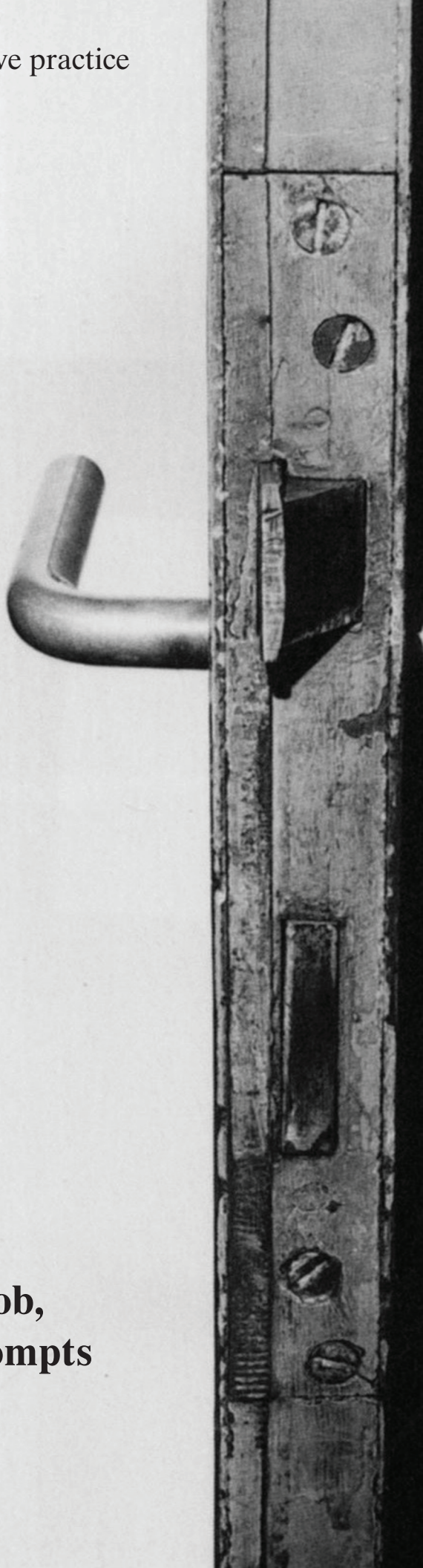


Wittgenstein's Doorknob, or The Promptness of Prompts

by Ira Livingston

What follows is a series of modular sections about the use of prompts in creative and cognitive process and projects. Sections are less like a series of steps and more like facets of a three-dimensional object we are turning around in our hands, in our minds. Readers are invited to dip in and out of the text as they see fit. Various key principles and examples will be found throughout.

The title refers to a famous doorknob designed by the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein. Was Wittgenstein *merely a genius*, or is there some wellspring deeper than philosophy and design from which he had learned to draw in his practice of both; some way he found to use one for doing the other?

Wittgenstein's doorknob, like his philosophy, is engaged in the performance of *opening*; more particularly, *circuitous opening*. This is also what prompts do. We can learn, like Ludwig, to practice Open Process, whereby the outcome may be philosophy or it may be a doorknob, but having produced one of these, you might still use it as a means to get to the other. The art of making it up as you go is not just a slacker's creed, it's a practice that needs to be cultivated.

Every wobble in your forward progress is the bud of an alternate future.

Wittgenstein's Doorknob, or The Promptness of Prompts

> You can only succeed in extricating people who live in an instinctive rebellion against language. Wittgenstein, 272

1. Introduction

A prompt is a set of parameters for a creative project. The word mainly comes from creative writing, but we're using it in a general sense. A *score*-- the term used mainly in music and performance-- is often understood as a more fleshed-out version of a prompt.

You could stress the difference: the script of a play might be called a score, but you wouldn't call it a prompt. In Roland Barthes's terms for literature, a prompt is *writerly* (requiring the reader to be more of a co-writer) and a score *readerly*, or in Marshall McLuhan's terms for media, a prompt is *cooler* (requiring more active user participation to fill in the blanks) while a score is *hotter* (it does more of the work for you). A prompt is more like a wild seed, designed to produce surprising mutations and variations, while a score is more focused on replicating and reproducing. Even so, in art as in biology, reproduction and mutation are sides of the same coin.

