

## ***Textes et contextes***

ISSN : 1961-991X

: Université de Bourgogne

14-1 | 2019

Silences croisés contemporains ; Le détective récurrent : entre intime et société

# Vanessa Place and the Performance of Verbatim

05 June 2019.

**Fiona McMahon**

🔗 <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=2073>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

Fiona McMahon, « Vanessa Place and the Performance of Verbatim », *Textes et contextes* [], 14-1 | 2019, 05 June 2019 and connection on 22 July 2024. Copyright : [Licence CC BY 4.0 \(https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/). URL : <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=2073>

PREO

# Vanessa Place and the Performance of Verbatim

## *Textes et contextes*

05 June 2019.

14-1 | 2019

Silences croisés contemporains ; Le détective récurrent : entre intime et société

Fiona McMahon

🔗 <http://preo.u-bourgogne.fr/textesetcontextes/index.php?id=2073>

Licence CC BY 4.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

- 
1. Verbatim Transferral and Voice
  2. Public Performance and the Contexts of Silence
  3. The Participating Audience
- 

There has never been a document of culture, which is not simultaneously one of barbarism. And just as it is itself not free from barbarism, neither is it free from the process of transmission, in which it falls from one set of hands into another<sup>1</sup>.

Walter Benjamin

- 1 The poetry of Vanessa Place calls attention to the exploration among contemporary poets of the intricacies of the relationship melding sound and meaning. How sound is produced has an enduring relevance, as underscored by the pervasiveness of the public performance of poetry in North America and in Europe<sup>2</sup>. Equally vital however is a concern with how the performance of poetry is freighted with silence, in a compositional sense but also metaphorically, when the gaps in language engage imaginatively with the audiences of poetry. The discourse on poetry is no less interested in the connection between poetry and the structures of sound, including those negative spaces that sound out silence. Approaches in literary theory rightly

investigate the empirical conditions underlying the experience of orality and of aurality in poetry. Indeed it is argued that the interaction between the poet, the audience and language is to be viewed from the perspective of the etymological origins of *poetry*, from the Greek *poiesis*, understood as a process of “making” or “creation” (Dworkin and Perloff 2008: 749). The sounds poetry makes interest Place, as evidenced in the significant attention devoted to the rhetorical tools derived from audio and digital media in one of her recent projects, and an ongoing one, entitled “Last Words” – a collection of statements recorded by inmates on Death Row in the State of Texas. The piece is contingent upon a public record compiled since 1982 by the Texas State Department of Criminal Justice and made available through an online database housing the identities, the criminal records and the final words of Death Row inmates. To date, it is comprised of 560 verbatim transcriptions of audio-documents recording a statement made by the jailed offenders prior to their execution and subsequently stored under the heading “Death Row Information”. These transcriptions are labelled in turn under the heading, “Last Statement”, some of which Vanessa Place has recorded and performed on different occasions since 2014<sup>3</sup>. In its current form, *Last Words* was made available in 2015 as an audio recording on CD that was published in a book, along with a sample bilingual transcription of a “Last Statement”. The pages of this book, released by the French publishing house Dis Voir<sup>4</sup>, are comprised principally of photos displaying the “death row portraits” of the inmates that have been executed.

- 2 Given the procedures of appropriation and recording upon which these performances rely, important distinctions may be drawn with respect to the manner in which modes of orality are structured and received by an audience. The question that arises is also how the conditions of aurality are put to the test: what are the linguistic structures voiced by the performer and what is it that the audience hears at the public poetry event or when listening to audio recordings? One problem, it would seem, is that the voice reaching the audience of poetry is less embodied in the metrical and phonemic features relevant to traditional prosody than in the historicized space in which the words are sounded out. What vocalization is performed when the dynamics of archival retrieval take precedence over the

mechanics of prosody? Secondly, if the performance of poetry has become in part an exercise in staging the “cultural position” (Dworkin and Perloff 2009:13) of voice – one that highlights the interplay between private and public discourse – what changes does that incur for the subjectivity awarded to the speaking voice, as in the Romantic tradition? In what sense does the distinct distancing from the lyric paradigm of self-expression and linguistic integrity point to a diminishment of voice? The deliberateness of this gesture suggests that the rhetorical resonance of silence is inherently tied to Vanessa Place’s performance, inescapably becoming a conduit of meaning. The question raised is whether poetry can mediate a powerful form of subjectivity all the while stepping away from historical modes of production that traditionally celebrate a meditative or self-reflexive “I”. What *Last Words* directs us to consider therefore, at least initially, is the genericity of poetry, since the conditions of poetic utterance and reception are put to the test. More compellingly perhaps, the focus on the channels by which words are communicated to an audience is indicative of the reflection engaged with the sociality of language.

