Next to Nothing: Poetic Information in Robert Fitterman and Vilém Flusser

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"Amid the whirlwind of information, economic shocks, and the constant pressures on our time and minds, it's easy to ignore the call of our inner lives," a recent advertisement for the magazine *Poetry* declares. "*Poetry*," it continues, "is the antidote to all that distraction and busyness."

The advertisement's claims echo a wide range of popular and philosophical texts. Almost every word in the ad is a terminus technicus in Heidegger: information, busyness, distraction, the call. "[I]nformation," Heidegger writes, "obstruct[s] . . . our access to the *forma*, the essence, and the proper character of the being of things."[1] Many of Heidegger's readers rely on this and other, similar sentences to oppose information and authentic language.[2] But there are more nuanced passages in his writings that can be used to read him against himself, to undo the opposition of information and *forma*.[3]

The model for such a reading of Heidegger can be found in Derrida's essay "*Ousia* and *Grammē*: Note on a Note from *Being* and *Time*," where he examines Heidegger's project of shaking "the 'vulgar concept' of time" in favor of another, authentic concept of time: "In attempting to produce this *other* concept, one rapidly would come to see that it is constructed out of other metaphysical or ontotheological predicates."[4] The same goes for the construction of concepts for poetry, *forma*, and the inner life in opposition to information, busyness, and distraction.

But if the current everyday understanding of information—as "knowledge communicated concerning some particular fact, subject, or event"[5]—is used as a starting point, it is difficult to see how information could be intimately related to poetry. There is, however, another acceptation of information: it can also mean "the shaping of the mind or character; communication of instructive knowledge; education; training; advice."[6] Information is always also formation; it is always at once formed and formative.

The philosopher Vilém Flusser relies on just such an acceptation of information throughout his writings, as in this passage in *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*: "Tools . . . change the form of these objects: they imprint a new, intentional form on them. They 'inform' them: the object acquires an unnatural, improbable form."[7] Truly informative photography, for Flusser, offers new models of experience; it shows a formable world and not a world that has already been given a definitive form.

Informative photographs, for Flusser, are not "redundant": "What we are surrounded by above all are redundant photographs—and this is the case despite the fact that every day new illustrated newspapers appear on our breakfast table. . . . It is precisely this permanent-

ly changing situation that we have become accustomed to: one redundant photograph displaces another redundant photograph."[8] Redundancy and novelty are the same for Flusser, as they are for Walter Benjamin, who understands the incessant flow of new commodities as the eternal return of the same.

For Flusser, the informative photograph would do nothing but present a redundant photograph once again: "What would be informative, exceptional, exciting for us would be a standstill: to find the same newspapers on our breakfast tables every day or to see the same posters on the wall for months on end. That would surprise and shock us."[9] These lines confirm Flusser's specific understanding of information: informative photographs provide no new information but also do not become something other than informative. Repetition allows information to be experienced for the first time.

Flusser mentions no names, but it seems like he's describing photographers like Troy Brauntuch, Sherrie Levine, and Richard Prince. These rephotographers make images enigmatic that seem transparent, or redundant, in their original contexts. They use appropriation to allegorize their sources and reveal an alterity at their center.

For Flusser, the model of repetitive, nonredundant creation is not limited to photography. Poetry, too, can be informative: "the new poet . . . no longer identifies himself as author but rather as permutationist [Permutator]. Even the language he manipulates no longer seems like raw material stacked up inside him but rather like a complex system pressing in around him to be subjected to permutation. His attitude to a poem is no longer that of the inspired and intuitive poet but that of an information designer."[10] Instead of expressing or excavating an interiority, the permutationist rearranges and transposes existing material. Although Flusser's understanding of the history of poetry (once there were inspired poets writing about their inner lives and nowadays poets manipulate found materials) cannot be adopted without critique, his texts can still be used to understand contemporary poetry that foregrounds appropriation.

Robert Fitterman is a permutational poet in Flusser's sense. In his recent book *Holocaust Museum*, Fitterman quotes captions from photographs in the online archives of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum, together with their identification number, but without the photograph, and in his poem "Directory" (originally published in *Poetry*) he copies a mall directory's lists of stores.[11] In "Replacing References to Photography with References to the Web in Vilém Flusser's *Towards a Philosophy of Photography* (1983)," Fitterman shows how the presentation of information (Flusser's text as copied, processed data) and a form of busyness (replacing, cutting and pasting, retyping, modifying: Fitterman's manipulation of Flusser's text) can generate information (in the Flusserian sense) or what Flusser calls "poetry in the sense of a construction of experiential models."[12] The model of experience offered in Fitterman is that of a writer who inserts himself into an informational environment as its busybody permutationist. In this process, information is not left behind in favor of something else; Fitterman uses information as information and not as material to

be transfigured. He writes of his practice as carving "paths through the informational morass."[13]

Fitterman's writings reveal little "about what might lie beneath" his "usefully useless" information, as one dissatisfied critic notes. "Fitterman finally gains only what he ventures," this critic claims, "which is, by design, next to nothing."[14] I suspect that Fitterman wouldn't be unhappy with that judgment. "Next to nothing" would be a good term for what is offered in Fitterman's texts: a tentative, fragile experience of information.

