The A-poetic Poetry of Bernar Venet[1]

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Since 1966, the French artist Bernar Venet has incorporated language and scientific discourse into his artistic project. His poems—a selection of which is reproduced in this issue of *Public*—were produced over three decades from 1967 to the present and are related to his early Conceptual artworks, which involved presentations of scientific, mathematical, economic, and other useful data from various intellectual fields. The artworks were intended to be didactic expositions of this external knowledge in an art-receptive setting. The "A" in the title of Venet's collection of poems, *Apoétiques: 1967-1998*,[2] indicates a wish on his part to distance himself from the standards and general conventions of poetry, and derives ultimately from Marcel Duchamp's idea of the "a-artistic."[3] Duchamp proposed the notion of the "a-artistic" to indicate that in his artwork, art was present along with something that was outside, which was non-art.

A number of Conceptual artists have presented written material that is highly poetic, while yet denying that the work itself was poetry. Venet distinguishes himself from his colleagues by linking his poetry and artwork. In the 1990s he began to resituate some of his poetic works as wall-drawings and paintings, thereby illustrating the slippage that has historically occurred between avant-garde art and poetry in the twentieth century. In his most recent body of artwork, Venet employs the mathematical symbols and scientific language that were found in his work of the middle to late 1960s. The piece that started him on this track is called *Monostique*, which was originally conceived of as a poem. Several years ago, Venet decided to install a wall drawing to revitalize his minimalist apartment surroundings, so he cleared off a wall and printed on it the equation of *Monostique*, one of his earlier mathematical equations-as-poetry. The startling effect of the equation on the wall compelled Venet to reorient his art practice in this direction.

A systematised, pared-down selection of esoteric information will share space with the poetic, which typically benefits from a certain obscurity of meaning. Many of Venet's poems present information that is inaccessible to the understanding of most viewers. This is deliberate and is productive in terms of reception, as art will withdraw from complete comprehensibility and possesses an element that is inaccessible, that attracts to itself a fascination through its obstruction of finality. Because of Venet's exploitation of this situation, there is the possible criticism of mystification that could be brought to his work. Yet the non-comprehension component of art counters the equally important need for transparency, particularly when artworks are viewed as historical processes involving constant redefinition of their significance through a creative engagement of the perceivers who inhabit ever-changing circumstances.

Poème vocabulaire scientifique (2) / Index alphabétique, of 1967, is the earliest poem in Venet's published collection. In that year he was visiting his brother (a chemical engineer) in the south of France where, while looking through his books, Venet came across list of scientific words that struck him as being poetic in tone, due to its repetition and inherent rhythm. He was not considering writing poetry at that point but he nevertheless adopted the list as a poem, with some alterations.[4] *Poème vocabulaire scientifique (2) / Index alphabétique* exhibits some qualities that link it to poetry in a traditional sense. These include its rhythm, left justification, and non-use of the full page for arranging words. Regular texts commonly use up most of the available space of the page, while poems often employ much of that same page space negatively as an unprinted zone occupied by the readers' freedom.

Despite the differences in syllables of the full words, the verbalized repetition of "poly" allows for a sonic and visual rhythm to emerge into a hypnotic engagement. Sets of words repeat such as Polyalcools / Polyamides / Polyacryliques / Polyacrylonitrile / Polybutadienne, suggesting that the printed sequences could continue endlessly. The use of "poly" involves the reader into the theme of these prefix-related materials, of real substances, resulting in a redirection of poetic attention toward the factual and the materiality of scientific investigation. Many of the terms have to do with synthetic materials. "Poly" indicates "many" or "much," providing a multiplicity within a named consistency and a relational scientific identity. This work and others of Venet's could be said to be "polyfunctional." His other poems often stem from several sources in a "polygenetic" fashion. Finally, "polysemy" involves a diversity of possible meanings and relate to the "polysemic," "pansemic," and "monosemic" notions of Jacques Bertin's that Venet employed to theorize his use of "monosemic" (or fixed, unambiguous) signs in his early Conceptual artwork.