## 1. Verbatim Transferral and Voice

- 3 In her performances of late, Vanessa Place draws attention to the fabrication of the artist persona and the conversation between artistry and narratives of power. More broadly, establishing itself in what is now a substantial tradition of American poetry steeped in strategies of appropriation, Place’s poetry demonstrates how the verbatim transferral to poetry of borrowings from documentary contexts comes to query the societal relevance of poetry. When the selections from the archive are performed by Place, who is a poet and a lawyer by profession, the historical circumstance of the poet as bard, balladeer and storyteller, is revisited in a decisive manner. That a lawyer should apply her meticulous legal mind to offering new directions to contemporary poetic discourse is not unprecedented. The American poet Charles Reznikoff before her awarded archival material singular rhetorical agency in a decades-long undertaking that intermingled legal testimony and the creative process<sup>5</sup>. What is striking however is the paradoxical stance of the poet, who in this instance conspicuously takes up the role of performer. The talent displayed by Place would appear to be of little consequence, since her skill as a

performer is seemingly confined to the accuracy of her verbatim record. Similarly, the myth of the originary voice is dispelled, though in a manner akin to medieval chroniclers, the poet continues to function as the vehicle, the sounding board of a community. Word after word, the locutionary performances of Vanessa Place draw attention to the conceits according to which language structures experience. This is apparent most noticeably when she draws from the vernacular of our day to build thematic webs relating societal questions to each other. Secondly, and in a manner that differs radically from traditions of oral poetry, audio and digital media build frameworks for the transmission of narrative in Place's poetry. These schemes prompt questions as to whether reading and performing as a poet entail a revival or a diminishment of oral presence. The utterances featured in Place's poetry occupy an oblique space where they are at once sounded out and silenced. The doubleness of this practice carries implications for the relation of consciousness to language, and likewise, for the relation of the performer to her audience. By seizing upon archived content, is verbatim poetry enabling the empowerment of those voices stored away or merely repeating their silences? What and whose experience is passed on through the performance?

- 4 The malaise elicited by this poetic soundscape is inescapable since the experience contained within the Death Row archive is traumatic at its core. Time and time again, the audience is drawn to consider the valuation of the archived content, extracted from an institutional database – a state judicial archive – as a direct source. Understandably, when listening to the repeat performance offered up by Place, the dramatically staged neutrality of the occasion can be both riveting and troubling. As transcribed from the state data base, here are four such statements made by inmates and subsequently recorded by Place<sup>6</sup>:

Last Statement, Charlie Brooks Jr.

Date of Execution, December 7, 1982

- 5 Statement to the Media:

I, at this very moment, have absolutely no fear of what may happen to this body. My fear is for Allah, God only, who has at this moment the only power to determine if I should live or die... As a devout Muslim, I am taught and believe that this material life is only for the express purpose of preparing oneself for the real life that is to come... Since becoming Muslim, I have tried to live as Allah wanted me to live.

6 **Spoken:**

Yes, I do.  
I love you.  
Asdadu an la ilah illa Allah,  
Asdadu an la ilah illa Allah,  
Asdadu anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah,  
Asdadu anna Muhammadan Rasul Allah.  
I bear witness that there is no God but Allah.  
I bear witness that Muhammad is the messenger of Allah.  
Inna li-Allah wa-inna ilayhi rajiun.  
Verily unto Allah do we belong, Verily unto him do we return.  
Be strong.

...

Last Statement, James Autry  
Date of Execution, March 14, 1984

7 **Last Statement:**

This offender declined to make a last statement.

...

Last Statement, Thomas Barefoot  
Date of Execution, October 30, 1984

8 **Last Statement :**

When asked if he had a last statement, he replied, “Yes, I do.” I hope that one day we can look back on the evil that we’re doing right now like the witches we burned at the stake. I want everybody to know that I hold nothing against them. I forgive them all. I hope everybody I’ve done anything to will forgive me. I’ve been praying all day for Carl Levin’s wife to drive the bitterness from her heart because that bitterness that’s in her heart will send her to Hell just as surely as any other sin. I’m sorry for everything I’ve ever done to anybody. I hope they’ll forgive me. “Sharon, tell all my friends goodbye. You know who they are: Charles Bass, David Powell...” Then he coughed and nothing else was said.

...

Last Statement, Kenneth A. Brock

Date of Execution, June 19, 1986

I have no last words. I am ready.

