

About

THIS PAGE IS A LITTLE OUT-OF-DATE: A MORE PRECISE DESCRIPTION OF THE ANTI-SONNETS PROJECT IS FORTHCOMING

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(This page is constantly evolving: for a more concise definition of “mega-subjectivity”, see my essay, [First, Find Your Island: The Quest for a Mega-Subjective Space](https://angryoldmanmagazine.com/2296-2/) (<https://angryoldmanmagazine.com/2296-2/>).

Towards the mega-subjective

The **Anti-Sonnets** (<https://antisonnets.wordpress.com/>) project is part of a broader investigation into a post-conceptual practice which will be defined as *mega-subjectivity*. It comprises, in its initial phase, the production of 365 consecutive sonnets – that is, one per day through 2017. The intention is to use to the sonnet as a vehicle to explore and expand the notion of context-as-content.

The quest for the mega-subjective takes as its start-point one of the key proposals of the Art & Language collective, that all art is defined by “its capacity to provoke thought”. Whilst sharing the broad conceptualist belief that such capacity is increased by the banishment of authorial interference, I argue that such an effect is better achieved not by banishment *per se*, but by over-loading: that there comes a point when subjectivity is piled on so thickly, so full of contradictions and failures, that its attendant values and judgements are rendered meaningless. At this point – the mega-subjective – subjectivity ceases to exist: it becomes objective. The reader can discern no more authorial identity in the piece than in, say, Kenneth Goldsmith’s [Day](https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/day-excerpt) (<https://www.poets.org/poetsorg/poem/day-excerpt>) – a re-typed edition of the New York Times. The principle remains the same: to ‘remove’ so that the viewer/reader may mentally impose.

A self-styled champion of ‘Uncreative Writing’ (http://veramaurinapress.com//pdfs/Kenneth-Goldsmith_uncreative-writing.pdf), Goldsmith nevertheless conceded the flaws in his works of wholesale appropriation, which required “as many decisions.. as there are in an original or collaged work”. His [Soliloquy](https://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy_book.pdf) (https://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy_book.pdf) and [Fidget](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/perloff_goldsmith.html) (http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/perloff_goldsmith.html) – respectively, a record of every word spoken by the author in a week, and every bodily function undertaken in 24 hours – could, in their absolute and total exploitation of the self, be termed mega-subjective.

Mega-subjectivity can be seen as (somewhat sub-conscious) response to capitalist domination. That is to say, in a global society in which capitalistic forces control every aspect of life (including anti-capitalistic protest), where is the subjective space in which creativity may flourish freely? The answer lies surely in the imagination. In his [Towards a Conceptual Militancy](http://www.zero-books.net/books/towards-conceptual-militancy) (<http://www.zero-books.net/books/towards-conceptual-militancy>), Mike Watson asks: “[H]ow might we restore the individual to itself when the human being has been hollowed out and objectified, left as a mere husk and

assigned mundane tasks adequate only to keep the capitalist machine moving? ... [W]e first need to reclaim our subjectivity through an act of creative imagination – in short, via art.”

It follows, then, that while mega-subjective works will often willingly adhere to a set of principles and/or restraints as a conduit for the true course of subjective whim to shine through, the last thing mega-subjectivity wishes to do is sanction that last bastion of freedom: inner expression. Thus, one of its key components will be the rejection, to various degrees, of any form of editing process.

Anti-Sonnets

The Anti-Sonnets (<https://antisonnets.wordpress.com/>) project seeks, through various contextual experiments, to maximise that space which remains free of capitalistic influence – the mega-subjective space – through experiments including juxtaposition, recontextualisation, and failure, and the proposal that the pursuit and/or process of art is more important than the finished artwork itself. Many of these experiments have their antecedents in avant-gardes such as Dada and Fluxus; in destructivism and Situationist *detournement*; in radical anti- and non-art movements like the early 1960s Japanese collective, Hi! Red Center (http://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/02/26/arts/hi-red-centers-quiet-actions-still-reverberate-today/#.WRF_a1KZnjQ). Ultimately, it proposes a new psychogeography which rejects the uniform banality of urbanisation and its attendant, inescapable political hierarchies, and champions, instead, the unashamed pursuit of the elusive Arcadian idyll.