Ordre / désordre is a more recent poem that relates to, and is a verbal justification for, certain sculptural pieces that are organized through chance procedures. *Ordre / désordre* suggests that disorder is really the law of the universe. Venet says: "People think that there is order. I think that there is disorder... You can see order only in a little part of the big disorder. A line could be crooked, but if you look at a very short piece of this line, it looks as if it is straight." In this piece, the lines were taken from texts written by Edgar Morin. Venet takes notes from such writings and may directly appropriate them but will also alter and restructure them if necessary. Typically, the lines are fragments of sentences that he finds resonant and which have their own special feeling: "They are very rich. They have a very rich potential of meaning, and they fit into my way of thinking also. I recognize myself. I recognize my field, my way of thinking." Though *Ordre / désordre* is somewhat apocalyptic in its subject of creative indeterminacy and of entropic destiny, it is also presented in a consistent, orderly, progressive listing that counters the invocation of chaos and catastrophe.

Hommage à l'"*accident*" involves synonyms that were derived from many texts. It was written initially to give context for a sculptural piece entitled, *Accident*, and the poem always accompanies the piece. The sculpture appears differently in each installation. Metal bars are placed against the wall, then they are pushed and fall to the floor, leaving an unpredictable resulting structure. *Hommage à l'"accident"* continues the theme of *Ordre / désordre*. Again, it concentrates on a strictly regimented presentation of chaos, itself a contradiction of form and sense. The left justification of the text is fixed and, when arranged in vertical order, the right margin of the word column presents a wave-like verticality by virtue of the differences in the numbers of letters per word. This leaves a built-in perceptual tension in the visual appearance of the page, and it echoes the flux and fixity that is found in other aspects of this work. The poem is a prescription of carefully listed components of change, complexity, uncertainty, randomness, disintegration, and degradation, leading to disaster. Like the listing of chemicals with their relations governed by the prefix "poly," these words are each linked by associations with the others that are not forced but interconnect and expand the integrated circuit of meaning. Paying homage to these qualities of chance, both the beneficent and the destructive, requires accepting the capitalized instabilities that are in the end irreversible. "Désordre" is placed hierarchically at the beginning of the procession of uncertainty, while the last term of the list, "Irréversibilité," incorporates a finitude within its location. Venet says: "All of those words are consolidating my way of thinking."

The words making up *À propos de sobre* were chosen from a dictionary. Simple terms are used to replicate the rhetorical operations of traditional poetry. He says: "Usually when you write a poem, you have an idea and you insist on it and you come back on it and you come again, and you find the words to insist on this same idea, and here I thought: 'Let's go the extreme. Let's just make a list of synonyms.'" As opposed to the chaos that he celebrates in other works, here it is fixity and self-contained qualities that interest. Each element refers to the aggregation of qualities listed, with "Mesuré" being the last term to define the poem's own identity.

The phrases in *Se souvenir* were borrowed from a book on psychoanalysis. He found a beauty and perfection in the somewhat obscure terms like "compulsions défensives" and "identités de perceptions". Of the final line he says: "'De la résolution du souvenir défensif'—my God, it's so open, more pansemic than that, there is nothing." A continual displacement of memories aided by commas reproduce the constant shifting of memory, which never proceeds in a coherent fashion but through uncalled for interruptions of continuity by multiple openings onto paths arriving from elsewhere and leading there as well.

Venet stated repeatedly about his Conceptual artwork of 1967 to 1971, that he was opposed to the notion of it having aesthetic qualities. *Poème*, being about the idea of a poem in an abstract sense, is a highly reductive work that erases (then recreates) the qualities prized in most poetry. It is a poem without metaphors, illusions, or appearances—the poem as poem, like the "art as art" of some Conceptual

art. Venet thought that just as we use this kind of language to speak about art-works that are "very much about themselves," why not use that same critical language in a poem? *Poème* identifies its literary genre and is accompanied by an itemized vertical list that denies the possibility of its own qualities while presenting them simultaneously.