Here, in any case, we're not going to be stressing the difference between prompts and scores. In fact, we're going to be stressing as little as possible.

The question behind this project is simple: is there a transdisciplinary practice and theory of prompts? The way this question can be translated into prompts-- our main business here-- is even simpler: come up with prompts that might work for a transdisciplinary range of people, try them out, talk about how they work and try to figure out what works and what doesn't work, revise them, try them again. This is what we do in Poetics Lab: we explore poetics in the most expansive (and original) sense of the word as *the process of making things*, with particular emphasis on *play* as creative practice. The faculty and students involved have been mainly artists, designers, architects, performers, writers, and scholars; occasionally we even allow actual poets. But to be clear: our love and attachments to our particular media and disciplines are not something we want to "transcend." We want to tap the *subdisciplinary* aspects of play, to "go back to the well" and to bring whatever openness and energy and know-how we can get from working/playing together back into the media and disciplines we love-- as well as expanding our repertoires. As in any long love relationship, it's usually a good idea to re-cultivate "beginner's mind," to keep moving on from vanilla. Pleasure doesn't stay still and so can't be found always in exactly the same spot.

> Oh was *that* what you meant by *trans*, *sub*, and *disciplinarity*? Why didn't you say so?

The old saw that "writing about music is like dancing about architecture"-- in other words, that it's a fool's errand-- is often attributed to 1970s comedian Martin Mull, but versions of it go back at least to 1918: "writing about music is as illogical as singing about economics" ("The Unseen World" by H. K. M., New Republic 2/9/1918, p. 63, Vol. 14, The Republic Pub. Co.). To us, on the other hand, these seem like the start of what might be good prompts or even mottos.

In any case, though-- and again as in biology and evolution-- the sweet spot we seek to find, occupy and sustain here-- the leading edge-- is in the interplay between constraint and freedom that is definitive for prompts and scores. Preferring to err on the side of freedom, we're going to use *prompt* as the inclusive term. Not only the script of a play but all of language, and (since anatomy is not destiny) even our DNA-- and all the past and the present moment besides-- are prompts for unscripted futures that remain for us, collaboratively and improvisationally, to make.

At a moment where history seems to be leading us relentlessly into some fascist authoritarian dystopia-- or maybe worse, to the policelessly policed fascism of a neoliberal capitalist utopia-- we need to ask how improvisation and collaborative worldmaking in the delineated space of a prompt-- in a classroom or on a stage or a piece of paper-- might function merely to enable us better to bear the scriptedness, suffocation and powerlessness of life outside those delineations-- and how in so doing it may help us summon energies and knowledges to work on behalf of other possible futures.

Aside: Autotelization

People who complain about language being linear and reductive and restrictive just aren't language people. Of course language is all those things: those are the constraints; that's the prompt! This hasn't always been obvious to me (I started off as a visual artist), and it is still counter-intuitive for me in media I don't find congenial.

I worked with a digital artist, Victor Vina, who designed and coded the interactive parts of my digital book, *Poetics as a Theory of Everything*. To me, the limitations of the digital platform made it seem like there was a gratuitous, constantly renewed and immensely frustrating obstacle course placed between us and what we wanted to make. For Victor it was, as ever, a series of challenges and opportunities for discoveries, break-throughs and clever work-arounds. The constraints of the digital platform were for him like the grain of wood to a woodcarver or the stickiness of clay to a potter. The resistance of the material is *what one works with*.

Of course language is a resistant, grainy, sticky medium for thought. If you focus on the end (say, the articulation of a feeling or an idea), language can seem like an uncrossable swamp. Prompts work by leveling the playing field between the means and end. You'll get there, by and by: swim, skim, slither, crawl and fly.