- 9 The content of these transcriptions is crucial, whether one is reading the Texas state online database, listening to Place perform these selections or listening to a recording of her performance, since the repeat of the public record differs. If one avails oneself of the database, each “Last Statement” can be cross-referenced with additional data that expands both the knowledge one has of the crime for which the death sentence was pronounced and of the individual who has been executed – his professional and social background, including race, age and criminal record. On the contrary, if one is only listening to the recording or the performance, the content is less individualized, as is the subject shadowed by the poet. The verbatim retrieval of content appears to only re-enact the “empty position” filled by the subject in any archive, as Giorgio Agamben has argued (Agamben 2006: 39). One becomes keenly aware while listening to Place how the subjectivity of the individual on death row appears muted by the recording or the performance. The rhetorical gestures accomplished by the poet – whether in a studio or before an audience – may be described as a twofold reduction of the subject, whose disappearance remains one of the fundamental principals of the archive<sup>7</sup>. The performances

derived from these procedures may be received in one sense as a habitat for silence, for words silenced, buried in archives and retrieved by a default enunciator, who appears to be emptied of its interiority. In a reverse manner, owing in part to the underlying empathy of Place's undertaking, it is as though the statements relayed by the enunciator come to acquire a universal resonance. Though abiding by the verbatim simplicity of the borrowed statement, the recording and the performance step outside the perimeter of the individual subjects and in doing so, lend their experience a potentiality beyond the institutional archive. This paradox points to the problem raised by the "process of transmission" Walter Benjamin addresses in his discussion of history and memory (2004: 392), for one may ask to what community verbatim writing belongs and whom it sets out to address? Does it matter that Place is revisiting the experience of convicted criminals and not that of their victims?

## 2. Public Performance and the Contexts of Silence

10 *Last Words* stands among other examples of appropriation in contemporary writing that demonstrate a keen interest in the ostensibly non-poetic contexts a writer may draw upon, be they dictionaries, phone directories, newspapers and in Place's case, as a lawyer, appellate briefs or other such judicial documents. In another instance, in her three-volume series *Tragodia*, Place reproduces the appellate briefs she used as a criminal defense attorney in California when representing sex offenders. Place's poetry is remarkable indeed for its close connection to records of violence. However, the organizing principle of her poetics, established upon the repeat of public record, takes up some of the theoretical concerns regarding the representational agency of poetry shared by a host of writers, including Robert Fitterman, Kenneth Goldsmith and Caroline Bergvall, in what is called "conceptual writing". With conceptualists, a fascination for the production of literature and how it signifies is not restricted to judiciary documentary material; conceptual writing largely embraces schemes of cultural appropriation, culling from literary sources and public record, while at the same time unflinchingly reassessing the semiotic and stylistic features of writing. As the poet Caroline Bergvall has ob-

served, this involves a “flattening of stylistic impulse” (2012: 20-21), a muffling of literary language in an effort to offer new modes of structuring socio-cultural experience. Conceptualists may call this “engaged disengagement” (2012: 21) whereby a diminished authorial voice calls attention to the deliberate removal of expression in a stylistic and a metaphysical sense – the postmodern separation of the subject from language. They do so in a manner which puts into play the “author function” (1998: 211) made axiomatic by Michel Foucault, shifting the focus from what discourse discloses about the author’s interiority to the value of discourse as a social construct. In a similar fashion, conceptualists such as Vanessa Place revisit post-structuralist theory through their willingness to equate the author with a “scriptor”, and linguistically, with an empty enunciator, an “instance writing”, as Roland Barthes defined it, whose role is to oversee a “tissue of signs” belonging to a vast dictionary at the writer’s disposal<sup>8</sup>.

- 11 A renewed focus on depersonalized modes and contexts may be explained in a general sense, as some critics have, as a demonstration, in a reverse gesture, to sustain “a position in the community”<sup>9</sup> (Leibovici 2007: 10). As it can be observed in the case of Vanessa Place, the politicized contexts of contemporary poetics propose to reframe the enunciative stance of the poetic persona in such a manner as to highlight the involvement of poetic discourse in the world of public discourse. In performance, this interest is vigorously conveyed through the use of verbatim prose, whose inevitable flatness provocatively threatens to silence the complex psychological trauma underlying each crime and subsequent death sentence. What is undoubtedly unsettling for the audience is how the duality pitting exteriority against interiority is exposed through this staging of contrasting tonality. The theoretical stance developed by Place is less ambiguous since it expressly directs attention to the productive agency of public discourse, in this instance archival material, when she argues that “context is the primary locus of meaning-making” (Place 2012: 446) – what she has named elsewhere, “webs of ethical and aesthetic conditions and assumptions” (2010: np<sup>10</sup>). Weaving poetry from the strands of a collective body, conceptual writing directs attention to the departure from the traditional lyric fashioning of poetic utterance as a single distinctive voice; it loosens the ties of poetry to music and implicitly, to the realm of the emotions; it also fore-

grounds the encroachment of poetry upon the prosaic and the prosaic upon the poetic. The dismantling of the frontiers between private and public realms is further highlighted by the very accessibility of the writer's material transferred across different media. Once poetry comes to circulate from text-based to audio and digital media, it comes to acquire what can be described across the arts as "the very shape of a public issue"<sup>11</sup> (Leibovici 2007: 10). With Place, the mobility and pervasiveness of poetry puts it at some remove from any claims of authorship. The digital trajectory continues outside the single performance, ensuring that the social and political schemes ordered by writ of law are continuously exhibited and weighed alongside the lingual components of the poet's borrowed material.