Tableau noir… is related to a rather Concrete poem that Venet wrote in 1963 and which involved a repetition of only the word "noir." Like *Tableau noir…*, the earlier poem was related to Venet's black artworks of the early 1960s that included: a black book, black films, noise music emerging out of the actions of a metal wheel on black tarred gravel, black mirror works, tar paintings, a 1963 coal pile of unspecified dimensions, and so on. One black mirror piece of 1963 (a wall-mounted sheet of plexiglass backed with black paint) was originally proposed to a gallery as a total black mirror environment. He used the mirror piece to photograph self-portraits and portraits of his friends as indistinct black reflections. Venet's first serious photograph was of his brother, and it was taken in a blackened room. The brother was present in front of the camera and was recorded on film, but the photograph was nevertheless completely black because there was no light to register difference. It was a figurative monochrome image. Even with the very basic information that Venet provides in *Tableau noir…*, the result is evocative as a consequence of the suppression of detail. Only "Film noir" is a term in general use, but if there is "Film noir," then why not "Poèsie noire"? Ending with the word "brillant" complicates the previous listing of arts and their qualifying blackness by providing an almost Emily Dickinson-like giddy send-off to the earlier lines that are otherwise basic descriptions of Venet's own early artwork.

Besides being a printed poem and a painting, *Sans titre*, was presented at the Pompidou Centre in Paris on May 15, 2002 as a performance piece, and it has also been recorded. The numbers, derived from astrophysics, are read aloud with the voice altered by a computer. About the reading, Venet says: "You just listen to that and there is nothing human in it. So already the numbers are not very poetic, but then there is no poetry in the voice and it's not even a human being. It is a computer speaking." *Sans titre* is closer to Venet's work with mathematics and economic information. The qualities of difference and constant change within systematisation and order give the work its interest. There are positive and negative groupings of numbers, echoing the "ups and downs" of Venet's earlier stock-market works, in which the significance of the subject matter lies in its fluctuation and change.

Sans titre was a poem first then a black on red painting done with a transfer process much later. A laser printing of the poem was scanned to a computer. The numbers were optically corrected to give them a more crisp quality, then the text was printed on plastic with cut-outs the size Venet wanted. He painted the background of a canvas, then transferred the numbers onto it. His most recent paintings involve saturations of mathematical equations overprinted on top of each other, leading to a confusing stimulus. Venet notes that with the original single equation

works, the viewers often become intimidated because they don't understand, but "today, because of the saturation thing, because there are so many, they understand that they don't have to understand. So they see that in a more aesthetic way."

VLF is written entirely in acronyms, some of which are immediately recognizable, while others oblige the reader to accept the lack of connection to the significance alluded to. Naturally, it is signed "BV." Venet employs textual material that is used continually in daily life as informational points of reference. But acronyms rarely find their way into formal poetry, especially when constituting the entire set of reference departure points. Some of the initial acronyms stand for: Societé nationale des chemins de fer, Train à grande vitesse, Air France, Parti communiste français, etc. All of the acronyms are in French. When read aloud, each letter is rendered in a staccato form. Every second line ends with a hard "a" sound, giving a pointed rhythm to the overall reading. It is one of the less serious poems, and as he says: "We have to relax once in awhile."

Interpret in English is one of Venet's personal favourites and dates from the end of the 1960s. He cannot read it at all himself and says that it can be difficult even for experts in mathematics. He has subsequently had it translated into an ordinary readable language. The original piece includes more text than is printed here. For Venet: "This is the ideal abstract poem." He introduces monosemy (non-allusive language with fixed signification) into the field of poetry, as he had done earlier in his paintings and Conceptual works. He suggests that the opening instruction, "Interpret in English the following sentences in L_1:" was written in the original text, perhaps as an instruction for students, and he decided to keep it for its own interest. The difficulties of translation, certainly one of the problems in adequately circulating international poetry, is something that translators continually attempt to overcome. Interpret in English is a work that demands of the reader the necessary but ultimately impossible task of translation. Translation from mathematical logic to English (which is not Venet's native language) is a first-order quality of the poem. Translation is integral to it and is therefore not something that is done to the work but, rather, constitutes a large part of the significance of the work. As with *Sans titre*, the poem's interest partly derives from the non-comprehension that emerges in the mind of even a determined reader.

Untitled (to Don Judd) is a tribute to the constancy and integrity of the American Minimalist sculptor Donald Judd. Although Judd had painted for some years in his youth, it was in 1962 that he began working on his early Minimalist sculpture. From that time until his death, Judd assigned his works the designation of "Untitled," accompanied by the date. His reason for not giving descriptive titles was to avoid corrupting the significance of the abstract forms of his work with literary references that would shape their reception in undesirable ways. Judd employed the designation, "Untitled," to avoid verbal evocativeness, but Venet emulates Judd's system precisely for that reason, writing a resonant poem that builds in a systematic way.