Victor designed an exercise for Poetics Lab, "the PLAB Performative Code for Information Interchange." Students divided up into small groups, each of which would form one module in a sequence: Scanner, Encoder, Processor, Memory, Processor, Decoder, Printer. The task was to figure out how to translate a text or simple pixilated image into digital code, then transmit, decode, and print it out (the last step demonstrating whether it had been successfully transmitted). In each case, the exercise began with a babel of chaos and confusion but evolved rapidly through configuration, design, testing and debugging phases and on to transmission of the messages Victor had given us: lyrics from the song "Daisy" (as sung by the HAL computer in the film *2001: A Space Odyssey*) and a highly pixilated version of an old Space Invaders video-game character.

Students became cogs in a machine. But they were *mindful cogs*: they could adjust their functions and divisions of labor to make the process more efficient-- and/or more pleasurable. The first class to do the exercise decided to transmit the digitized information on post-it notes affixed to the stretched-out arms of one member of the Processor group. It wasn't especially efficient, but I think they were going for *playful* and *photogenic* instead, as per the old saying, "it's not whether you win or lose, but how you look while playing the game." They turned the exercise inside out, making the end-- successful transmission of the data-- into

> the means for *transforming the means into an end*. Play, like life, is *autotelic*; it is its own goal; it seeks to optimize and sustain itself; it delinearizes ends and means, looping them back on each other. For good or ill, generative prompts are *autotelizing*.

2. The Crossing-the-Line Prompt

Typically, a prompt might include some constraint on content and some constraint on form, where each constraint also offers room for improvisation-- such as "write a story about your grandmother, in four parts"-- which might be a good prompt, because it immediately reminds me of the time my grandmother fell asleep on the railroad tracks. (The first two sections were disjointed, the middle was mushy, and the end seemed to roll away from the other sections. Grade: B-)

But seriously, what makes for a good prompt? Of what does its promptness (or promptitude, prompticity, promptessence) consist? This is an important question because if we can get even part way to an answer, it seems that-- not to be too vulgar about it-- we would have a formula for cranking out any number of short stories, feature articles, games, sculptures, pastries, pies, breads, savory tear-and-share filled rolls, multi-tiered cakes with mirror icing and sugar work, or-- sorry, but I've been watching the *Great British Baking Show*, which happens to be a study in the masterful use of prompts.

If I could teach students how to generate good prompts on their own, they would have essentially downloaded into their own brains my function as a teacher, and then, for the rest of the semester, they could work away happily amongst themselves while I sit at my desk playing Boggle on my phone and collecting my salary.

In other words, what makes a prompt *prompty*? Or to take one more step back (often a good idea), is the question of what makes a prompt prompty itself a prompty prompt?

The answer is no! It was already too *meta* for most people's liking, but then you went ahead and meta-meta-ed it and lost whatever remained of your audience! Fortunately, it's easy to correct this (Quickly! They're already heading for the exits!) by going in the other direction.

Simply think of a bunch of things and, without any theorizing or philosophizing as such, see which ones seem like good prompts.

> Prompt: Crossing the Line. Put a vertical line on the blackboard, and label one side *Good Prompts* and the other *Bad Prompts*. Take something from one side-- I suggest starting with a bad prompt (as I'm going to do, below)-- and start altering it slightly and see if you can make it move by steps from that side to the other.

> When does it cross the line, and what is it that makes it do so? There-- you've just figured out what makes a good prompt!

(The Crossing-the-Line prompt can be used widely for categorizing and definitional exploration. I have used it, for example, to get sudents to figure out what constitutes *play* and how it differs from *not-play*. I ask them to put Play and Not-Play on either side of the vertical line, then think of realms of human activity that have some part play and some part not-play, such as sports and games, design- and art-making, thinking, sex, collaborative projects, politics, conversation. It is interesting to draw these as blobs that have some part on one side and some on the other, just to see how much of each people consider *play*. Now think of various specific examples that fall on one side or the other, try to "walk them" over to the other side by altering them, and see if you can tell what it is that makes them cross the line. And please don't tell anyone, but the activity being practiced in this prompt is sometimes called *theorizing*.)

