WORD TOYS: POETRY AND TECHNICS

By Brian Kim Stefans, Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017

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Printed on a ream of unbound (and mostly blank) paper, Kenneth Goldsmith's 2015 *Theory*—a collage of anecdotes, quotations, and provocations largely recycled from his now decades-long career as an "uncreative" writer[1]—may best personify the coupling of formally experimental poetry and high theory after the turn of the current century. In short, *Theory* is vapid, self-indulgent, suspiciously marketable, and deeply unsatisfying. And while more nuanced argumentation has emerged, even flourished, in less spot lit corners of contemporary poetic criticism, much of it either falls back on the shopworn methods of conventional (i.e., late twentieth-century) literary scholarship or leans hard on supplanting aesthetic provocateurism with hands-on activism.

  In the midst of these polemics, Brian Kim Stefans's *Word Toys* is a shining star—or, to honour his prevailing theme of *text as technicity*, an asterisk. While maintaining the passion for the artistically alien that remains, in my view, avant-garde criticism's foremost reason for being, Stefans is explicitly sensitive to experimental literature's historical, cultural, and intellectual situations. The result is a study that is neither devotional nor reactionary, but genuinely interesting. Stefans seeks primarily to connect the post-hermeneutic philosophies of thinkers such as Alain Badiou, Gilbert Simondon, and Bernard Stiegler to the literary lineage ex-

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1 Kenneth Goldsmith, *Theory* (Paris, Jean Boîte Éditions, 2013).

tending through Poundian modernism and Charles Olson's "open field" to the poetries of both the early internet and Web 2.0; in the process, however, *Word Toys* illuminates a kaleidoscopic catalogue of technologies—including prehistoric clay currency, nineteenth-century nomograms (two-dimensional drawings used to assist with complex computational operations), and esoteric programming languages—as well as literary artworks—such as Christian Bök's 'pataphysical poetry, Xu Bing's "Square Word Calligraphy" (a system for rendering English words in the visual style of Chinese ideography), and the early internet writer Toadex Hobogramma-thon's "Dagmar Chili" anti-blog. This index might suggest that *Word Toys* is among the chaotic textual assemblages Stefans dubs "undigests"—almanacs or sourcebooks more suited to perusal than focused study or debate—and there is some truth in that de-piction, with Stefans himself describing several of his chapters as "overloaded with concepts."[2] But Stefans's humility is outpaced by his simultaneously thorough and visionary understanding of theory; if previous generations of avant-garde poets were always only inspired by philosophical ideas, Stefans is among the first to master them. While the arguments elaborated in *Word Toys* are not airtight, they are immensely compelling, helping to lay the ground-work for a newly historicized understanding of poetic composition in the age of the internet.

Stefans is unequivocal in placing continental philosophy at the forefront of his approach to poetry, as his explanations of phil-osophical concepts consistently overshadow both historical con-textualization and textual analysis or "close reading." Yet Stefans also evades the conventional method of theory-driven criticism, which sets philosophy in the role of a frame, lens, or system hence-forth used to digest the texts under consideration. In contrast, Ste-fans's discussions of philosophical concepts, representative literary works, and historical case studies (each of which is more or less complete in itself) are planted side by side, jostling against each other like billiard balls or tectonic plates. The style can be grating

2   Brian Kim Stefans, *Word Toys: Poetry and Technics* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 9.

at times (especially in the book's later chapters, where transitions, summaries, and syntheses become increasingly sparse), but generally fits well with Stefans's argument, which maintains that poems are *evental* in the sense described by Badiou. Rather than existing through their relationships with subjects or meanings already rendered possible within the world, they are singular objects with their own truths, essences, and forms of becoming. At some points, this means that poems are uniquely linked to Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's "plane of immanence," in which the undifferentiated energy of being gives rise to an endless virtuality of novel forms. However, Stefans more frequently posits poetry in the mode of Simondon's *technicity*, a category populated by inorganic yet evolving individuals deeply engaged in the pursuit of life "by means other than life."[3] The book's titular "toys" are less often playthings than sites of technical activity in the vein of William Carlos Williams's "machine[s] made of words."[4] Or, following a somewhat different tack that links poetry to the mathematical truth value of graphs and diagrams, they are "transitional objects" in the sense proposed by D. W. Winnicott (via Stiegler): that is, foundational tools for navigating the threshold between the interior of the subject and the unknowable externality Quentin Meillassoux calls "the great outdoors."

Among the many concepts Stefans addresses throughout *Word Toys* (and there really are a lot of them), his application of technicity to poetic composition is especially fruitful for two reasons. First, the recognition that technical objects, like living organisms, have a *function* establishes a continuum between radically open or "indeterminate" experimental poetries and those that are more linear, closed, or "undecidable" (in that they involve "not the *blurring* of meanings but the flipping back and forth or between several discrete meanings […] one of which must be chosen to make a poem work").[5] Second, Stefans's insistence on approaching poems non-hermeneutically, as the sites of concrete "reality effects" akin

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3   Stefans, *Word Toys*, 69.
4   Ibid., 67.
5   Ibid., 27.

