalogue to restructure the media ecology around Gertrude Stein, and by virtue of this organization the different parts of the ecology, their construction and mutual relations became palpable. This quality that in turn encourages collaborative energy: it enhances the reader’s and spectator’s prospects to intervene into the ecology.

Conceivable as something like a historical and humorous DIY queer identity kit, the Stein and Toklas paper dolls distributed during the 2012 San Francisco Pride Parade as an LGBT activist gesture, and to advertise the Seeing Gertrude Stein exhibition that ran simultaneously, crystallize how such an invitation to intervene can play out. What the paper dolls realize is a potential that is already present in the archived construction of Stein’s persona discussed above. Because it is also a collaborative achievement, pieced together like an assemblage of arbitrary elements from different sources, and because, as developed in chapter three, it fulfills the fundamental purpose of making available an artist’s subject position to a body, Stein’s, which belonged to a number of the ‘wrong’ categories: woman, lesbian, Jew. As already discussed, the earliest version of Stein’s artist persona that came about in the relational engagement with other artists in the context of the salon was contaminated by queer connotations, and implied aspects of gender experimentation or transgression. As the young Stein wrote in her notebook, after reading Otto Weininger: “Picasso and Matisse have a maleness that belongs to genius. Moi aussi perhaps” (quoted in Will 2000: 58). In the inessential, openly staged, openly queer and assembled nature of
Stein’s persona lies its subversive potential.

The pick-and-choose and do-it-yourself constructionist quality of personal identity that is wittily communicated by the Stein and Toklas paper dolls produced by the San Francisco Jewish Museum is already present in the way the archive shows off Stein’s craftsmanship in the art of being a “publicity saint.” Just as the archive helps to moderate the image of Stein’s writing process from the frictionless outpourings of a genius sitting around most of the time “really doing nothing” toward the patient, meticulous work shown by Esdale, it can also help moderate the image of the inactivity of the “publicity saint,” as it provides access to the craftsmanship and work implied in creating the celebrity Gertrude Stein as a crucial interface for the written work. Both are media poetic pursuits, making the interface of the medium tangible, and recalling, as Lori Emerson suggests, that such an interface is a construction that is part media technology, part artwork and part user.

Stein and Toklas paper dolls designed for the 2012 San Francisco Pride Parade play out the iconicity of Stein and Toklas as queer style icons (Copyright, San Francisco Jewish Museum).

If we look at the archive of artifacts and documents as providing an infrastructure in the media ecology of Gertrude Stein that functions outside or next to the infrastructure of bibliography, then we can also see how Stein’s persona becomes a part of this on equal terms with other parts (like the writings and the art collection), and thus how it can be subsided to a media poetics of its own, which directs attention to its interface as a con-
constructed and modifiable phenomenon. This process is what provides Stein’s persona with a progressive quality surpassing its appearing like a smooth and commodified “thing.”

What is crucial to understand about the construction of Stein’s life and work considered together is that its biographical parts – the construction of a Stein persona – are as open to appropriation, intervention and collaboration as we have seen Stein’s experimental language to be. Just as Esdale demonstrates the composite identity of *Ida a Novel* through engagement with the archive, the composite identity of the Stein persona can also be uncovered when engaging with the archive.

Part of the difference between Stein and Goldsmith comes with the participatory dimension that is part of the Stein persona as a collectively shaped phenomenon and the way this is documented and made available in the archive. If Goldsmith in his recent author’s performance follows up on the commodity value of Stein’s persona, and expands on the humorous components in her gestures of disidentification, he is not – at least not since his works from the early 2000s – to the same degree subjecting this persona to a media poetics that opens it for intervention. But, as I will now discuss, there are alternative strategies to play out this part of Stein’s heritage in contemporary culture, and meet the challenge of the commodification of the artist’s persona encountered by conceptual poetry, the provocative nature of which became obvious in the response to Goldsmith’s practice.

**Laurie Anderson: the persona as mock-Hollywood star and body-technology assemblage**

Some of these strategies extend from the context of 1970s-1990s body and performance art, and include evident heirs of Stein in terms of her artist and celebrity performance. The name of multi-field performance artist and musician Laurie Anderson is brought up in several discussions of Stein’s contemporary legacy (Berry 1992; Will 2000; Bay-Cheng 2004), and I will take a brief look at her practice as an example of the tradition that develops the composite and assemblage-like character of Stein’s persona by working with the dissolution of the organic bodily unity by technical intervention, not just as gimmicks but as a means of altering and displacing a bodily sense of identity. As we have seen, Stein’s experience with publicity in the modern media reality she had encountered in 1930s America made her preoccupied with the dissolution of individual personality. As Ellen Berry writes, she had experienced how a unified corporeal identity was replaced by “the immediacy and transitory appeal of the public icon, an image created by mass media such as the cinema, widely available to a heterogeneous audience and capable of unlimited reproducibility” (Berry 1992: 177). Running through Laurie Anderson’s practice in various media, it seems, any sense of bodily identity is completely torn apart and can be exchanged for a new one like a coat. As she phrases it in the monologue *Americans on*
the move: “I AM IN MY BODY THE WAY MOST PEOPLE DRIVE IN THEIR CARS” (Anderson 1979: 54).

As an artist, Anderson has insistently resented the pigeonholing of herself and her work into a specific category in terms of genre and or medium. She could with equal justification be called a performance artist, visual artist, digital artist, filmmaker, musician, sound artist and spoken word poet. On a biographical note, Anderson experienced a career leap comparable to Stein’s with The Autobiography when she entered the British radio charts with the surprise smash hit single “O Superman” in 1981 and thus moved from the obscure performance art circles of New York to a popular music scene, securing a three-album contract with the record label Warner. It seems likely that the wider platform provided by her (brief) public breakthrough was important for her remarkable ability to avoid being tied primarily to one specific cultural sphere in terms of the production, circulation and consumption of her work, which travels freely between production circumstances, distribution platforms, and audiences tied to the fields of performance theater, spoken word literature, documentary/art film, indie music, electronic/new media art and contemporary art museums. She even occupied a position as NASA’s first ever artist-in-residence (2003-2005). In this sense also, Anderson’s contemporary practice has affinities with the transmedia reception of Gertrude Stein as it is played out in multiple fields of art and culture. Like in the case of Stein, it seems that the strong personal brand is one crucial factor in securing the passage between multiple fields.

Anderson is part of a New York performance scene in the late 1970s and the early 1980s that grew out of the Stein collaborating circles of the 1960’s intermedia art scene. The scene also includes figures like the director Robert Wilson, who was crucial in the reception of Stein’s plays in the theatrical avant-garde of the 1970s-90s. But when it comes
down to direct allusions to Stein in Anderson’s work, they are relatively sparse.

However, there are rich affinities with Stein’s techniques and styles throughout her performative practice and musical recordings. Like Cage’s lectures discussed in chapter one, many of Anderson’s longer talk pieces seem grounded in the humorously self-assured semi-oral practice Stein perfected in her Lectures in America. On the album, United States Live I-IV (1984), several tracks recall works and practices by Stein. Examples are the brief track “English”, adding an insistent hushing sound to the names of languages (“Englissssshhh-schh, Frensschhh, Polisssshh, Swedisssshh, Duteccchhh, Russssshhian, Cchhhhinese, Yiddisssshhhh, Danisssshh” Anderson 1984) and the following track, “Dance of Electricity” about the rivalry between the inventors Thomas Edison and Nikola Tesla, recalling Stein’s libretto, Doctor Faustus Lights the Lights in its portrayal of the aging Edison killing dogs with electricity, just as Stein’s Faustus, also the inventor of the electric light, in the final scene kills his docile dog for the purpose of going to hell.