Figuring out what makes a prompt prompty is something that requires a prompt, and the more time you spend on it (that is, not reading about it but practicing it), the more you'll get from it. So here's an enactment of the Crossing-the-Line prompt, without the blackboard.

Start with the fairly random prompt to, say, list all the things in your bedroom, if you're a writer, or place them all in a pile, if you're a sculptor or installation artist of some kind. Is this a good prompt? Nope. It's too mushy and undifferentiated, visually and conceptually. Even so, if enough people complete the prompt, it might be interesting to see all the results together. They would form together a kind of *field of samenesses and differences* that move the project toward what might qualify as *research* or *an archive* ("A Cross-Sectional Analysis of What U.S. College Students in 2018 Had In Their Bedrooms") or *conceptual art* ("Roomful of Roomfuls," on view in the atrium at MOMA through January).

Grade: C (yes, it's a bit harsh, but with grade inflation you'll be in the B+ range). Of course, since the meta-prompt was to think of a bad prompt and then add just enough to move it to "mediocre," it might be well on the way to a solid A. Good start! Keep at it!

So, something like "make a list" might be close to being a good prompt after all. Think of Wallace Stevens's most famous poem, "Thirteen Ways of Looking at a Blackbird" or cultural theorist Eve Sedgwick's list of the radically different ways people understand their sexualities. The reason that these lists work so well as poetry and theory is because they take something the dominant paradigm insists is *singular* (a poem, sexuality) and use the list to open it up into complex pluralities, while, at the same time, assembling mostly incommensurate phenomena into a constellation. This just describes what lists routinely do; we're just not used to it being *described.* We only tend to notice it when it rewires our brains, as when the unlistable is listed.

The principle here is very simple: a prompt is generative when it opens up something closed (so closed that its closure might be a given we no longer think about at all), when it invites-- insists-- that one do something prohibited, orders something disorderly or unrelated, disorders

something whose order we consider fundamental, complicates something simple, makes a story where it seems that there couldn't be narrative at all, defamiliarizes, enables us to think the "unthought known" (Bollas), reveals as a picture that which otherwise "held us captive" (Wittgenstein).

> Aside. Here are all the words of the previous paragraph rearranged as an alphabetical list. What of their meaning do they retain even after being reordered? What do they gain in *performing* that to which they previously only *referred*? Drawing from this list, could you make a poem, or is the list itself already enough of a poem? What little bits of syntax begin to emerge? Read it aloud and see what you think:
>
> a, a, a, about, all, all, as, at, at, be, be, (Bollas), captive, closed, closed, closure, complicates, consider, couldn't, defamiliarizes, disorderly, disorders, do, enables, fundamental, generative, given, held, here, insists, invites, is, is, it, it, it, its, known, longer, makes, might, narrative, no, one, opens, or, order, orders, otherwise, picture, principle, prohibited, prompt, reveals, seems, simple, simple, so, something, something, something, something, something, story, that, that, that, the, the, there, think, think, to, unrelated, unthought, up, us, us, very, we, we, when, when, where, which, whose, (Wittgenstein).

Now, to start back with the writing project, describe each thing in your bedroom *with a single adjective and a single noun*. To the first constraints on content and form (*bedroom* and *list*), we have now added an additional formal constraint. The adjective/noun constraint is a simple gimmick, but creating a field of differences and likenesses (the repeated adjective/noun pairs) is an effective way of capturing attention. By foregrounding the difference-flattening effect of language, it highlights differences among the things ("Ikea pillow," "mother's ring," "Becky's dildo" are all adjective/noun pairs, as are "fascist authoritarianism, red wheelbarrow, infinite universe" and so on), giving us access to the curious and contradictory relationships between words and things, as poetry often does. By conspicously *defamiliarizing* the way words and things are organized, the prompt applies a leverage by which, even if only for a moment and in the form of a vague feeling, words and things are pried slightly apart from their fellow words and things and from each other. On a good day, you can see the light streaming through, or at least feel a sense of being opened up and enlivened.