- 12 The theoretical positioning of Place's work in contemporary poetry is instructive when considering the relationship of the individual to the community: through the conceit of the "subject" "the properly melancholic contemporary entity" (Fitterman and Place 2013: 38), poets who identify as conceptualists construe enunciation as an intersection of subjectivity and objectivity, the place where the difference between subject and object is erased. The "subject" is at once what or who is speaking and what or who is represented in speech. Using what is thus essentially an enunciative mask, Place's poetry would have us consider whether the "Death Row Information" of the website is to be heard as a genuine reflection of a speaking subject. By virtue of the performance itself, the reliability and thus the authority of these statements as information is no longer a given.<sup>12</sup> Nor can they be received as though still locked in the same ideological structure. In light of this, the audience may view the performative stance of the poet as an enabling one, in the sense that it provides for the release of testimony from the constraints of the digital archive. At the same time, there remains an ethical unease embedded in the act of enunciation that the discourse on conceptual writing does little to quell. According to the definition of conceptual writing offered up by Place and Robert Fitterman, the outcome of such performances is unequivocally tied to the "expectations of the readership or *thinkership*" (2013: 10) and only in a lesser degree to the mechanisms or the "strategies" of the writing (2013: 10). Through this transferral of agency, contemporary poetry adroitly alleviates itself of the weight of interpretation, and in the same breath leaves the audience to grapple

with what it means to read the transcription of someone else speaking about their death and then to hear the same words through the voice of a poet in a public venue. In the same regard, the “thinker-ship” is left to ascertain how poetry performs silences previously digitized in the archive.

### 3. The Participating Audience

- 13 It might be argued that subjectivity is at once lost and found by degrees in Place’s audio piece. Though the premise of conceptual writing is that “it does not create a single voice or thematic constant from its constituent bits” (Fitterman and Place 2013: 45), through Place’s appropriation of the final words of inmates, a personal record, there is a search for a form of the *idios* – of the particular, the personal and the private (akin to Roland Barthes’ concept of *idiorrhythmy*, a utopian social model harmoniously melding individual freedom and collective responsibility)<sup>13</sup>. This is apparent for instance in the way individual testimony is retrieved from the larger mass of a database, word for word, as in verbatim. Barring a few poetic slippages – where Place makes changes, perhaps unwittingly, that lend a more blatant poetic tonality to the texts – the duplication of the inmates’ statements can easily be verified. With equal care, *Last Words* also observes the silences written into the database. By leaving blanks (5 seconds long), Place has the listener hear the silences of those who declined to make a statement. When we listen to these silences, we are reminded, as Place has explained, of her interest in “the condition and assumption of communication itself, i.e. readability itself” (2010: np). Equally important perhaps is the ability of those silences to fulfil the prospect of the personal – to let seep back in a grain, a trace of self-presence. When sustained at length, the verbatim repeat has a lulling effect on the audience and the performance allows for the mystery and opacity that clings to silence to take hold – retrieving anything in fact which has escaped the homogenizing force of the archive.
- 14 Making one’s own someone else’s silence signals of course the meaningfulness of that void or absence. In *Last Words*, the performer posits the existence of a participating audience, one that will respond critically to the interface between poetry and law, between the exer-

cise of words and the execution of death sentences. As in Ancient Greek theatre, poetry becomes a communal activity where public authority is rehearsed on stage and in the audience. With Place, this rehearsal is a recovery of “words” from their companion “statements”, institutionalized records belonging to what the website names blandly and tonelessly as “Death Row Information”. The enunciative fragment here aspires to emerge from the web of information erected by the same authority that ensures the death of the speaking subject. In the design alone of the website, there is a reminder of the sheer amount of information now available in digital culture and of the way that the channelling of information may be construed as a form of violence, as a means to eradicate the particular, the personal voice of the individual<sup>14</sup>.

15 It is revealing how the organization of the database is replicated in Place’s performance of that information. The project is incremental and as such it mimics the accumulation of data in ever-growing digital networks. In a similar fashion, the mimetic proliferation of language is played out in the multiplication of media, since Place is working from a written transcription of the audio recording of the inmates that is made prior to their execution. From that written transcription she makes an audio-recording, which today in the 2015 *Dis Voir* edition now includes one transcription of a last statement and a 2-hour CD recording, along with the photos of inmates who remain nameless.