Referring to the destruction of the ancient temples of Palmyra by ISIS bombers, Bob Nickas wrote in his essay ‘Museum of the Void’ for The Anti-Museum (http://www.fri-art.ch/sites/default/files/2017-01/Anti_Press-FINAL_0.pdf): “This attempted erasure of the past turns out to be entirely futile, as if reducing a row of Assyrian columns to dust obliterates their larger, indelible existence – every written account, every image ever recorded in print or on film... all would have to be deleted as well as deleted from memory – a complete impossibility.” In other words, the subjective mind (seen as a metaphoric extension of the rural and parochial) is, particularly in these shocking political times, the natural next space to be (re-)colonised.

“A portrait of the mind in action”

Quite apart from its ubiquitous assumptions of romanticism, the sonnet has always been as much about exposing the (often tortuous) process of its own creation as it has been about the finished sonnet itself. Phillis Levin wrote in her Penguin Book of the Sonnet (<https://www.abebooks.co.uk/9780713995299/Penguin-Book-Sonnet-500-Years-0713995297/plp>): “The sonnet inscribes in its form an instruction manual for its own creation and interpretation. It is a portrait of the mind in action.”

In spite of its inherent traditionalism, the sonnet has always flirted with the avant-garde. In its flagrant challenge to the form’s attendant notions of beauty and purity, Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130 (<http://www.shakespeare-online.com/sonnets/130.html>) was regarded as one of the earliest forms of anti-poetry. It would itself be re-framed by the language poet Harryette Mullen, who addressed the sonnet using Oulipian methods in her Sleeping With The Dictionary (<http://poetrykanto.com/issues/2005-issue/harryette-mullen/variation-on-a-theme-park-harryette-mullen>). Further, Mary Ellen Solt’s Moon Shot Sonnet (<http://coldfrontmag.com/concrete-poetry-in-america/>) is “intended as a spoof of an outmoded form of poetry”.

In each of these three examples, it is the act of re-contextualisation itself that counts. The end product, as a material entity, is broadly inconsequential: the value – the provocative capacity – is to be found in both the concept, and the exposure of the personal struggle (and perhaps failure) to realise it. The Turner Prize-winning artist Martin Creed (<http://www.martincreed.com/>) said at a lecture at Leeds Beckett University in 2017: “I sometimes think finished works don’t show the struggle, and I don’t

like that.”

The quest for a kind of subjective maximalism, through the exposure of process and/or examples of more straightforward maximalist or minimalist practice, is nothing new. Works such as My Secret Life (<https://www.gutenberg.org/files/30360/30360-h/30360-h.htm>), a 2500-page epic of Victorian pornography first published in 1888, or Joe Gould’s An Oral History of Our Time (<http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2015/07/27/joe-goulds-teeth>) – a multi-million word transcript of everyday conversations, which was never published and may or may not have been an enormous hoax – eschew literary convention in dispensing with subjective disciplines such as judgement and, in the case of Gould, perhaps even materiality itself. Likewise, in his pseudonymous Trouble at Willow Gables (<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2002/apr/21/fiction.features1>), Philip Larkin proposed a schoolgirl story that “follows her progress through school, from the day when she enters the school to the day she leaves”. The prospective result so implausibly vast, so devoid of any semblance of quality control, that it achieves mega-subjectivity through concept alone: the theory (and virtual impossibility) of its accomplishment is enough.

This dichotomic collapse between concept and materiality, between minimalism and maximalism – which is crucial in terms of creating the space in which mega-subjectivity may thrive – is also evident in the contrast between the respective artistic practices of Creed and Gavin Turk (<http://gavinturk.com/>).