to practical applications of technology,[6] connects poem-objects to the machines and algorithms whose operations more obviously determine the shape of the modern world. In both of these respects, Stefans offers a compelling alternative to the views of Language poets and poet-scholars such as Charles Bernstein, whose ideas he also deftly critiques. For Bernstein and his colleagues, formal experimentation is justified by a Manichean opposition between linguistic indeterminacy and semantic closure, where the latter characterizes both conventional poetics and the capitalist paradigm of the commodity. Yet the observation (not unique to Stefans) that Language poetry "seems to imitate, rather than combat or resist, the logics of late capitalism"[7] indicates the ultimate impotence of the Language poets' radical-normative binary. In contrast, Stefans's technicity suggests that avant-garde forms evolve from conventional forms according to their own essences and intentionalities, potentially unmooring them from binary opposition and capitalistic exchange. Although Stefans's theory could be described as conservative—because it consciously rewinds philosophy to a time before the "linguistic turn," and because it posits a gradient or grey area between avant-garde and hegemonic aesthetics—it is a vital response to Goldsmith's and other post-Language avant-garde writers' spectacular failure to balance experimental poetics and radical politics.

In the realm of literary criticism more broadly, Stefans's commitment to a form of reading that eschews hermeneutics (i.e., the analysis of transmitted meanings) is probably his most remarkable accomplishment. Taking his inspiration from Graham Harman's and Meillassoux's adherence to a "naive mimesis" in their readings of H. P. Lovecraft and Stéphane Mallarmé,[8] Stefans is able to consistently bracket the question of interpretability as he instead emphasizes the concrete acts—including speculation, computation, and un-grounding—that both poems and readers perform in their navigations of language and the universe. For ex-

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6   Ibid., 23.
7   Ibid., 116.
8   Ibid., 3.

ample, his discussion of information theorist Claude Shannon's "27th letter"—in layman's terms, a blank space, such as the space between two words—elucidates the poetic value of non-meaning without making ambiguity an end in itself: rather than signifying pure ineffability, the blank space "*works*" by engaging the (human or mechanical) reader in "a statistical analysis of the future events of the poem," an action whose dynamism constitutes the positive content of the poem itself.[9] On the other hand, the strength of Stefans's proposals is sometimes undermined by the extreme breadth of his subject matter, especially when he attempts the older-school literary critical endeavours of classification and canon-formation. In both his three-part breakdown of "speculative prosody" and his taxonomy of "outsider writing," Stefans fails to convincingly reconcile traditional schemes (such as Roman Jakobson's self-referentiality or John Ashberry's "other tradition") with the digital literatures his study celebrates. Between the various essays collected in *Word Toys*, it remains unclear whether Stefans intends to characterize all poetry as a species of technicity or simply to highlight those poetries that are among the most technically inclined.

This muddying, in turn, sets up one of the most intractable problems facing *Word Toys* and its line of argument. Stefans's fifth chapter—titled "Terrible Engines" and acting as a sort of critical centre of the book—begins by adding a third to Brian McHale's description of the modernist and postmodernist literary "dominants." While modernism's "epistemological dominant" interrogated the human subject's relationship with reality, and postmodernism's "ontological dominant" challenged the reality of the subject itself, Stefans proposes a speculative literature that bypasses their shared morass by "subjecting readers directly to the work and putting objects for study in their hands, both literally and figuratively."[10] The problem lies in the fact that these three paradigms cannot subsist in a genuine continuity, despite Stefans's earnest desire to see them do so. Instead, Stefans's "literature of sets," actualized mostly in the form of conceptualist games whose

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9   Ibid., 42.
10   Ibid., 158-59.

rules are the concretes facts of language, recast modernist and post-modernist questioning as an objectless diversion. After all, the psychological and ludological theories on which Stefans relies (at least in parts of *Word Toys*) take for granted the actual existence of subject-players. If not a hard break, then, the relationship between McHale's and Stefans's literatures is marked by the overarching dominance of the latter, since modernism and post-modernism would have merely "acclimatized a human readership to ontological uncertainty" without having truly doubted the presence of that readership or the status of its humanity.[11] This impasse between speculative realism and what has been aptly called the "hermeneutics of suspicion" may very well be endemic to Stefans's sources in Badiou and Meillassoux. However, Stefans's attempt to overcome it in the field of literature—which, being fundamentally rooted in human language and culture, is inevitably populated by writers and readers for whom the function of *meaning* is hardly trivial—draws out some of its most compelling contradictions.

Overall, though, my challenge does not constitute a criticism of *Word Toys* so much as a way of positioning it within the diverse sets of texts, techniques, and technologies it assembles. To invoke an old distinction, Stefans is a writer who thinks through theories rather than facts, but his adventurousness usually serves him well. *Word Toys* engages many more concepts than I can adequately address, including many of Stefans's own creation and several that are provocative beyond the disciplinary confines of avant-garde literary criticism. In "Miscegenated Scripts," for example, Stefans braids Western (mis)conceptions of Asian cultural forms with pan-Asian experimental text art to posit a "transpacific" "algorithmic culture" that both draws from and cuts through ethnic identity.[12] This subject alone, with its encyclopaedic scope and bold implications, seems generative enough to spawn another 350 pages. But even if *Word Toys* evades any obvious unity of form, its sections gel into a unity of effect that is both subtle and impactful. In a milieu where both of Stefans's key fields—avant-garde po-

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11   Ibid., 189.
12   Ibid., 193.

etry and continental philosophy—have seen their relevance dimin-
ish in accordance with their becoming increasingly tone-deaf and
arcane, Stefans resuscitates their nuance and magic in the service
of a practical wisdom with broad value to scholars both within and
on the margins of his disciplines' traditional stomping grounds.