In the piece “Three Songs for Paper, Film and Video,” as Ellen Berry has noted, Anderson picks up directly from Stein’s claim that the detective novel must be considered the only true form of fiction of the 20th century. As Berry suggests, in this piece “Anderson directly invokes Stein in an effort to distinguish between an early moment in media culture and our present moment, and between the medium of language and the media of film and video” (Berry 1992: 184), even if I might object that the medium of print, or as Andersen’s title states, “Paper”, would be a more precise designation for the material platform of the detective novel than “language.” But this does not alter Berry’s important point, being the way Anderson via Stein makes the connection between media technologies and conception of identity:

Anderson paraphrases Stein’s quotation about the modernity of the detective story, acknowledging Stein’s recognition of the death of the centered subject in fiction, the loss of a concern for character as personality: “The detective novel is the only novel truly invented in the twentieth century. In the detective novel, the hero is dead at the very beginning. So you don’t have to deal with human nature at all” (Berry 1992: 184).

Anderson continues the logic further into science fiction films on the verge of the 21st century, where “the hero just takes off in the very beginning” to end on the television signals that travel infinitely beyond the earth’s atmosphere, making the individual human subject dissolve completely into the unbreathable air of outer space.

Running through the different media it employs, Anderson’s practice repeatedly deals with this relationship between identity, technology and changed bodily conditions in the concrete work with her own persona as a moldable assemblage made up by more or less arbitrary, or at least exchangeable, elements. The use of multiple screens, microphones and speakers that distort, disperse and alter sound and image in a performance situation can split up the embodied unity of the performer, exploring the limits of the
body as a technology in its own right. In this way, Anderson applies a media poetics that she extends beyond the page, screen or musical track to include the bodily performance practice as she emphasizes the materiality of this performing body, as a central interface that should never be allowed to pass as neutral or, worse, natural.

In her performative and musical practice, Anderson has extensively explored the voice as a material instrument in ways that are clearly continuing Stein’s gender-bending practice of disidentification, when performing as a male genius. Anderson uses techniques of digital and mechanical voice manipulation to explore the change in authority achieved when changing the sound and tone of voices, for instance from lighter feminine towards the deeper masculine, and thus moves further towards the non-binary conception of gender identity implied in Muñoz’s concept. Like Stein exploring masculine forms of (authorial) authority through carefully designed public discourse, conduct, intonation and costuming, without explicitly cross-dressing or acting according to male gender codes, Anderson has also worked with a queering of male codes of dominance and authority, for instance by actively manipulating an embodied medium like the human voice not usually considered a medium at all, but a ‘natural’ part of the body and thus beyond manipulation.

In the tracks on her debut album *Big Science* (1982), the persona incarnated by Anderson’s voice can shift in a matter of seconds, from a fragile, seemingly confessional feminine pop singer voice via the reassuring, mechanical voice of a stewardess to the deep, masculine voice of a military commander, or a corporate authority. Through adaptations of language, vocabulary, voice and technical sound manipulations, the identity of the speaker/singer, usually perceived as a steady corporeal entity in the context of pop/rock music, can change drastically. In her work, Anderson plays with her own persona and alters herself, turning her own body and voice into a modulating material for her art by the intervention of technology, and thus develops Stein’s experience of the dissolution of the embodied, unified subject in a new media situation.

Anderson is carrying on Stein’s experience of uncanniness in the face of this situation. In her works, she is constantly confronting the dark side of this practice, hitting her head against its walls, like on the track “Monkey’s Paw” from *Strange Angels*: “I want stereo FM installed in my teeth, and take this mole of my back and put it on my cheek […] but nature’s got rules and nature’s got laws and if you cross her look out – it’s the monkey’s paw” (Anderson 1989). She displays the uncanny feeling that comes from the bodily subject being split by technology. In Anderson’s practice, the physicality of the body as the site of the voice, face, hands, and so on, that produce instances of discourse is continuously emphasized as it is being challenged. Not unlike the way Goldsmith in earlier works like *Fidget* is exploring vulnerable, unstable relations between body and technology, but in opposition to the smoother version the commodified persona exhibited in his later practice. If Stein’s collectively assembled celebrity persona is also a potential-

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For an excellent account of Steins experiences of uncanniness in her encounter with publicity and particularly the medium of film that applies a media theoretical approach, see Lang 2015.

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ly threatening, uncanny double, in Anderson’s split bodily subject this threat is felt as a constant friction. As reassured and self-confident as her persona can appear, it is always underwritten by a growing panic that gets a bodily expression in the music and the body used to perform it.

In her concrete work with mechanical, electric and digital technologies, Anderson is taking some of Stein’s insights into a broader space of performance in an open dialogue with a more and more digitalized popular culture touching upon more recent formations of stardom, especially via her engagement with elements from popular music. Since her popular breakthrough, she has practiced her version of media poetics with a larger audience in sight. In a continuation of Stein’s making palpable and alterable the interfaces of writing, Anderson is uncovering and making palpable some of the interfaces that govern the contemporary multi-media ecologies of art and culture, such as the gendered distribution of voice authority and performative persona. She thereby challenges the neutrality of the compartment of ‘art’ in new ways like Stein did when she challenged the image of the male, literary genius. Anderson is not explicitly alluding to Stein’s name as a provider of avant-garde capital, as Kenneth Goldsmith did in *Stein on punctuation*, but her contribution to the contemporary media ecology of Stein seems no less significant as her practice actualizes Stein’s media poetics in its disturbance of the smoothness of the interfaces of the supposedly autonomous spheres of music, art and literature, to show these as being just as contaminated by habitual patterns of dominance and authority as society at large.

Much more than in the field of literature, it is an established circumstance in the field of popular music that the persona of the performing artist is a crucial part of the art experience, but Laurie Anderson’s insistently intermedia and transmedia practice suggests how, even across all the other fields of cultural production she actualizes, the persona remains one of the most dominant interfaces through which artworks are experienced. Thus, Anderson’s transgression of the naturalized figure of bodily identity is not exhibiting a postmodernist free-floating post-identity condition where anyone can be anything they choose to be. Rather, it demonstrates the extensive effects of various markers of bodily identity. A certain type of body or voice will provide the speaker with a certain impact, like when Anderson’s modified voice suddenly sounds like a military authority. Certain things become accessible to this speaker that are not available to other speakers with other identity markers. Anderson’s work exposes the arbitrary brutality implied in these circumstances and its frightening outreach in an era where big data, surveillance and biometrics also hold us prisoner in our physical identity. It is this same impact “naturally” provided by bodily privileges invisible to those possessing them (and especially invisible within the infrastructure of poetry where a long tradition for ignoring the body of the writer exists) that the angry responses to Goldsmith’s “Michael Brown” performance are also testifying to. Thus, although Goldsmith, like Anderson, is debunking the binary between serious artist and publicity saint, and calling attention to the performative dimensions of his art, the effect of his persona as interface for his work becomes an en-
tirely different one.

In many cases, the characteristics of the persona as interface will be dictated by stereotypical cultural imagery and gendered and/or racialized clichés, and constructed more or less at random by corporate media’s appropriations and interpretations of an artist’s body and performance. Thus, this crucial interface often appears to be at least in part outside the control of the individual artist, dictated by bodily circumstances, and cultural clichés, and subjected to various degrees of capitalist dictate. In such cases, the persona becomes immaculate, repeatable and seemingly immaterial like a meme, but in practices where the body and the persona are used consciously as a part of the artist’s material, this interface can be rematerialized. Anderson’s example serves to deepen the understanding of the persona as a collaborative assemblage as composed by Stein in its contemporary developments to display the subversive potential behind its immaculate commodity shine.

III. THE SALON (INFRASTRUCTURE)

If Kenneth Goldsmith and Laurie Anderson are drawing the body of the artist or performer into focus in front of the artwork in their practices, in both of the two final instances of Stein’s media ecology that I will look at, the attention is turned away from both the fetishized autonomous art object – whether a book or an auratic, visual art object – and from the idolized figure of the artist, whether conceived as genius or celebrity. In accordance with John Durham Peters’ summoning of an infrastructuralist turn in the theoretical framework of the humanities, both directly address what one could call the infrastructures of art. Matters traditionally relegated to the background in discourse on art concerning the structures that determine its institutionalization, canonization and distribution via exhibition and sales, become the center of attention.