16 If the transfer of information from one medium to the next may be deemed “uncreative writing<sup>15</sup>”, as Kenneth Goldsmith for instance has termed his own work, the performance engineered by Vanessa Place is unique in the sense that it carries a distinct testimonial purpose (that bears a relationship to a bardic, even epic tradition). For what the audience hears is a retrieval of a recording that has been erased from a public forum, given that The Texas State Department of Justice does not make the recording available, only the transcription. As such, the poet’s voice stands in for those whose words remain solely as a textual transcription in the public archive. Through this recovery, the poetic medium appears to function as though a transmitter of lived experience and to query therefore, in a broad sense, the representational aims of poetry. Indeed, if we consider Place’s use of technology, her work considerably revises the means by

which language arrives at this result. For the poet takes up some of the digital practices that govern the circulation of mass information in the culture at large: as Kenneth Goldsmith has argued, after copying and pasting, the internet has prompted a Duchampian “filtering and sorting sensibility” (Goldsmith 2011: xix) through any number of “‘re-’ gestures”, for instance “re-blogging and retweeting” (Goldsmith 2011: xix). When Place reads archival transcriptions, a form of “re-gesturing” takes shape that initiates a suspension or a displacement of authorial voice. This particular kind of silence or effacement is communicative, since it works towards establishing a forum for discussion in a public space. In doing so, the poet appeals to an audience presumed to respond critically to the material on display. By remaining silent therefore, the poet partakes in an effort to consider the social structures in which discourse circulates.

- 17 Undoubtedly, Place’s archival experience as a lawyer has prepared her for this repetition, the replaying of what has been recorded then transcribed. As Place has remarked elsewhere, “The Law is revealed a speech act, a speech act that is fundamentally about witnessing” (2010: np). Similarly, scholars in the field of law and literature will point out that law and poetry share a verbal and performative basis sustained by methods of repetition. We may recall for instance Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, his study of society and government, and come to understand even more closely how repetition in verse is historically prevalent in law: “And in ancient time, before letters were in common use, the laws were many times put into verse, that the rude people taking pleasure in singing, or reciting them, might the more easily reteine them in memory<sup>16</sup>” (189).
- 18 If we concur that *Last Words* would have us remember the Death Row inmates, the shape of that memory is less readily defined. This is because the voices of the inmates emerge in the recording under different guises. Though deliberately exhaustive, the project inescapably leaves some questions unanswered about the transformative action of iteration. The differences between the written copy and Place’s spoken copy are left untold unless one opens the archive. Even then, whether the words carry the same rhythms may escape us. For instance, does the poet’s voice offer up an emotional inflection that has previously been erased by the transcription of the inmates’ recording? At the very least, the statements recorded by Place comprise an

arresting litany. The cumulative design draws attention to the disorder that has left its stamp on the lives of these individuals: inmates claiming their innocence or admitting their guilt; inmates unable or unwilling to make a statement and preferring silence; inmates denouncing the inadequacies and injustices of the system or those expressing acceptance, even approval of the law.

- 19 In this instance, Place's commitment to repetition cannot be equated with the paradoxical play between boredom and risibility, as undertaken by such modernist writers as Gertrude Stein (Crangle 2010: 135<sup>17</sup>). There is nonetheless an equally strong desire for continuity through repetition – that “writing should go on<sup>18</sup>” (1998: 318), as Stein writes in her 1935 essay, “Poetry and Grammar”. In this regard, Place joins in retrospectively with Stein to direct her repetitions to an audience, intent upon sounding out meaning. Once performed, “Death Row information” becomes intertwined in a similarly heuristic process. The sounds that her own voice lends to the words of Death Row inmates are key. They define this dispassionate information as a source and an outlet for knowledge and ultimately, as a source and an outlet for authority of another kind – one that stands outside the institutional framework of the archive<sup>19</sup>.
- 20 As a poet and a lawyer, Vanessa Place is doubly aware of the relationship between language and authority. Place's work has concerned itself with replaying that relationship, upsetting assumptions about the legitimacy of each. The original authorial voice is put to the test – its individuality and subjectivity – as is the authority invested in the Word as a scriptural talisman and thus as a point of origin for literature and law. The social contract ensuing from the governance of language is what is at stake here. How does language suggest and implement a model of authority? For Place, and other writers assembled under the term “conceptual”, the legacy of the Language poets is distinctly felt since the interest lies with art forms questioning the legitimacy of that authority. With Place specifically, scepticism regarding language spills over into scepticism over the mechanisms of the judicial system.
- 21 At the same time it is impossible to overlook the authority of sacredness conferred upon information recast as *Last Words*. In some instances, the anaphoric intonations and lexis of religion are already

present, with invocations of Muslim or Christian gods and biblical syntax replayed in the words of prisoners. Keeping with the religious metaphor, it is as though the poet's *Last Words* were to be performed retrospectively as the last rites of those awaiting death. While death indeed remains the central metaphor behind this performance – the silencing of life – the tradition of incantatory rhythms in Ancient law may also be heard in this iteration of judicial archives. Whether the poet acquires a persona akin to that of prophet, priest or lawmaker is less certain. One can revert to the general argument that poets are acting as supposedly neutral vectors when they adopt a rhetorical form of silence. This is what Kenneth Goldsmith essentially puts forward in his anthology *Against Expression*, when he says that “writing’s response will be mimetic and replicative” (2011: xxi). However, the response of an audience to verbatim writing is more difficult to ascertain. This is especially true when the context, as with Place, is so thoroughly steeped in trauma. Audience response stands to be more disruptive, discordant and heteroclit.