Venet's poem was written after Judd died. They had been friends, lived nearby and, both being collectors, had exchanged many works, their own and those of others. The layout of the poem—with its almost identical lines, each progressing by a year—echoes Judd's series of wall-mounted vertical stacks of identical metal and plexiglas boxes, the space they occupy alternating with an equal amount of empty space between them. In 1967, the artist Mel Bochner wrote about serial work of Judd's sort:

> Systems are characterized by regularity, thoroughness, and repetition in execution. They are methodical. It is their consistency, and the continuity of application that characterizes them. Individual parts of a system are not in themselves important but are relevant only in the way they are used in the enclosed logic of the whole.[5]

Judd generally limited his vertical stacks to nine boxes, but like Constantin Brancusi's *Endless Column*, this poem continues on in modular progression, halted only by the year of Judd's death.

Plus, minus (to Mondrian) is a verbal representation of the sign system developed by the Dutch painter Piet Mondrian in the so-called "Pier and Ocean" series of 1914 to 1917. It is not an accurate transcription of the vertical and horizontal signs of any particular Mondrian painting, but it immediately suggests the crowded fluctuations of isolated phenomena in the series. *Plus, minus (to Mondrian)* is related to *Son et résonance*, an earlier musical work of Venet's. *Son et résonance* was performed by soldiers lying on the ground with machine guns. Venet (who began his art career while doing military service) conducted the soldiers. When his hands were up they fired; when they were down they stopped. The music was originally to be titled *Son et silence*, but "silence" was changed to "résonance" when the alterations in sound between the two were not cleanly delineated in practice. The conflicting positives and negatives of the artillery fire in *Son et résonance* brought to Venet the unlikely idea that it was similar to the "plus and minus" works of Mondrian, thereby leading to his writing this poem.

Different from many of Mondrian's later paintings, the "Pier and Ocean" works are extremely fast and operate visually like the excessive oval shimmering of sunlight on a rippled body of water. Venet's transcription of that shimmering into pronounceable words slows down the effect of differentiation into a more plodding text that is read more than sensed. Still, there is an abstract quality set up by the repetition of only two words in a rectangular field that may achieve fleeting visual qualities of non-verbal signification. Reading the poem from left to right, top to bottom, finds the work framed by "Plus" at the beginning and "minus" as the final word. This framing and the difference between provides the oppositions and resolutions that one finds in Venet's other poetry, as well, of course, as in Mondrian's own Neo-plasticism through which he wanted to attain a state of equilibrium found in the flux and articulation of opposition in difference.

Une autre approche de l'infini, or "another approach to infinity," is a beautiful, highly poetic work that suggests the infinite or mathematical sublime arrived at through a clearly defined mathematical method. This contrasts to the more common notion of infinity found in art as something that may be best approached through a kind of mysticism or illogic that proceeds by means of obstacles to sensibility. For a non-mathematician, however, there is another failure of understanding that may lead to a similar state of apprehension. Unlike a mystical sublime sensed through contemplation, this one was found through a rather prosaic method. Venet came across the equation, an actual mathematical representation of infinity, in a mathematics book. He made a photocopy of the page, cut out the equation, stuck it on a piece of paper and laid it away in his poetry box. The realities of creation can be very distanced from the resulting presentation and its significance in reception.

The poetic writings of Bernar Venet introduce alternative fields of knowledge into the discipline of poetry. By this he demonstrates that (as has been obvious in the developments of twentieth and twenty-first-century visual art) an increasingly vital poetry can be written through the introduction of external material redefined as being poetic in nature.

Notes

1 I would like to thank Bernar Venet for his insightful commentary on these poems in an interview conducted on October 13, 2002.

2 See Bernar Venet, *Apoétiques* (Geneva: Musée d'art moderne et contemporain, 1999).

3 Venet met with Duchamp on one occasion and while Venet never wished to be understood as being one of Duchamp's spiritual descendants, there is an influence nevertheless.

4 *Poème vocabulaire scientifique (2) / Index alphabétique* was published in 1968-69 by Marian Goodman's New York-based Multiples Inc.

5 Mel Bochner, "Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism," *Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology* (New York: E.P. Dutton, 1968), 94-99.