Creed’s Work No. 128 (<https://books.google.co.uk/books?id=GBje2wzplioC&pg=PA104&lpg=PA104&dq=%22martin+creed%22+sculpture+%22in+a+collection%22&source=bl&ots=iv1a8nhqNF&sig=zNghiHrqhUNjrcByO-g4du0W8T4&hl=en&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwjYqtiauOLTAhWOI1AKHYucB2QQ6AEILzAC#v=onepage&q=%22martin%20creed%22%20sculpture%20%22in%20a%20collection%22&f=false>) consists of all the sculpture in the collection of the exhibiting gallery, crammed into a single room at City Art Gallery in Southampton. Creed said: “It was an attempt to make something without choosing, without deciding.. (so) it’s all kind of treated equally.”

In (apparent) contrast, Turk’s Cave (<http://gavinturk.com/artworks/image/10/>) consists of white-washed room empty but for a blue ceramic plaque which reads: “Gavin Turk, Sculptor, worked here 1989-1991”. It was Turk’s (failed) submission for his postgraduate degree at the Royal College of Art. In effect, where Turk removes to impose, Creed imposes to remove. Interestingly, much of Turk’s other work exaggerates its own authorship to the point of meaningless: walls scrawled with his signature; objects not only merely re-contextualised in the Duchampian sense of declaring it *art*, but clearly embossed with Turk’s own audacious and spurious claims to ownership. Turk said: “It seems that audiences will see other artists in my work anyway, so I just cook the books in plain sight.” The lack of subjective judgement displayed in each of the respective examples of Creed and Turk serves to maximalise their provocative capacity: mega-subjectivity has been achieved.

The notion of removing all visible evidence of quality-control inevitably ensures that much of what may pass for mega-subjectivity must reside in the banal, the everyday and the anti-poetic. The Chilean anti-poet Nicanor Parra sought to collapse notions of genre and hierarchy in his Artefactos (<http://www.yorokobu.es/artefactos-los-cachivaches-poeticos-de-nicanor-parra/>) – a series of visual poems which placed everything – from crude pornography to venerated cultural effects – on the same level. His works produced a “language that is not emotively congruous with the subject matter” – by extension, expanding the intangible space between content and context in which mega-subjectivity may thrive. Similarly, the French avant-garde painter Francis Picabia experimented with “purposefully weak” images which were intended as “an effective way of critiquing power structures”. Another, sonnet-specific, example is to be found in Clarke Coolidge’s Bond Sonnets (<http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/BOND/bond.html>), which appropriated prose from Ian Fleming’s (already appropriated!) 1964 novel, Thunderball (<https://jackl0073.wordpress.com>

[/2015/01/02/thunderball-the-bond-story-that-killed-ian-fleming/](#)). Thus, many of my sonnets seek to collide the form's historically romantic contexts with, for example, fast food menus or the crude, nihilistic scrawl of Reddit chat-rooms.

Many who would call themselves conceptual writers have gone to great lengths to eschew the personal in order to achieve a kind of objective purity. Of course, Goldsmith in particular has gone to great lengths to illustrate that any such intention is doomed to failure. Even a work such as 'Day' is riddled with subjectivities: which font to use; which order in which to re-type the text; which day's newspaper to re-type in the first place. Other conceptualists have sought to exhibit different forms of authorial influence in order to avoid such impossibilities. Adopting what he called a process of "collective subjectivity", Rob Fitterman merged thousands of voices culled from Google searches into single narratives in works such as [This Window Makes Me Feel](http://www.robertfitterman.com/works/this_window_full_version.pdf) (http://www.robertfitterman.com/works/this_window_full_version.pdf) and [No, wait. Yep. Definitely Still Hate Myself](http://www.robertfitterman.com/newworks/NO_WAIT.pdf) (http://www.robertfitterman.com/newworks/NO_WAIT.pdf). Fitterman wrote: "I am interested in the inclusion of subjectivity and personal experience; I just prefer if it isn't my own."