Is it a good prompt yet? Maybe, depending on how formalist and conceptual you like your art. Grade: B/B-.

So let's try a step or two further. When you've (1) made a list of the things in your bedroom, describing each with a single adjective and a single noun, then (2) start to build a poem by writing a single, short sentence about each, using the adjective/noun as the subject to start each sentence. This might well be enough to send you on your way, enabling you to figure out how

you want to shape it, organize it, knit it together further. So after inviting you to do just that, in whatever way you're inclined, that could well be where the prompt leaves off.

The simple two-step prompt provides a way to (1) disassemble the world into fragments (via the list) and (2) re-assemble the fragments back into a kind of world (via syntax/sentences). In the process of reassembly, it is likely some new organizing principles will occur to you-- and I really do mean "occur to you," as in, "oh look what just happened there; I think I'll build on that."

If you're still at a loss, though, and you want more of a prompt, you could (3) arrange the sentences in some alternating order-- such as happy things alternating with sad things, or utilitarian objects and symbolic objects, or whatever alternating order the list suggests to you, (4) redescribing the items as necessary so as many of them as possible can be used in your alternation schema. (And if it's art rather than research, of course you can make some of the things up.)

That's pretty good (B+/A-), but the flat, back-and-forth alternation in itself doesn't provide much of an overall shape (an "arc") or any kind of closure or ending unless you've found these yourself, in the process. Neither of these is required, but they'll get you more "likes."

So how about (5) interspersing, as a kind of varying refrain, longer sentences about the things that *don't* fit the schema (this time redescribing things *not* to fit, if you want to use them for the refrains) and (6) ending with something that qualifies as a *present absence* or *absent presence* for you in the room, most likely by picking one of the most evocative things to use as the ending. For example, I'm thinking of the famous haiku about the chill felt by the narrator who, in his bedroom, steps on the comb of his dead wife. Pretty dramatic, right? Or if you wanted to go in the song-lyric direction, you could just end with some version of "but she's not there." Grade: A-

Wait, only an A-? What do I have to do to get an A in this class? *I'm going to tell you*.

Let's go back to the conceptual sculptor. Let's say you started by (1) assembling, from the bedroom, all the objects from a single size category that includes a good number of objects-- say, a small paperback, a vase, a box of Kleenex, a sex toy, an alarm clock, and so on. If there aren't enough objects of any given size, (2) cut things into pieces to fit! You will need to get access to a metal shop or some sophisticated tools in order to cut things cleanly, which will be difficult-- but it'll be worth it. If you cleanly cut up a sex toy and an alarm clock and a box of tissues, you're already in the A range! This is, quite frankly, because the sex toy is sexy, the alarm clock and the box of tissues look good cut up, the three have interesting connections and disjunctions, and most of all, *you did a lot of seriously gratuitous work*. The latter may even constitute a definition of art. It's certain, anyway, that a capacity for gratuitous labor will serve you well in all experimental practice. (3) Now hang these all on the wall in some regularly spaced pattern-- a grid, a circle, a sinuous curve. Done! Or if the project still falls a bit unsatisfyingly between modernist minimalism and postmodernist maximalism, how about going in the modernist/

minimalist direction and (4) painting the wall grey and spray-painting all the objects white? Of course this will create other problems to solve (maybe try spray-painting the tissues individually?), but after you've done so, you should probably declare victory and stop. Even so, because I'm not a minimalist, I can't help wanting to (5) add multi-colored polka dots to everything, and then (6) drive a bulldozer through the wall. Hopefully we would have videoed each step and this can be the final scene, but if we haven't, we could say that we decided (after philosophizing together late into the night) that it's important that there be *no video or record or product as such*, because that increases the gratuitousness of the labor (*and isn't that what you said you wanted? Happy Winking Face emoji*). Either way, grade: A.