Fitterman's texts supplement the usual questions asked of authored texts (Who is speaking? What is the meaning? What substances—substantial and already existing subjects, substantial and weighty themes—are at their center?) with questions that Foucault poses at the end of "What is an Author?": "What are the modes of existence of this discourse? Where has it been used, how can it circulate and who can appropriate it for himself or herself? What are the places in it where there is room for possible subjects? Who can assume these various subject functions?"[15] These questions coexist with questions of authorship in Fitterman's texts, which show how inner lives are constituted not in opposition to information but with it. "The appropriator," Fitterman writes, "sees all objects as equal, as equally up for grabs. The appropriator is interested in borrowing the material that is already available—not as a null set in retaliation to invention, but as a new way of *participating in* invention" and, I would add, as a new way of reflecting on and using information.[16]

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NOTES

[1] Martin Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars: Protocols, Conversations, Letters*, ed. Medard Boss, trans. Franz Mayr and Richard Askay (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2001), 58. See also Heidegger, *Zollikon Seminars*, 74; and Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, trans. Peter D. Hertz (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 57-139. On language and *forma*, see Heidegger, *On the Way to Language*, 130.

[2] "Language has become 'information,'" writes the authoritative Heideggerian commentator Otto Pöggeler, "which informs one about beings and thus places them at man's disposal. Language is formalized so that it can serve technologically-calculating man as information." The essence of language, can only be "glimpsed," Pöggeler writes, if "we are looked upon by it, appropriated into it," and not if language is thought of as informative. Otto Pöggeler, *Martin Heidegger's Path of Thinking*, trans. Daniel Magurshak and Sigmund Barber (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1987), 225.

[3] See Heidegger, "The Time of the World Image," in *Off the Beaten Track*, trans. Julian Young and Kenneth Haynes (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 73.

[4] Jacques Derrida, *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982), 31 and 63. See also Reiner Schürmann, *Heidegger on Being and Acting: From Principles to Anarchy*, trans. Christine Marie-Gross and Reiner Schürmann (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1987), 268.

[5] *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. "information."

[6] Ibid.

7 Vilém Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, trans. Anthony Mathews (London: Reaktion Books, 2000), 23.

8 Ibid., 65. On redundancy in Flusser and its sources in information theory, see Sjoukje van der Meulen, "Between Benjamin and McLuhan: Vilém Flusser's Media Theory," *New German Critique* 37, no. 2 (Summer 2010), 190–191.

9 Flusser, *Towards a Philosophy of Photography*, 65.

10 Vilém Flusser, Does Writing Have a Future?, trans. Nancy Ann Roth (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 74–75, translation modified (Roth translates "Permutator" as "remixer" and "permutieren" as "remix").

11 Robert Fitterman, *Holocaust Museum* (London: Veer Books, 2011); and Robert Fitterman, "*Directory,*" in Fitterman, *Sprawl : Metropolis 30A* (Los Angeles: Make Now Press, 2010), 15–21.

12 Flusser, *Does Writing Have a Future?* 74. For a related discussion of the "mundaneness" of Fitterman's writing, see Lytle Shaw, "Docents of Discourse: The Logic of Dispersed Sites," *boundary 2* 36, no. 2 (2009), 42–44.

13 Robert Fitterman, *Rob the Plagiarist: Others Writing by Robert Fitterman 2000–2008* (New York: Roof Books, 2010), 10–11.

14 David Levin Becker, "Friends without Benefits," *American Book Review* 32, no. 4 (May/June 2011), 12. In a review of Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX*, David J. Alworth offers an explanation for some critics' dissatisfaction with Fitterman's informational texts: "there is something fundamentally unsettling about appropriative compositional strategies, especially in the way they grant purchase to expressive categories that are not necessarily conversational representations of a continuous interior life." "With its guise of informational egalitarianism and its here comes everybody textuality," Alworth continues, "the Internet for Fitterman demonstrates finally how 'the authentic and the inauthentic can co-exist in interesting ways,' something experimental poets have known for decades." David J. Alworth, "Robert Fitterman's *Metropolis XXX* and the Politics of Appropriation," Jacket 30 (2006), http://jacketmagazine.com/30/alworth-fitt.html#fn23.

15 Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?" in Foucault, *The Essential Works of Foucault: Aesthetics, Epistemology, Method*, ed. James Faubion, trans. Robert Hurley et al. (New York: The New Press, 1998), 222.

16 Fitterman, *Rob the Plagiarist*, 16.