As suggested in chapter one, the first solid canonization of Stein in post-war America sprang foremostly from her achievements as a collector and patron of the arts. In these years, the avant-garde movements of early 20th century Europe were becoming catalogued, exhibited and canonized in America. As one of the first to display paintings by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso side by side, Stein’s name became tied to the grand narrative of European modernism as it was institutionalized in the United States, from the Armory show in 1912, which included a number of pieces from Stein’s private collection, to the Museum of Modern Art’s first exhibition based on the Stein siblings’ painting collections titled Four Americans in Paris. The Collections of Gertrude Stein and her Family that ran 1970 to 1971.185

As also discussed in chapter one, in terms of Stein’s heritage, the post-war years

185 This major exhibition at MoMA was probably the highest profiled institutional embracing of Stein’s name, since her lecture tour, and it has certainly influenced the popular reception of her persona in the 1970s. As we saw, it was also this exhibition that brought Stein’s name to the attention of Tom Hachtman.
have been considered a build-up phase, where her friends and advocates as well the institutional infrastructure of academia in general and the archive in particular worked towards a conservative preservation and normalization of Stein. As suggested, this operation had the purpose of securing Stein's legacy by modelling her as a proper modernist figure through her association with canonized visual arts. If this effort did not in the first instance have the intended effect in terms of her literary canonization, it did in terms of her establishment as a crucial figure in the narrative of European art history as it was being framed in an American context. Stein’s position in this narrative is a crucial component in the Stein ecology I have traced in art and popular culture. Many appropriations emerge from her established position in the mythology around the birth of painterly modernism in Paris in the early 20th century.

By the 1960s, however, the art historical narrative of Stein’s salon was increasingly becoming the object of nostalgia. As demonstrated by Dick Higgins’ depreciation of Picasso as a “fading” voice producing merely “painted ornaments,” by the mid-1960s the institutionalization of high modernism had resulted in an incipient neutralizing of the initial provocation caused by the artworks associated with this era. This development also applies to Stein as an art collector, as her early taste in painting was becoming heavily canonized. Yet, as we have also seen, the multimodal figure that actually arises from the archive and the artistic and cultural collaborations with Stein’s persona deviates significantly from that of the media exclusive canonized modernist.

**Salon de Fleurus**

The first of the infrastructuralist contributions to media ecology of Stein’s reception that I will now turn to, the *Salon de Fleurus*, emerged in a two-room apartment in Spring Street, Soho, NYC. Here it existed between 1992 and 2014 as a private initiative not publicly advertised, but spreading by word of mouth, and little by little becoming known in art circles and local media, and hence, related to the way Stein’s original salon in Rue de Fleurus started. The *Salon de Fleurus* was never, and did never postulate to be, a correct historical reconstruction. As a “source,” it claims not Stein’s original salon but its fictionalization in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*.

Rather, it was, then, an attempted reconstruction of the salon’s ambience as imagined by the American narrative of European modernism. Hanging on the walls of the Soho apartment were hand-painted copies of works from Stein’s collection, mainly by the three main characters of the Stein salon version of the narrative of modernism: Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso. The copies were carried out in different styles and materials (coal sketches, pastels, oils, acrylics, etc.) and hung between other reproductions, sketches and interior photographs from the salon. The rooms were decorated to reconstruct the homely context in which the modernist art of Stein appeared side by side with kitsch objects and
worn old furniture, thus focusing on the ambient space in which the works resonated rather than on the works themselves. No historical accuracy has been claimed in terms of either formats, colors and sizes of the copied paintings, which bore no stable relationship to those of the originals, or in the way they were hung on the walls. In fact, if one looks up the paintings featured in the Salon de Fleurus, one will soon discover that they were not part of Stein’s collection all at the same time, and thus many of them never hung side by side at 27, Rue de Fleurus.

If we recall Teresa Brennan’s invoking of the spatial factor in the transmission of affects through the ambience generated by a particular site, such as the temple of Delphi, this is the factor that the fake salon is trying to reconstruct (Brennan 2004). Moreover, the complex temporality of this affect transmission was explicated in the Salon where contemporary books and catalogues about Stein and her collection, like the one from the 1970 MoMA exhibition, were lying around for visitors to browse through and Stein related souvenirs and kitsch objects were displayed on tables and shelves along with antiques mimicking Stein’s taste in knick-knacks – thus constantly keeping open in the visitor’s mind the historical time span of the entire 20th century that this collaborative enterprise was actualizing. In this way, while evoking an ambience from Stein’s salon, the new salon firmly resists letting its visitors absorb themselves in a nostalgia for the belle époque of modernist mythology.

186 Very colorful paintings like Matisse’s Portrait of Madame Matisse may be reproduced in shades of brown, while others are reproduced in full color. Large paintings may be scaled down to pocket size, while others are closer to their original proportions (see documentation photo from salon and archive below).

187 For instance, the Soho salon has contained both a fake Louis XVI chair with Picasso’s Stein portrait copied onto the chair back (visible on the right in the installation view), citing Alice’s Picasso needle work chairs, and a post-2000 Gertrude Stein coffee mug (visible on the mantelpiece in the archive photo below), as well as worn, but not particularly old copies of some of Stein’s books and numerous biographies on Stein and her contemporaries (for example Avis Burnett’s 1972 Gertrude Stein and Janet Hobhouse’s 1974 Everybody Who Was Anybody).
The *Salon de Fleurus* is no longer located in the original Soho apartment, but the concept is still alive in other shapes. It is almost impossible to classify in terms of field, medium or genre. In the catalogue of *Gertrude Stein: Five Stories*, Tirza Latimer reflects on the phenomenon, framing it as a conceptual artwork.

The *Salon de Fleurus* installation, a piece of conceptual art, does not deliver what its name prompts visitors to expect: a shrine to an original site of modernism. Instead, the space compels viewers to think about that expectation and the myths generated by the Steins’ salon at 27, Rue de Fleurus (Latimer 2011: 335).

However, the use of the label *art* seems curiously unfitting, as the concept appears more like a general educational initiative in its attempt to deconstruct as a specifically American art historical fabrication the canonized narrative of “cosmopolitan modernism” that places Stein’s mythical salon as its site of origin. Further, in the *Salon de Fleurus* and its various offshoot projects that developed during and after the *Salon*’s Soho life, there is an aspiration towards dissolving not just the narrative of modernism as a string of unique, original artworks, but also the concept of the original artist that is constructed and implied by this narrative. This is achieved both, in following in the vein of Walter Benjamin’s cultural theory, by accentuating the importance of copies to retroactively establish (more or less arbitrary) chief works needed to construct the narrative of art history and the original artist,188 and also on the level of the arrangement itself, which is demonstratively presented as an anonymous institution without author or originator, letting the figure of the artist as craftsman and conceptual originator dissolve into the functionalities of the salon’s infrastructure, as the anonymous “doorman.”

In a 2014 piece in *Afterall* magazine, the artist-academics collective ‘Our Literal Speed’ describes the experience of visiting the *Salon*:

Somewhere in the recent past in an overpopulated urban zone, an upper-middle-class, straight white man finds his way to a place where he’s been informed that there may be art. He traverses a knot of street corners until he’s face to face with an old wooden door in the centre of a white brick wall. No doorknob. He knocks. He’s greeted by a middle-aged man of uncertain ethnicity with an accent of ambiguous origin and features that are forgotten before they can be noticed. This man’s clothes are those that anyone wears who wants to disappear from view casually, without magic or fuss. The upper-middleclass, straight white man asks if he might see the art that might be on offer. And then there’s an unspoken thought that circulates in and out of the room’s four ears until the greeter says, ‘We don’t consider this a work of art.’ He

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188 See for instance Walter Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducability” (Benjamin 2008) and his discussion of Malraux’s *Musée imaginaire de la sculpture mondiale* in the *Passagenwerk* (Benjamin 1999).
adds, ‘I am The Doorman.’ The upper-middle-class, straight white man is relieved. He needed exactly this kind of no-nonsense assurance. The upper-middle-class, straight white man says, ‘But some people…’ The Doorman cuts him off, ‘Yes, some might consider this a work of art, but that’s their problem. If somebody wants to see this as art, fine, but let me state this as clearly as possible: this is not art’ (Our Literal Speed 2014: 86).