Others have achieved a similar effect: Ara Shirinyan's [Your Country is Great](https://jacket2.org/commentary/laughing-ara-shirinyans-your-country-great) (<https://jacket2.org/commentary/laughing-ara-shirinyans-your-country-great>) collates the Google searches for "[country] is great", ordering the often nonsensical results to mimic the self-centredness of the Tripadvisor generation (for example: "argentina is shit. / argentina is great. / get over yourselves and accept the truth; / argentina is both of those things." In Vladimir Zykov's [I Was Told To Write Fifty Words](http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf) (<http://www.ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf>), the author advertised on an online platform for submissions of 50 words, for each of which he would pay one cent. The subjective randomness of the anonymous responses achieves an objective whole, in that no authorial identity can possibly be attached. Yet these works of collective subjectivity still inevitably suffer from the problem identified by Goldsmith – that of the subjective choices made on behalf of the curator: what to search for? Which results to discard?

Those subjective judgements, while still apparent, are less pronounced in works by artists like Monica de la Torre and Trisha Low, who, like Turk, embrace their own subjectivity in plain sight, through works which include and revolve around their own (at least notional) identities. In [Doubles](http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/doubles) (<http://www.wordswithoutborders.org/article/doubles>), de la Torre presents a fictional series of e-mail responses from people of the same name, ostensibly revolving around the search for a long-lost daughter: the fictional work became reality when the inspiration for her original piece saw and responded to her fiction online, in the vain hope that she might be able to help. For [Confessions](http://sotospeakjournal.org/interview-with-trisha-low/) (<http://sotospeakjournal.org/interview-with-trisha-low/>), Low secretly recorded and transcribed five more-or-less identical confessions made by her to different priests, presenting the resulting transcripts without editing. In fusing truth and reality, both de la Torre and Low succeed in merging subjectivity and objectivity to the point where they become inter-changeable: effectively, the mega-subjective point.

The world from memory

Perhaps the best example of a practice that matches the intentions of mega-subjectivity is that of the British artist Emma Kay. In a series of giant works which were subsequently re-appropriated into book form, Kay attempts to relate the respective histories of the world ([Worldview](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kay-worldview-p78340) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kay-worldview-p78340>)), the bible ([The Bible From Memory](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kay-the-bible-from-memory-p78331) (<http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/kay-the-bible-from-memory-p78331>)), and Shakespeare ([Shakespeare From Memory](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Kay) (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Emma_Kay)), entirely from memory. Taking 'Worldview' as an example, Kay skates across millions of years – her inconsistencies, mistakes and omissions; her index in which monumental events of history sit next to the fleeting consequences of teenage fads – all lending a more subjective richness that no traditionally authored equivalent – irrespective of scope – could hope to match. In other words, it is the text's inevitable, attendant

failures which expand that crucial capacity to provoke thought. The text may allow us to make a limited number of subjective deductions relating to the author's education or knowledge, but the whole, despite being a work of pure, authentic individuality, tells us less about the individual and more about the condition and fallacies of the (objective) human mind.

In his Metamodernist Manifesto (<http://www.metamodernism.org/>) the American writer Seth Abramson proposes a movement which, mirroring Kay's pursuit of the non-judgemental everything, "seeks to collapse distances, especially the distance between things that seem to be opposites, to create a sense of wholeness that allows us to... transcend our environment." Abramson proposes a writing which is "ironic and sincere, cynical and naive, accurate and false"; one which "layer(s) different emotions on top of one another, giving each their full due... enacting what it is like to be alive in the internet age." Abramson adds here (http://www.huffingtonpost.com/seth-abramson/metamodern-literature-and_b_7067708.html): "the dissolution of these boundaries will not create an indiscriminate, nihilistic singularity of indeterminacy.. but a metamodern intertextuality and fusion of opposites that is in all respects generative of progressive thought and action". In a certain respect, mega-subjectivity colonises those 'indeterminate spaces'. Furthermore, paradoxically, given the mega-subjective goal of total subjective freedom, these contradictions may be best achieved via various Oulipo-style restraints: the square, for example, acting as an contemporary (and imagistic) alternative to the historical fourteen-line textual form (and thus retaining a referent which contributes to any subsequent re-contextualisation).