> Aside: Gratuitous Labor. For final projects and the like, the most objective way of grading might be simply to specify how many person-hours of labor get you what grade. So, just as it doesn't make sense to give an expensive gift unless the recipient can see that it's expensive, you have keep in mind the prompt *to make the labor visibl*e.
>
> When I drew and painted more in public spaces, I got used to strangers asking "how long did it take you to make that?" but I never quite understood where the question was coming from. Now I think the interest wasn't really in the "how long" (since we all understand work by the hour)-- but in the "to make *that*": in the gratuitousness of the labor I was lavishing on the little piece of paper in front of me.
>
> What's stultifying about the prompt to "write a ten-page paper" (which would seem, anyway, to be about mandating a certain amount of labor) is its stupid emphasis on the *product*; it's stupid because the more pages you require, the lower the intensivity of labor per page. The intensivity of the labor matters just as much or more than the amount, but the teacher simply hasn't figured out how to mandate that. I've learned to focus my effort as a teacher of writing in trying to figure out how to trick students-- sorry, I mean *how to inspire and encourage them*-- into spending *more* intensive and gratuitous labor on a *smaller* total volume of writing. You can't just say "spend an hour writing a sentence" because students don't know how to do that, and what's more, *how do you make the labor visible?*
>
> One of my most successful assignments in freshman composition was what I called the Master Sentence Project, in which students spent the final four weeks reading long sentences (e.g., Allen Ginsberg's *Howl*) and crafting a single, very long sentence of their own. You simply can't do this in one go; the only way to do it is circuitously, like the sentence itself. First, write a five-page paper. Now condense it to a one-sentence paragraph with a sonnet-like progression that winds around to a "turn" at the end. Of course it helps not to know in advance that you're going to have to condense it, otherwise you lose the "making it up as you

go" advantage. Now add some research and zoomed-in details, now gratuitously re-write it in three different ways, now throw it all away and start over, now see if you like one or more of your originals better than your started-over version (or try combining them!), now weave another voice or perspective into it, now add some of your own stuff to your classmate's sentence-in-progress, now do a couple rounds of editing and proofreading. Even in the most empirical sense of how much syntactical complexity they could manage, students outdid themselves, but what's more, they got an experience of mastery that they hadn't even known was possible, a bit like finding you can juggle ping-pong balls, a gerbil and a chainsaw at the same time.

In terms of being a manifestation of the labor that went into it (and by the way, no animals were harmed in the writing of that last sentence), a very long sentence--like this one, I might add (obviously harder to write than the same volume of shorter ones)-- is more like a rhyming poem (obviously harder to write than prose), an engraving comprising thousands of lines (each of which had to be painstakingly incised into copper), a film with a cast and/or crew of thousands, a gothic cathedral (medieval equivalent of the film in terms of collective gratuitous labor). After all, aren't we are all walking manifestations of the intensive and sustained love and attention poured into us?

If you don't want to go the Gratuitous Labor Path to an A, here's another one, for the theoretically inclined; the rest of you can skip this paragraph without giving it a second thought; go ahead, run along if this is too tough for you (is the reverse psychology working?). Think about the nonlinear aspects of the process. Nonlinearity, here, is simply what characterizes the process of looping back to change things as the project evolves. In the writing project, the nonlinear steps include (1) going back to redescribe the things that don't fit into your alternation schema so that they do fit, and then, subsequently, (2) when you need to select some of them for the refrains and the conclusion, picking out ones to redescribe so as *not* to fit. The final loop takes the project to the "next level" (and this is what gets you the A): to create the conclusion, you (3) looped back on your initial organizing principles (in this case, by opposing non-opposition to opposition, and by deconstructing presence/absence, which had been an unspoken constraint). Words always evoke absence (to the extent that they refer to things that aren't present), so ending with an explicit focus on some thing that evokes absence also functions as a way to reflect on the written piece as a thing itself, whereby the piece develops a new layer, a kind of self-consciousness. Nonlinear steps tend to knit structures together and allow them to evolve: you get to the end and then go back to revise/redo the piece to reflect what you've learned in the process, repeating this until you're happy with it or until the piece walks out the door looking for new friends.

Here's another even better way to get an A: without thinking too much or working too much, just get in the zone and nail it. And yes, I have some recommendations for how to do that.