The description of the doorman corresponds well with my own impression when I met the keeper of the salon’s current archive, not open to the public, but accessible by appointment. Here, the former doorman, now salon archivist, is collecting and documenting the past and ongoing developments of the project in the rooms of an even smaller New York apartment whose walls are covered with clippings, photographs and (fake) artifacts documenting the life of the Salon.189 His refusal to take on the art label is clearly a significant point in the project that becomes even more explicit in some of the offspring projects, such as the inclusion of the Salon as an off-site location in the 2002 Whitney Bienneal, in the 2014 e-flux exhibition The Unmaking of Art and the transportable version of the Salon de Fleurus hosted by the Independent Curators International (ICI). Paradoxically, all these initiatives are safely located within a general infrastructure of the art world. This comfortably leaves the question of using of the art label as “their problem” (them being the curators and others responsible for each of the exhibition venues), as the doorman suggests in the cited article. But, if the salon can be framed as a piece of conceptual art, it is one that resists being ascribed to any artist, no matter which institutional infrastructure it is placed within, which is consistent with its critique of the myth of the autonomous genius. As a consequence of this critique, the conceptual originator of the Salon remains anonymized and refuses to perform as such. He is just a doorman.

The meta-art historical exhibition The Unmaking of Art that included a salon installation was an expansion on the twisted Walter Benjamin-inspired take on history implied in the Salon. It included not just the history of modernism but the entire construction of chronological art history as begun in European Renaissance, constructing the pasts of Antiquity and Prehistory and terminating in Modernism, turning it upside down to dissect how the construction of the chronological narrative is entangled in the construction of its main objects: the autonomous artist as a unique and brilliant individual (the genius) and the autonomous artwork (the masterpiece).190

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189 I had the opportunity to visit the archive located at West 103rd Street and discuss its contents with the doorman/archivist on November 2, 2016. My discussion of the phenomenon is based on this visit and a visit to the ICI + documentation material given to me by the ICI. I respect the doorman’s request for anonymity.

190 The theoretical argument behind the exhibition is developed in the lecture “The Unmaking of Art” by ‘Walter Benjamin’ (in: Walter Benjamin: Recent Writings, 2014). See also e-flux documentation, which includes a video recording of the Benjamin lecture (e-flux 2014b).
Photos taken at the current archive of the Salon de Fleurus located in a small Upper West Side apartment. Mantelpiece with knick-knacks and mirror view of two walls of documentation. Wall of artifacts from Soho Salon de Fleurus, including painted copies of many of the paintings that, in new versions, constitute the back bone of the Salon de Fleurus travelling exhibition hosted by the ICA (Matisse: Portrait of Madame Matisse (Femme au Chapeau), Nude; Cézannes: Bathers, Still Life with Apples, Mont Sainte-Victoire; Picasso: Boy Leading a Horse, Portrait of Gertrude Stein, Girl, Guitar on Table, Student) (Photo: Solveig Daugaard, November 2016).

In the course of this exhibition, lectures by prominent but deceased speakers like Walter Benjamin, Alfred Barr and Gertrude Stein were announced at the space in New York. The Stein lecture had the title “The Making of Americans” and was held on January 20th 2015. Following the playful, trans-historical logic from the Salon de Fleurus, a young woman steps onto a small podium and is announced, warmly, but not exuberantly as the esteemed writer Gertrude Stein. She does not resemble Stein and is not dressed up like her in any obvious way. Appearing like an average well-dressed, female academic of the art world, she could be a curator or an art historian employed by e-flux. She delivers a brilliant lecture accompanied by a colorful PowerPoint presentation of entirely updated design about “her own” early 20th century Paris art collection in particular and the history of public and private collections of modern art in general. During the talk, she is constantly operating with the whole historical time span from 1905 to the present day, commenting, for instance, after showing a number of slides with replicas of some of “her” paintings, “Music by Matisse is now at MoMA, as is Boy Leading a Horse by Picasso, which was once in our Salon. And a portrait that was a study for Les Demoiselles d’Avignon is at MoMA as well.” (e-flux 2015a: 4)

The lecture refers to myths and stories about Stein as an art collector, and how these connect with her writing and artist persona. It traces its relations to modernist art history as recounted to this day, specifically by the Museum of Modern Art, a concept whose anachronistic grounds “Stein” in her lecture dwells upon somewhat. Here, she is

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191 The announcement of the lectures can be retrieved (e-flux 2015b) but the video documentation of the performed lecture on which the following description is based, has been removed. The lecture was first given in 2011 at the exhibition “The Making of Americans” at the James Gallery at CUNY Graduate center New York. The written base for the lecture is available as PDF (e-flux 2015a).
talking about the first initiatives by that name that were to end up as the New York MoMA as we know it today,

its name was an oxymoron. I remember when a young Alfred Barr visited me in the Paris salon a year earlier, in 1928, and mentioned his plans for a new modern museum. I was a bit amused. I told him: “That’s nice, but how it can be both a museum and modern?” (e-flux 2015a: 4)

This witty comment is based on a quote ascribed to Stein in the catalogue to *Four Americans in Paris*. As a response to Barr’s attempts to persuade her to leave her collection to the Museum of Modern Art, Stein’s comment was “You can be a museum or you can be modern, but you can’t be both” (Hightower 1970: 8). It is worth noting, of course, is that in the 1930s this comment would appear pretty conservative, and all in all less remarkable, as the general conception at the time was that museums dealt with and catalogued the past. But with the new context of the collaborative, posthumous lecture it points to a very current conceptual problem that arises when the “new” and “present” are being subjected to the infrastructure of the museum. Thus, once again we see an example of the reciprocity that the collaborative poetics implies.

Stein’s position formulated in the 1930s is deepened and expanded when it is actualized in a new collaboration in 2015. But it is not only the anachronistic implications of museumizing the contemporary that are problematized in the lecture. It continues to trace the fiction of the art history told on the basis, not of nationalist schools and traditions, as it was in most European museums all the way up through to the 1960s, but of internationalist movements centered on sovereign and genial artists conceiving a series of canonized “Twentieth Century Masterpieces.” In this construction of art history, artists and artworks are conceived more or less independently of their local contexts, as they are picked up from (American) private collections like her own and retroactively combined into a narrative by American institutions like the MoMA at a time when the institutions of art in the European capitals that were being romanticized as the cradle of modernism in these very narratives had hardly included any of these painters in their collections: “In other words, it was the Americans who were bringing European modern art to Europe” (e-flux 2015a: 8-10). Thus, the collaborative Stein lecture departing from the *Salon de Fleurs* plants in Stein’s most institutionalized claim to fame – her famous salon and its modernist art collection – a simultaneous creation and destabilization of the autonomy of modern art and the autonomous modernist artist.

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192 Correspondence between Stein and Barr on the matter is stored at Stein’s archive (YCAL), but the preserved letters do not include responses from Stein.

193 As was the title of the 1952 major art exhibition shown at Musée d’Art Moderne, Paris and Tate Gallery, London and curated by former MoMA curator James Johnson Sweeney, the first bringing the comprehensive American narrative of European modernism (back) to Europe.
Dust jacket with Alfred Barr’s chart of international modern movements from MoMA’s 1936 exhibition *Cubism and Abstract Art*. A recent example of the continued influence of this conception of art history is the grand interactive chart of artists in a complex network created for the exhibition *Inventing Abstraction 1910-1925* at MoMA 2012 (Courtesy Museum of Modern Art).