- 22 Place’s piece brings us language that had been brought to a standstill, stored away in an archive and yet that becomes, through performance, dynamic in its architecture, in its delivery and in its reception. Fundamentally, by combining appropriative and performative methodologies, *Last Words* may be described as “a listening that compels a listening<sup>20</sup>”, the task of poetry as defined by Henri Meschonnic (1988: 90). Place’s work presupposes the existence of a community of listeners since it exists either as an audio recording or in the ephemeral shape of a performance piece. In that regard alone, it demonstrates the intention to create “new platforms of receivership” (Goldsmith 2011: xxi) that are politically enabling. The urge for “replication,” to quote once again Place and Fitterman (2013: 20) is transformative. The doubleness of Place’s enterprise is compelling by what it achieves, re-enacting the trauma of death as ordained by law. How this is put into play is equally important, since it calls upon an audience to listen, to hear the echo of what has been silenced.

---

## Works Cited

Agamben, Giorgio, “The Archive and Testimony”, *quel che resta di Auschwitz*

(Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989), Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 143-146, in: Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive. Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 38-40.

Barthes, Roland, "La mort de l'auteur", 1968, in : *Essais critiques IV. Le bruissement de la langue*, Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 1984, p. 61-67.

Benjamin, Walter, "On the Concept of History", in: *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 4: 1938-1940*, Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, Eds. Cambridge, Massachusetts, and London, England: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2004, p. 389-400.

-----, « Sur le concept de l'histoire », in : *Écrits français*. Présentés et introduits par J.-M. Monnoyer. Coll. "Bibliothèque des idées". Paris : Éditions Gallimard, 1991, p. 339-356.

Bergvall, Caroline, "The Conceptual Twist. A Foreword", in: *I'll Drown my Book. Conceptual Writing by Women*, C. Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody and Vanessa Place, Eds. Los Angeles, CA: Les Figues Press, 2012, p. 18-22.

Crangle, Sara, *Prosaic Desires. Modernist Knowledge, Boredom, Laughter, and Anticipation*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010.

Dworkin, Craig and Marjorie Perloff. "The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound : The 2006 MLA Presidential Forum", *PMLA* (2008): 749-760.

Dworkin, Craig and Marjorie Perloff, eds. "Introduction: The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound", in *The Sound of Poetry / The Poetry of Sound*. Chicago

and London: University of Chicago Press, 2009, 1-17.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?", in: *Against Expression. An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. Dworkin, Craig and Kenneth Goldsmith, Eds, Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 2011, p. xvii-xxii.

-----, *Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in the Digital Age*. ;Columbia University Press, 2011.

Fitterman, Robert and Vanessa Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms*, 2009, Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013.

Fitterman, Robert, "Foreword", in: *Notes on Conceptualisms*. 2009, Brooklyn, NY: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2013, p. 9-10.

Hobbes, Thomas, *Leviathan*, Richard Ruck, Ed., New York University, 1991.

-----, *Léviathan*. Traduit de l'anglais, annoté et comparé avec le texte latin par François Tricaud. 1971. Paris : Éditions Sirey, 1983.

Foucault, Michel, "What is an Author ?", in: *Aesthetics, Method and Epistemology. Essential Works of Foucault 1954-1984*, James D. Faubion, Ed., Robert Hurley and Others, Tran, Vol II. New York: The New Press, 1998, p. 205-222.

Leibovici, Franck, *Des documents poétiques*, Collection *forbidden beach*. Al dante // questions théoriques, 2007.

Meschonnic, Henri, « La rime et la vie », in : *La rime et la vie*. Éditions Verdier, 1989, p. 208-231.

-----, "Rhyme and Life", Gabriella Bediti, Trad., in: *Critical Inquiry* vol. 15, n° 1, University of California Press, 1988, p. 90-107.

Perloff, Marjorie, "Writing Philosophy as Poetry: Literary Form in Wittgenstein", in: *The Oxford Handbook of Wittgenstein*, Oskari Kuusela and Marie McGinn, Eds., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 714-728.

Place, Vanessa, "Afterword", in: *I'll Drown my Book. Conceptual Writing by Women*, C. Bergvall, Laynie Browne, Teresa Carmody and Vanessa Place, Eds., Los Angeles, CA : Les Figues Press, 2012, p. 445-447.