Ultimately, the Anti-Sonnets (<https://antisonnets.wordpress.com/>) will be set free, in a variety of different ways which are yet to be specifically determined, to accumulate additional contexts. This concept of freedom is no coincidence, far from it: it can be seen as an extension a practice free of conventional restrictions; a kind of reverse-Futurism, best achieved by the exploitation of one's own identity in a way which optimises the capacity of others to provoke thought: that is, in a mega-subjective way.

North Sentinel Island/Fryup

Returning to the proposal that the subjective mind may be (re-)colonised as the meta-physical extension of the rural and parochial. Obviously, this contradicts the avant-garde obsession with urbanity; with its desire to re-appropriate, or *detourn*, from within. Guy Debora admits: "It is known that initially the Situationists wanted at the very least to build cities" (Debord/Sussman, Passage). For the most part, mega-subjectivity assumes the city to have been exhausted of its *detourning* potential: the *detourning* itself is now being *detoured*, via the mainstream appropriation of emblems and ideologies such as punk etc. Far better, surely, to unashamedly champion the idea of escape, to embrace a kind of Clare-ian vision of perfect wilderness, in which we are (literally) free to exploit our own subjectivities in an almost communistic way: to lay them bare for re-adoption and re-appropriation by others.

One of the few remaining places left on earth where this is possible is North Sentinel Island (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/North_Sentinel_Island), in the Bay of Bengal, whose indigenous inhabitants, the Sentinelese, reject any contact with modern civilisation. Yet Google Maps makes it accessible: both physically/voyeuristically (via photo zoom), and by the flaws in its own programme, which fail to recognise socio-political aspects of the (proposed) journey. Even more than North Sentinel Island itself, the real wildernesses lurk in these spaces and contradictions between what is possible/impossible and seen/unseen.

In a certain respect, North Sentinel Island presents the final physical manifestation of the concept of *escape-to-nothing* (as opposed to the Letterists' *reduce-to-nothing*): an untamed and untainted utopia. The Letterists' successors, the Situationists, declared their aim to build physical cities (Debord/Sussman, Wild Architecture); Jules Romain's novel Donogoo Tonka

(<http://writingcities.com/2015/12/15/donogoo-tonka/>) describes a scientist who actually does so.

Why, though, stop at physical manifestations? Even a painstakingly-designed, newly-built, Situationist-inspired city could hardly purport to be a city for all: how can physicality satisfy the individual proclivities of all? The answer is no city at all (which rather limits its mega-subjective possibilities) or the exploitation of that last true wilderness: the personal utopia that exists, to varying extents unexplored, in each of our subjective minds. In many respects, this is the essence of mega-subjectivity: to produce works which inspire such individual exploration.

If this meta-place – this personal utopia in which truth and fiction becomes an indistinguishable blur, where contradictions and hypocrisies and paradoxes and inconsistencies and perhaps above all failures reign supreme – is to have a name, then it is a necessarily personal one. William Faulkner set his southern novels in Yoknapatawpha County – which he called his “apocryphal county” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Yoknapatawpha_County), and which was clearly inspired by the nearby Lafayette County, MS. Mine is ‘Fryup’. Fryup is ‘real’ to the extent that it is findable on a map, its location etc invoke nostalgia and a certain amount of broader, local knowledge; but that ‘realness’ merely serves as a cipher through which fantasies ebb and flow: impossibly attractive (real and imagined) girls; occasional World Cup wins; exotic wildlife; romantic transients: a veritable *Deletionpedia* of impossible-to-erase off-cuts; a place of inexhaustible inspirations. The question is, how best to manifest such inspirations impersonally on the page.

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