The final offspring of the *Salon* I will discuss is the travelling exhibition sponsored by Independent Curators International (ICI), which is currently still running. The ICA exhibition is scheduled to travel until the end of 2019 and has already been shown at various biennials, museums and exhibitions in cities all over the world from L.A. to Ljublana, from Belgrade to Beirut. The exhibition consists of thirty-one anony-
mously painted copies (not the same copies that were at the Soho salon, but new ones) of some of the most famous pictures from Stein’s collection by Cézanne, Matisse and Picasso, some books and educational material and a newsprint catalogue. Furniture and all other effects are supplied locally. As Virgil Taylor, curator at ICI explained to me, it is a perfect travelling exhibition because it is flexible and adjusts to individual contexts, it is inexpensive and ships easily. As the paintings included are not originals, and can easily be replaced in case of loss, the insurance sums are small. In this way, the ICI can reach out broadly, including to less wealthy institutions on the geographical “periphery” of the art world. And since the clash between the popular globalized American narrative of an international movement of modern art with the European context in which these artworks were actually produced, and the countries in which some of the modernist artists were born and trained, is a major point of the exhibition’s critique, it is highly beneficial and interesting to be able to show the exhibition in a locally adapted version in cities like Pristina, Zagreb and Riga that were outside the influence of the Euro-American capitalist art market in the crucial post-war years, when the MoMA narrative was being globalized.

If the *Salon de Fleurus* is destabilizing the narrative of modernism connected to Stein, it is at the same time honoring Stein’s media poetic definition of visual art as “oil paintings,” especially in the ICI travelling version. As already discussed, it is a common understanding that Stein herself lost touch with what was cutting edge within the visual arts and cultivated an increasingly sentimental and bad taste in visual arts in the last 15-20 years of her life. It is hard to disagree completely with this assessment if one compares Matisse’s *Femme au chapeau* with Francis Rose’s idyllic 1939 portrait of Stein and Toklas. But in “Pictures” she explains how she has gradually become more and more addicted to being around oil paintings after she experienced a painted panorama as a child and had the experience of being “surrounded by an oil painting” (LIA 226). This emphasizes not just the media interface of the artworks (that they are canvases covered with oil paint) but also her preoccupation with ambience. Her addiction is not just to looking at the pictures, but to being surrounded by them, to being in the same room with them. What is actually on the oil paintings and particularly who put it there may be of secondary importance (clearly, in this case: the medium is the message).

Late in her life, Stein herself could no longer afford her old friends’ paintings, so she found some painters she could afford and who moreover were willing to paint almost whatever she wanted them to. In a sense, it is this impulse in Stein’s practice of art col-

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194 With their more uniform format, the ICI reproductions become realizations of Andy Warhol’s dream that art should not contain an identifiable signature: “I think it would be so great if more people took up silk screens so that no one would know if my picture was mine or somebody else’s” (Goldsmith ed. 2004: 17).

195 Interview at ICI, 404 Broadway, New York City, with Virgil B/G Taylor, ICI, November 1st 2016.

196 The obvious example being, again, Francis Rose: “He has this summer painted the house from across the valley where we first saw it and the waterfall celebrated in Lucy Church Amiably” as we are told in *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* (ABT 910).
lection that the Salon de Fleurus, and particularly in its touring incarnation, is following up on at a time where the prices of the modernist artworks have exploded to such a degree that several of the paintings in the Salon de Fleurus inventory are no longer available to the public in their original executions, but locked up safely in the collections of extremely wealthy people in tax havens around the world. And even those that are publicly accessible require insurance and security measures so high, that, on a global scale, most institutions and most people will never have the chance to see them. In the ICI exhibition, access to oil paintings like the ones Stein loved being surrounded by is democratized, giving people in Pristina, Beirut and Belgrade the possibility to walk among the modernist classics and experience the ambience that she valued so highly.
The Salon concept is deconstructive of a dominant narrative and it criticizes the insane dimensions of the art market’s economic logic, but it also takes very seriously Stein’s love of being physically close to paintings and believes in the affective joy that this ambient experience provides. Thus, it is not solely a prank when a fake version of Matisse’s *Femme aux chapeau* is exhibited in a small museum in Pristina. It is also a recognition of the ambient enjoyment one gets from being close to this painted canvas, stripped of all the mythic aura of originality and the economic overwriting of the global art market, working on a hunch that the people of Pristina may need this affective soothing, teasing, or entertainment at least as much as the people of San Francisco who can visit the original at their local MoMA branch.

Finally, the ICI travelling concept also includes a matrix for the performance of the doorman function. This is a brief score instructing a local official how to help along the visitor experience in the discreet manner of the doorman. Thus, the little remaining artist function that was already more or less dissolved into the salon’s infrastructure is then entirely loosened from the individual body of the artist. In this sense, the *Salon de Fleurus* represents almost the exact opposite response to Stein’s heritage when compared to Laurie Anderson’s. By applying the anonymity approach, it refuses to participate in the fetishizing of the artist as genius or icon, simply leaving out the individual body of the artist, and insisting on becoming an anti-brand, something that reemerges from scratch with each project.

Filip Noterdaeme *The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart*

As Michael Davidson has suggested, after Gertrude Stein treated her own life story as “a series of signs – a story to be told by Alice Toklas, for example”, it was “only logical that this story can be extended and refashioned by others” (Davidson 1996: 40). Thus, many instances in her work anticipate the appropriations and re-circulations she has been subjected to in posterity, most evidently, perhaps, the way the story told by Toklas was first published without mentioning Stein’s name on the cover. In essence, the *Salon de Fleurus* is an example of such a refashioning, departing exactly from the *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas*, and from the general art historical narrative around Stein’s collection and persona. Clearly, it enhances the simulacrum aspect of this construction that Davidson detects as already being inscribed in Stein’s own practice of treating her life story as “a series of signs.” The musicals, cartoons, greeting cards, children’s books and silk scarfs called upon in the preceding are also examples of such refashioning, and they all have one aspect in common with the *Salon de Fleurus*. Namely, that they stick overall to recognizable versions of the historical Stein and Toklas, and thus remains committed to paying tribute to the couple as at least pseudo-historical figures.

*Salon de Fleurus*’ critique of the canonized narrative of originality and sincerity is
also implicit in Filip Noterdaeme’s 2013 refashioning of Stein and Toklas’ story, The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart, an explicitly collaborative work of literature engaging directly in the processing of Stein’s actual writing. Noterdaeme’s novel also departs from Stein’s iconic status both as a queer role model and as the salon hostess of modernism, and uses both as weapons in a crusade against the commodification and Hollywoodization of the infrastructures of the art world. But it parts ways with the other cases examined in this chapter (apart from Anderson, perhaps) in its re-queering of the queered identities of Stein and Toklas, as it uses their (un)conventional practice of disidentification as a template for fashioning the identities of the novel’s two main characters, that also interrogate ruling discourses, both on gender and sexuality, and on conceptual issues of art and literature.

In The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart, the Belgian, New York City-based conceptual artist Filip Noterdaeme adapts the voice of his partner, the German expatriate cook and cabaret performer, Daniel J. Isengart – closely following Stein’s example when adapting Toklas’ voice – and in a gossipy manner accounts the story of the eccentric couple’s life in the queer communities and the outskirts of the alternative art scene of New York in the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s. Stylistically (picking fragments at sentence level), plotwise and conceptually, the novel stays close to Alice B. Toklas, though consequently outing all the original’s veiled hints to the homosexual relationship between the two main characters. Moreover, it satirically frames a conceptual discussion about the art historical narrative initiated by Stein, and the commercialization of canonized art as incarnated by the big New York City museums, all of which the main characters engage with (the Metropolitan, the Guggenheim, the New Museum, and the Museum of Modern Art).

A comparison of the initial self-presentation of the narrator of each Autobiography can illustrate the fundamental technique. “Alice Toklas”: 
I myself have had no liking for violence and have always enjoyed the pleasures of needlework and gardening. I am fond of paintings, furniture, tapestry, houses and flowers even vegetables and fruit-trees. I like a view but I like to sit with my back turned to it (ABT 659).