-----, "The Allegory and the Archive", Chapbook, Derek Beaulieu, Ed., Calgary, Canada: No Press, 2010. Page consulted <http://lemonhound.com/2013/02/25/vanessa-place-the-allegory-and-the-archive/> (viewed April 25, 2017)

-----, *Last Words*, Zig Zag series, Philippe Langlois and Frank Smith, Dir., Paris : Éditions Dis Voir, 2015.

-----, *Tragodia. 1. Statement of Facts*. Los Angeles, California: Blanc Press, 2010.

Reznikoff, Charles, *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915): Recitative*, Vols. I-II, Seamus Cooney, Ed., Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978-1979.

Gertrude Stein, "Poetry and Grammar", in: *Writings 1932-1946*. Catherine R. Stimpson and Harriet Chessman, Eds. New York: The Library of America, 1998. p. 313-336. R,

-----, *Lectures en Amérique*. Trad. de l'américain et présenté pr Claude Grimal. Paris : Christian Bourgois Éditeur, 1978.

---

1 See Benjamin (1991: 343): « Tout cela ne témoigne [pas] de la culture sans témoigner, en même temps, de la barbarie. Cette barbarie est même décelée jusque dans la façon dont, au cours des âges, cet héritage devait tomber des mains d'un vainqueur entre celles d'un autre. »

2 In a recent collection of essays that reflects upon the modalities of performance as they relate to poetry readings, Jean-François Puff draws attention to the growing number of public reading events in France and celebrates what he calls the revival of orality in the poetic field. *Dire la poésie*, ed. Jean-François Puff. Nantes : Editions nouvelles Cécile Defaut, 2015, 9.

3 The sound piece *Last Words* was recorded in 2014 and first exhibited at the Mak Center for Art and Architecture (Los Angeles, April 9- June 11, 2014): "New Works by Andrea Fraser, Vanessa Place". Place later performed segments of this sound piece in France in September 2014, along with excerpts from the French translation (*Exposé des faits*) of a previous project, *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts*, when invited by the French writer Frank Smith to partake in the *Khiasma Relectures 15* festival (September 26, 2014, Espace Khiasma, Les Lilas): <https://r22.fr/son/expose-des-faits-vanessaplace-inc-last-words/>

4 *Last Words* appears in the “Zag Zig” collection edited by Frank Smith and Philippe Langlois.

5 Charles Reznikoff, *Testimony: The United States (1885-1915): Recitative*. Vols. I-II. Ed. Seamus Cooney. Santa Barbara, CA: Black Sparrow Press, 1978-1979.

6 The last statements recorded by Vanessa Place as a sound piece entitled, *Last Words* and later issued on CD by the Editions Dis Voir may be viewed on the website of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice under the heading, “Death Row Information”.

7 As Giorgio Agamben has argued, the archive was “founded on the subject’s disappearance into the anonymous murmur of statements.” See “The Archive and Testimony”, in: *quel che resta di Auschwitz* (Turin: Bollati Boringhieri, 1989); Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen, *Remnants of Aushwitz* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), p. 143-146 ; Charles Merewether, ed., *The Archive. Documents of Contemporary Art*. London: Whitechapel and Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006, p. 39.

8 In his essay, “The Death of the Author”, (1968), Roland Barthes assesses the rise of impersonality in literary modernity, as the performance of writing takes precedence over the expression of personality: “linguistiquement, l’auteur n’est jamais rien de plus que celui qui écrit, tout comme je n’est autre au celui qui dit je : *le langage connaît un ‘sujet’, non une ‘personne’*. (63).

9 My translation.

10 “Newspapers, dictionaries, shopping mall directories, appellate briefs—all are represented outside their natural habitats, i.e. those webs of ethical and aesthetic conditions and assumptions, including the condition and assumption of communication itself, i.e., readability itself.” See “The Allegory and the Archive”, first published as chapbook by No Press. Ed. Derek Beau-lieu. Calgary, Canada, 2010.

<http://lemonhound.com/2013/02/25/vanessa-place-the-allegory-and-the-archive/> (viewed April 25, 2017)

11 My translation.

12 As Marjorie Perloff has aptly summarized when drawing ties between the direction of contemporary poetry and the theory of language espoused in Wittgenstein’s *Philosophical Investigations*, the performative modalities of poetry override the notion of an innately signifying logos: “Wittgenstein’s writings enact their central motive: words and phrases can be understood

only in their particular context, their use. Not *what* one says but *how* one says it is the key to doing philosophy. And that, of course, is what makes it poetry as well.” (727)

13 See my discussion of Vanessa Place’s performance poetry with respect to the concept of idiorrhymy at the 2015 conference of the French Association of American Studies: “Vanessa Place and the Echo of Verbatim” in “(Idior)rythmes des communautés poétiques contemporaines / (Idior)rhythms of Contemporary Poetic Communities”. Dir. Vincent Broqua et Gwen Le Cor (AFEA Congrès 47, “Mouvement, enracinement, fixité”, Université de la Rochelle, 27-30 mai 2015).