And “Daniel Isengart”:

I myself have had no liking for violence and have always enjoyed the pleasures of singing and cooking. I am fond of kitchenware, desserts, books, scarves, cardigans and even cologne and lip balm. I like a man’s suit but I like it worn by a woman (Noterdaeme 2013: 1).

Even if not all paragraphs are as directly modelled on Stein’s text as this one, Noterdaeme’s entire novel is careful to adapt the tune and ambience of its model. The comic effect that comes from substituting elements from Stein and Toklas’ turn-of-the-century Paris life with equivalents from turn-of-the-millennium New York life is exploited shamelessly. Often, like in the quote above, playing on the twisting of gender clichés and stereotyped expectations to the décor of metropolitan homosexual living, but also, as in the following example producing endless chains of inside jokes likely to make connoisseurs of recent art history chuckle.

The surréalistes are the vulgarisation of Picabia as Delaunay and his followers and the futurists were the vulgarisation of Picasso. Picabia had conceived and is struggling with the problem that a line should have the vibration of a musical sound and that this vibration should be the result of conceiving the human form and the human face in so tenuous a fashion that it would induce such vibration in the line forming it. It is his way of achieving the disembodied. It was this idea that conceived mathematically influenced Marcel Duchamp and produced his The Nude Descending the Staircase (ABT 865).

Matthey Barney, Filip Noterdaeme explained is the vulgarization of Joseph Beuys, just as Jeff Koons is the vulgarization of Andy Warhol. Joseph Beuys had conceived of and was struggling with the problem that a society should have the makings of a social sculpture and that these makings should be the result of conceiving human labor and creativity in so tenuous a fashion that it would induce such makings in the people forming it. It was his way of achieving the transformative. It was this idea that conceived commercially influenced Matthew Barney’s Cremaster Cycles (Noterdaeme 2013: 146).

Where the romantic nature of the relationship between Stein and Toklas is never mentioned in Stein’s text, the love story between Noterdaeme and Isengart is explicit in Noter-
daeme’s narrative, sometimes in sexual detail, but without ever letting go of the characteristic cheerful, quirky tone of voice struck by *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* where all events are recounted in the form of amusing anecdotes, fitted for further sharing on festive occasions, or inviting themselves to be retold and “refashioned by others,” as Davidson suggested. When one returns to reading *Toklas* after experiencing the central position of the love story in *Isengart*, it becomes more obvious than ever how the structure of Stein’s book is indeed permeated by its unarticulated love story. Just observing the titles of its sections reveals how the structure spins around the encounter (in 1907) of its two main characters as a life-changing event and thus, once again, the reciprocity of the collaborative poetics is evident.197

As the focus of *The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas* is the depiction of Stein’s work, as is staged in the context of her Paris salon with its gallery of colorful characters, *Isengart* often focuses on Noterdaeme’s ongoing Marcel Broodthaers-inspired mock museum concept entitled “the Homeless Museum of Art” that for a while was located in the couple’s Brooklyn home and thus functioned as a semi-public space in a similar way to Stein’s salon. The fictive Toklas’ narrative of the salon life and of Stein’s work functioned as a staging of practices that were simultaneously unfolding in real life, where the couple were still living at 27 Rue de Fleurus, and Stein was still writing and trying to publish her writing, and thus it produced a media ecological muddling of the stories on its pages with ongoing events happening on other platforms. Likewise, Noterdaeme’s artistic practice, and particularly his satirical concept the Homeless Museum of Art, is unfolding both inside and outside of his novel, engaging in critical dialogue with official discourses on art, and like *Salon de Fleurus*, it appears to be particularly aimed at the MoMA:

**Mission Statement**
The Homeless Museum of Art (HoMu) is an art project created by New York-based artist Filip Noterdaeme. Since its inception in 2002, it has at turns been a live-in museum in a rental apartment in Brooklyn, an activist’s initiative, an exhibit in a vacant artist studio, a collection of original artworks, and a mock museum booth embedded in a commercial art fair. Juggling irreverence and sincerity, HoMu seeks to subvert the increasingly impersonal, market-driven art world and expose the sellout of cultural institutions to commerce, cronyism, real estate, and star architects. HoMu exists in a state of perpetual flux and continues to defy the rules of the established art world. (<http://www.homelessmuseum.org/>)

The Homeless Museum concept involves Noterdaeme himself posing as the “museum director” – a character constructed as a combination of a flashy art world type and a homeless man with a shabby, fake beard – and the cabaret performer Isengart in drag as Madame Butterfly, the museum’s “Director of Development”, plus the occasional company of other members of the “Board of Trustees” like the “Director of Public Relations”, Florence, the stuffed coyote, and Beethoven’s Symphony No.2, appointed “Director of Marketing.”

In a number of activist interventions, artworks and performances, such as “Penniless at the Modern,” a protest against the increased admission fee at MoMA that involved getting twenty museum guests to pay the twenty dollar fee in only pennies (which adds up to 40,000 coins) and the “MoMA HMLSS” where Noterdaeme produced a remake of Duchamp’s Boîte-en-valise, with miniature replicas of MoMA’s chief attractions to carry around on the streets in front of the museum to make a free alternative accessible to a less affluent public, the Homeless Museum has been involved in criticizing and problematizing the established art world.

As suggested, the story of Stein and Toklas’ involvement with the mythical Paris avant-garde that resides at the heart of the narrative of modernist art history told by the major institutions provides the perfect template for Noterdaeme and Isengart’s exposure
of the hypocrisy of these institutions. What I have established as Stein’s media poetics of identity construction, implying a conception of identity as assemblage and the subversive potential in making this fact openly available, is also an active element in Noterdaeme’s novel. Likewise with the non-binary approach to gender implied by her performing as a male genius, which we saw further outlined by Laurie Anderson’s cross-gender performances. On an obvious note, the novel contains an actualization of the drag figure so crucial to Muñoz’s concept of disidentification, as the narrator, “Isengart”, and several important subsidiary characters are repeatedly involved in cross-gender performances. But the systematic outing of the homosexual references in Stein’s novel also reveal the gender-bending practice of Stein’s life performance as genuinely queer. The subject positions of “Stein” and “Toklas” appear immediately available and useful to “Noterdaeme” and “Isengart”. Word even has it that Daniel Isengart is at work on a cookbook in which he collects recipes from friends all over the world, inspired by The Alice B. Toklas Cookbook that Toklas wrote and published in 1953. So far, this project has not seen print, but if Isengart is to follow the interval between the publication of Alice B. Toklas’ Autobiography and her Cookbook, the proper year of publication would be 2034 which leaves some time for him to work on it.

This extensive practice of cross-identification brings out the instances of disidentification already implied in the Stein-Toklas ménage. If disidentification is a mode of performance meant to dissolve the dominant codes and present utopian possibilities, then this utopian possibility is realized in the way the Stein-Toklas ménage provides an open space for cross-identification for the Noterdaeme-Isengart couple, to frame their performance of a lifestyle and an art practice that was certainly unimaginable to Stein and Toklas in their lifetime. The strategies of queering normative discourse and consensus branding are already evident in the abbreviation, HoMu – literally a homosexual queering of the mainstream abbreviation MoMA.

Thus, the autobiography remake outs Stein, not just as a queer figure in terms of gender and sexuality, but also adds interesting dimensions to her status as a figure of art history. This is achieved foremost by stressing the counter-cultural aspects of the salon format, which were highly significant to Stein in her own time, where the salon, as I have already addressed several times, indeed functioned as an alternative platform for the distribution of painting and writing that was unable to gain access to the official infrastructures of art and literature. These aspects are re-actualized in the Homeless Museum. In this sense, Stein’s philosophy of art is also outsed as potentially deconstructive of official institutional art discourse, even if it has also played a key role in formulating the ideals that this discourse subscribes to:

Gertrude Stein, in her work, has always been possessed by the intellectual passion for exactitude in the description of inner and outer reality. She has produced a simplification by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of associational emotion in poetry and prose.
She knows that beauty, music, decoration, the result of emotion should never be the cause, even events should not be the cause of emotion nor should they be the material of poetry and prose. Nor should emotion itself be the cause of poetry or prose. They should consist of an exact reproduction of either an outer or an inner reality. […] In Gertrude Stein the necessity was intellectual, a pure passion for exactitude. It is because of this that her work has often been compared to that of mathematicians and by a certain French critic to the work of Bach (ABT 865-866).

However, the contemporary art world has long ago sold out on these ideals of an unsentimental, intellectual passion for exactitude as they were once phrased by Stein. This observation has shaped Noterdaeme’s statement of poetics, in its calling out of the art world’s hypocritical discourse of sincerity:

Filip Noterdaeme, in his work has always been possessed by an intellectual passion for insincerity in the fabrication of art. He has produced an ambiguity by this concentration, and as a result the destruction of sincerity in art. He knows that earnestness, righteousness, virtue, the result of emotion should never be the inspiration, even political stances should never be the inspiration for art, nor should they be the material of art. Nor should emotion in itself be the inspiration for art. Art should consist of an exact reproduction of an insincere reality. […] In Filip Noterdaeme the necessity was intuitive, a pure passion for insincere art. It is because of this that his work has often been compared to that of the dadaists and by a certain American performance artist to the work of Jack Smith (Noterdaeme 2013: 148-149).

As a result of this disillusion in regard to the sincerity of the individual artwork, the Homeless Museum of Art promotes an impudent infrastructuralism, as Daniel accounts:

I often urged Filip Noterdaeme to create more artworks for the Homeless Museum exhibits but he was much more concerned with creating museum departments. Creating artworks is easy, he used to say, it’s the museum that is hard to create and a museum must have departments. In other words, to Filip Noterdaeme the museum itself was the exhibit and the art was the décor (ibid. 166).

It is evident that the overall problem the novel, and Noterdaeme’s art practice, is struggling with is the experience of a situation in which the infrastructures of the art world have outgrown art itself. Being hugely preoccupied with appointing a Board of Trustees, establishing strict membership policies and regulations and creating “museum departments” is a consequence of this analysis. As the institutional infrastructures of the art museums have been swallowed up by post-industrial market capitalism, expensive museum shops and prestigious architectural projects have taken control of the museum world,
and the Homeless Museum of Art with its shabby, homeless museum director figure is an attempt to create a satirical undermining of this economy.

Like the *Salon de Fleurus, The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart* has the light, cheerful quality of a prank, and is departing from Stein, the collector and hostess, as an icon in the modernist art canon, but instead of letting the figure of the artist dissolve into the infrastructure as was the case with the doorman, it creates the figures of Daniel and Filip and their schizophrenic alter egos Madame Butterfly and the Museum Director, drawing on Stein, not just as a figure to disrupt the narrative of modernism, but also as a predecessor in the practice of disidentification that they are performing.

In many ways, the satirical figure of the flamboyant yet shabby museum director resembles Kenneth Goldsmith’s performative identity of the poet as trickster, particularly as it appeared in earlier phases of his career, wearing crazy suits and making statements that put him at constant risk of being called out as a fraud or a madman. Yet there is an important difference in the infrastructural approach of the two artists, as while Goldsmith has adapted his practice to be included in the institutional frameworks of universities, publishing houses and art museums, Noterdaeme works from below these structures, via the homeless component. When he carries his mobile plywood Homeless Museum Booth and stuffed coyote around the streets of New York City, to install it on a corner, sit there in person to strike up conversation with passers-by about the art world selling out, he is not protected by the institutional infrastructures of the art world. In a sense, then he actually is a homeless lunatic, at least as long as he sits there, and this bodily investment efficiently disturbs the potential commodity shine of his trickster performance.
"Act so that there is no use in a center," Gertrude Stein wrote in one of her most quoted lines from *Tender Buttons*. A line that, paradoxically one might say, has been at the center of many readings of this book over the years. In the media ecological approach I have applied in this study there is no center. An ecology has no center. Thus, the complex media ecology of reading and writing that flourished in Stein’s salon included the published book, but as we have seen, it was never its center. In the early days, Stein’s writing was written and read in a space filled with oil paintings, knick-knacks and lively conversation between writers, composers, painters and happy amateurs of all nationalities, and this influenced the writing as well as the reading of this writing. In the conceptual framework of this study, it fueled Stein’s media poetics, her ambient poetics and her collaborative poetics.

In the media ecology of literature today, reading in a book, silently, contemplatively and in isolation is not a thing of the past. But it is becoming more and more difficult to claim as the only part of, or even the most important part of, our experiences with literature. The book in our hand has become one node among many others in our literary experience, including live readings, interviews with authors and ongoing discussions in journalistic and social media, blogs, podcasts and vlogs, not to mention the many poetic works that by design transgress the printed page to involve other digital, visual and performative media and the deliberate transmedia extensions of literary worlds to inhabit everything from motion pictures to board games. And just as the infrastructure distributing Stein’s early work was essentially collaborative, based on friends and friends of friends sharing her work in various ways, today, a digitally wired network of friends on social media seems more and more essential for distributing content.

In today’s technological environment we are reading and writing on the same platforms, on which we also see and process still and moving images and listen to sound. And these are platforms that we can carry around with us, and use in our everyday engagement with our surroundings. These conditions are changing our reading and our writing. What we are used to thinking of as two separate processes is becoming more and more
entangled, both with each other and with other activities of a practical, social and affective nature taking place in the ambient space that is surrounding us as we read and write. Instead of reading in solitary silence and then writing in solitary silence while applying a whole different technology, we are switching between the two that are both operated via our touchscreens and keyboards. What we read we also share, copy, edit and comment on, and what we write, others share, copy, edit and comment on.

Clearly, this ecology has no center. But that there is no use in a center is another claim entirely. Banishing the book from the center of literary practice poses severe challenges to the way we are used to reading, thinking, and talking about literature. The decentering of the book, in principle, opens the door for any context imaginable to suddenly be invested with unforeseen importance, and thus the hierarchies that previously structured our conversations about literature are dissolving. While these hierarchies may be worn out and out of touch with the complex media assemblage in which contemporary literary practice unfolds, and they may have proven themselves to be biased in terms of their undeniable favoring the writing by bodies (male, white, etc.) that have historically best been able to pass as neutral, unnoticed and not there, they most certainly had some use in a center. The book as the center of literature’s media ecology was useful in ensuring that we, in the conversations we were having about literature, were all referring to the same (would-be) autonomous object. Once this center is discarded, the risk is that conversations about literature derail while new, unpredictable, provisional centers arise. As addressed in connection with the debates on Gertrude Stein’s war years and on conceptual poetry and cultural appropriation, our confused navigation in this ecology can make debates explode when contestants do not agree what the new centers are, and thus answer from east when attacked from west.

“Act so that there is no use in a center.”

Importantly, Stein’s line does not tell us to act like there is no center. This would be a redundant act, since, evidently, there is none. But it calls upon us to act so that there is no use in one. Which implies an awareness that there may very well be use in a center, whether or not we want there to be.

In regard to Stein’s controversial depiction of racialized bodies, such an immediately useful center could be a contemporary racial awareness that was unavailable to Stein and, as we saw, merely measuring her words against such more or less fixed notions failed to account for the power that her work held for contemporary artists who had investments in such racialized categories. In the debates about Stein’s war years, instantly useful new centers could be the black-and-white interpretation of the political flanks in World War II informed by our contemporary knowledge of history, or it could be the extreme zionists’ positions dictating how to be a “good Jew.” In the debate on conceptual poetry, such useful new centers could be the responses to Kenneth Goldsmith’s offensive identity political
blunder with “The Body of Michael Brown” that lean on semi-essentialist conceptions of racial identity as independent of cultural appropriation, and that accordingly dictate a fairly narrow, politically permissible path for art to follow (above all represented by the Mongrel Coalition Against Gringpo, see Tamayo 2015, but also Chen 2015; MacGabhan et al. 2015). Or, in the same debate, it could be the defense of conceptual poetry that builds mainly on a return to practices of close reading the textual base of conceptual poetry without sufficiently acknowledging the weight that the author’s embodiment and the performative execution has in determining the work’s meaning and impact (Perloff 2015), especially in a time when, as Goldsmith and many other advocates of conceptual poetry repeatedly insists, “context is the new content.”