14 The database provides numerous ramifications that build upon information pertaining to each and every Death Row inmate. It begins by listing each of the 548 executed inmates by name and by number. A first link gives us all the details relevant to the inmate’s personal identity under the heading “Offender Information”. This includes his or her age at the time of execution and age at the time of the offense; the offender’s level of education, gender, race, native county, native state, eye colour and height. The database also records the prisoner’s prior criminal record and as it is termed, a “Summary of incident”, giving a brief account of the crime for which he or she has been convicted.

15 See Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in the Digital Age*. Columbia University Press, 2011. Examples include a work called *The Weather* (2005), where the poet provides a written transcription of a radio show; in another work called *Day*, (2003), an entire issue of the *New York Times* newspaper (September 1, 2000) is retyped, word for word, page by page, column by column, line by line —reducing multiple font sizes to the 9-point Bookman Old Style.

16 See François Tricaud, trans. (1983 : 291) : « Dans les temps anciens, avant que l’écriture ne fût d’un usage courant, les lois étaient souvent mises en vers, afin que le peuple inculte, prenant plaisir à les chanter ou à les réciter, les garde plus aisément en mémoire. »

17 Discussing Stein’s theory of a “continuous present” and the repetition of language it entails, Crangle argues: “This temporal focus fuels the risibility of Stein’s childlike prose still further as she asks that we consider language afresh with every reading — for Stein, each so-called repetition should be interpreted as a new and independent present. (117).

18 See Claude Grimal, trans. (1978 : 177) : « Quand j'ai commencé à écrire, j'avais le sentiment que l'écriture devait avancer, j'ai toujours le sentiment qu'elle doit avancer mais quand j'ai commencé à écrire j'étais totalement prise par le besoin que l'écriture avance [...] ».

19 Those statements culled from the Texas State database and subsequently performed by the poet provide knowledge of reality in their own right, much in the manner of the judiciary archive as defined by Arlette Farge (1989: 15) : « Des morceaux de vérité à présent échoués s'étalent sous les yeux : aveuglants de netteté et de crédibilité. Il n'y a pas de doute, la découverte de l'archive est une manne offerte justifiant pleinement son nom : source. »

20 Voir « La rime et la vie » (1989 : 208) : « La poésie fait vie de tout. Elle est cette forme de vie qui fait langage de tout. Elle ne nous arrive que si le langage même est devenu une forme de vie. C'est pourquoi elle est si peu paisible. Car elle ne cesse de nous travailler. [...] Puisqu'elle est une écoute qui contraint à l'écoute. »

---

### English

Vanessa Place, poet and lawyer by profession builds a meeting ground between public record and verbatim performance poetry. In her project entitled “Last Words” – a collection of last statements recorded by inmates on Death Row executed in Texas since 1982 – poetry rests upon strategies of appropriation that raise questions about the governance of language in a political and a rhetorical context. For Place, verbatim poetry is equally a habitat for silence, buried in the digital archive and retrieved by a default enunciator, who is emptied of its subject. Poetry with Place brings us to consider the conceits according to which language structures experience through its relationship with technology and puts into play the social and political schemes ordered in this instance by writ of law. This discussion shall concern itself with performances established upon methods of retrieval and iteration. How does verbatim poetry enact a relationship between enunciation and the creation of a community of listeners? When poetry undertakes an echoing of silence, previously digitized in the archive, what locus of meaning emerges for the audience?

### Français

Poète et avocat de profession, Vanessa Place fait coïncider documents publics et la performance verbatim en poésie. Dans son projet intitulé « Last Words » – un ensemble composé des dernières déclarations enregistrées par des détenus exécutés au Texas depuis 1982 – la poésie s'appuie sur des stratégies d'appropriation pour interroger les structures politiques et rhé-

toriques du langage. Chez Place, la poétique du verbatim se construit également comme le lieu d'émergence des silences enfouis dans l'archive numérique et recueillis par le poète, énonciateur par défaut, vidé de sa subjectivité. La poésie de Place donne à voir la manière dont l'écriture poétique dans sa relation avec la technologie parvient à organiser l'expérience et à examiner par là même les structures sociales et politiques dictées par la loi criminelle. Sera étudiée la performance en poésie fondée sur des pratiques d'appropriation et d'itération. Quels liens la poésie verbatim produit-elle entre des pratiques énonciatives du sujet et la formation d'une écoute collective ? Quel sens puise l'audience contrainte à entendre l'écho du silence, trace désormais inscrite dans l'archive numérique ?

---

### **Keywords**

Vanessa Place, contemporary poetry, conceptual writing, performance, verbatim, archive

---

### **Fiona McMahon**

MCF, EA 4182 « Texte, Image, Langage », Université de Bourgogne Franche-Comté, 4 Bd Gabriel, 21000 Dijon, France, Fiona.McMahon [at] u-bourgogne.fr