In the media ecology of Stein’s own work, functional centers also arose. One was the line “rose is a rose is a rose is a rose”, conceived in 1913, that became a collaborative and social device as it travelled from notebook to typescript to letterhead and wax seal to tablecloths and pottery plates and into a book by her friend before materializing in a printed book by herself in 1922 and eleven years later as a monogram replacing both the title and the author’s name on the first edition of The Autobiography of Alice B. Toklas. From here, it continued its journey further out into the ecology, to advertisements and satirical cartoons towards its countless evocations in years to come. Just as the rose is verbally multiplied in Stein’s line, it is materially multiplied in all the shapes and forms it has taken and continues to take. But every time it appears, it appears as a simple, singular shape. Not as a bunch of roses, and not as a compound multiplicity of this and that, but like Stein’s “natural way to go on counting” by “one and one and one and one and one” (LIA 325) like a new rose each time. Not unlike Andy Warhol’s repetition of coke bottles and Marilyns and his desire that things should be not “essentially the same” but “exactly the same” (Warhol and Hackett 1980: 50). Like the rose as it is repeated both materializes as red and dissolves as read, so does the line as a functional center in the ecology. Like a meme, it is an instantaneous center constantly dissolving itself, only to reappear as completely new. As it is picked up, transformed and repeated, it draws a path through the ecology that we can follow. A moving, self-dissolving center inviting us to join its movement and connect it to repeatedly new contexts.

Thus, the request to “act so that there is no use in a center” does not actually deny that there is sometimes use in a center. What it does is encourage us to act like there is not. In calling out the acting it reminds us that there is always a body involved, a body responsible for doing the acting that can prevent the recurrent, unreflective “use in a center” from taking control of the conversation again. Although, by definition, there is no center in the media ecology, we should not forget that the need for one is bound to arise, and in order to avoid succumbing to this need in an unreflected manner that leads to rigid ideological constraints or unresolvable fights, an act is required, and someone to perform it.

This appoints the weight of Stein’s physical body and its image as a crucial node in the ecology. As we have seen, the body of the artist generates affective attachments
towards readers and collaborators. An enormous relational force is attached to Gertrude Stein’s iconized, yet embodied persona with its complex assemblage of avant-garde obscurity, queer radiation, and immediately collectable celebrity value. Across the six decades through which I have traced the complex media ecology of Stein’s aesthetic reception, its impact has proved massive, both in the collaborations openly including it, playing with it and turning it on its head, and in those that appear to be interested only in written words. Emotional attachment as well as antagonism towards Stein’s persona have fueled many of the collaborations I have studied.

But the body of the artist is also a site permeated by biased structures. As the stories told about it and the images produced of it are not necessarily controlled by the artist herself, it is at risk of becoming an interface governed by the cliché imagery of capitalist commodity culture or another, immediately dominant discourse. Therefore, it is often conceived as irrelevant for the aesthetic judgement and unworthy of attention. But as we have seen in all the preceding chapters, not least in Haryette Mullen’s framing of the “aesthetic apartheid” she was confronted with, the color, gender and shape of the writing body always matter for the way the writing is read. It matters for the writing’s access to the functional infrastructures of literature, and it frames and shapes the paratext of the writing which, as Tan Lin developed, determines the better part of our reading before we even open a book. Thus, reducing this crucial interface to unimportant, arbitrary circumstance will always be favoring what Ron Silliman called the dominant subjects of history.

When Stein’s bodily appearance is demonstratively present in her media ecology, when her persona so overtly displays the clash between her body and the category of the gentile, straight, male genius that she convincingly occupies via strategies of disidentification, her work is helping us to keep this matter in mind. Yet, the acting body is also at risk of being framed as the new center.

The iconization of the artist’s image is commodified when the persona becomes immaculate, repeatable and seemingly immaterial like any other meme. But with the archivally documented collaborative work of Stein and her friends constructing this persona across various material platforms, this part of the ecology was subjected to a media poetics. As was emphasized by Laurie Anderson’s highly self-reflexive elaboration on this, where her body and persona are used consciously as a part of her artist’s material, this defining interface can be rematerialized. And as the media poetics of writing will make evident and alterable the technology of writing, this media poetics of the performative identity of the artist will make evident and alterable the technologies of these crucial parts of the ecology. Parts that, if they are naturalized or their relevance denied, are left to be defined by capitalist imagery. Thus, Anderson’s example deepens the understanding of the persona as a transmedia assemblage as also implied in Stein’s work to display the subversive potential behind its immediate commodity shine. To once again “act so that there is no use in a center.”

Finally, implicit in the ambient poetics I have addressed, both in the durational
space that arises in Stein’s own, most obviously reader-resistant work (Lorange 2015), and in her work with genres that imply a three-dimensional space, is another way of dissolving both the fetishized artifact of the artwork and the fetishized persona of the artist into the ambient space of the room or into the communal infrastructure of distribution. Again, this aspect becomes even more elaborate when we turn to Stein’s collaborators, such as Tan Lin, Heiner Goebbels or Field & Lang. Most of all it can be observed in collaborations unfolding in media with spatio-temporal characteristics other than literature, such as music, performing arts and curatorial practices going beyond the label of art. Here, the collaborative aspect can take center stage, like in the Fluxus scores of Alison Knowles or the choreography of Yvonne Rainer’s Trio A (The Mind is a Muscle). But perhaps John Cage’s most renowned composition, 4’33, illustrates this strategy most strikingly and displays the crucial part played in it by ambient poetics.

Famously, the composition is written for any instrument, or combination of instruments, and involves the musician(s) taking their places, and getting ready to play, but leaving the instrument(s) untouched for three movements, a total interval of four minutes and thirty-three seconds as the work’s title media poetically states. What constitutes the piece is the arbitrary sounds filling the room when no notes are played. These sounds, of course, are coming from the bodies of the musicians, but above all, they are the sounds of the audience’s participation. Thus, what the audience experiences when attending a performance of 4’33 is the ambient space that they are constituting via their collaboration. This space is a prerequisite for any music to be performed, just as Lyn Hejinian stated that the prerequisite for any writing or utterance as the ready silence of the listener. But radically, this piece is an example of an entire community acting so that there is no use in a center by performing the centerless. The silence in Cages 4’33 is not silence, it is the sound of the audience collaborating, just as the repetition of Stein’s language is not repetition but an invitation to her readers and collaborators to always connect the marks on the page to the surrounding ecology that lies beyond this page. As the we saw in the collaborations elaborating on the infrastructural aspects of Stein’s salon, most evidently The Autobiography of Daniel J. Isengart and the Homeless Museum of Art, such collaborative communities can also, in turn, be subjected to a specific media poetics emphasizing their meticulous construction and counter-cultural potential and allowing them to be operationalized in new ways that, as Stein’s salon did in its own time, can establish alternative platforms for art and other expressions that criticize and undermine the currently dominant infrastructures for art and literature.

“Act so that there is no use in a center.”

In today’s vast media ecology of material complexity and exhausting information overload, the use in a center will keep reappearing. But, if the use in a center is to be held off, if we are all to succeed in acting so that there is no use in a center, we desperately
need guides to find our way in the ecology. In this study, I have outlined some of the many ways in which Gertrude Stein can function as such a guide. By actively working with, framing and integrating both the textual, ambient and affective layers of the ecology into the way her work communicates, shapes its material, and interacts with the world it is part of, Stein is helping us consider what an embrace of the decentered condition can mean for literary practice in the 21st century.
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