I mentioned upfront that there is a kind of sweet spot between constraint and improvisation that is characteristic of good prompts. Like most sweet spots, it isn't a simple compromise: it can't be found by averaging along a linear spectrum-- that is, by having a little constraint and a little improvisation. You want to *maximize both*.

I saw a TV show featuring the actor Kathleen Turner teaching a master class to several college students studying to be actors. One of them had prepared Caliban's monologue from Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. It was terrible-- strained, over-emoted, pompous. It was so cringe-making, in fact, that I was about to turn off the TV (I'm physically allergic to bad acting), but then Turner stopped the student and asked him to perform it again, but with a heavy Southern US accent. After some hemming and hawing (starting with how he wasn't good at accents) and more prompting from Turner, he launched into it-- and it was *brilliant*, mesmerizing even. Amazing! How did Turner's prompt work so well? There may be several reasons, but in any case, *it distracted him from what he was trying too hard to do* (emoting and being highly serious) and forced him to *inhabit the words.* As the performer/poet/theorist Tracie Morris once told me, inhabiting the words is only way to do justice to Shakespeare, which like most poetry read aloud, is mangled by Method acting in which the actor is supposed to speak from a deep emotional core and the words are, in some sense, secondary. In poetry, on the other hand, it's the words that have to *get you there*.

Prompts work by distracting you from what you think you're supposed to do-- this is the magic trick of *misdirection*-- and thus give you at least a chance of finding your way to discover something surprising, something you really aspire to do, something around which new meaning or paradigms can be built. Note that Turner's prompt works by being maximally distracting, and to do this, it is important that it be rigid and arbitrary. In the words of Georges Perec, a writer most famous for writing a novel that avoided the letter *e*, "I give myself rules to be totally free."

Keep in mind, the dynamic (sometimes dialectical) relationship between constraint and freedom goes all the way down through biology and evolution into thermodynamics. If there were solid footing, we'd be on it.

3. Remaking

> This prompt takes off from current controversies about removal of monuments, especially those that glorify white supremacism. So far, the most readily available options have been limited to keeping them where they are (and continuing the glorification) or removing them, which (depending on what is done with the removed monument) seems like an act of willful forgetting or disavowal of implication-- for white people, anyway. As for people of color, who don't have the same disavowal/forgetting option, removal has at least the upside of taking away one visual slap-in-the-face reminder.

> So what if you started to imagine other more nuanced-- and more radical-- interventions that would substantially alter the statues? The simple act of throwing red paint on a statue is a start-- and brings a bit of joy. But what if you had a bronze foundry and a big budget at your disposal? How might you alter the figures and/or add other figures or structures or apparatus or even multi-media (including language) around them? Let's say our budget is huge-- in fact, in the future I have in mind, the budget for the National Endowment for the Arts dwarfs the military budget.
>
> What if you wanted the monument critically to *historicize* white supremacism (literally to contribute to "making it history") and thereby to enact its overthrow or displacement?
>
> Imagine radical interventions into particular monuments that glorify white supremacism, misogyny, war. Do sketches, renders, mock-ups and/or write-ups.
>
> If you want to make this a writing project, imagine a brainstorming meeting of the Replacing and Remaking Monuments Commission (the RRMC, known informally as R&R): this enables you to propose and debate various possibilities ranging from silly to fierce, and to assign them to various characters that may or may not include yourself.
>
> Or if you're inclined to science fiction, imagine a future world in which monuments have been radically remade: show the changed social, ideological, political and economic conditions that would have enabled the alteration. (For example, I'm thinking of a vignette in which three lovers meet at the Lincoln Monument, which now also includes marble figures of Octavia Butler, Judith Butler, and Albert Hoffman.)

As with most prompts, this one works via constraint and improvisation. It invites you to violate several fundamental pre-existing constraints, including the mostly modernist mandate to preserve art in its original condition.

The preservation mandate seems to derive in part from the way the "author function" is attached to art and literature, mandating preservation in order to distinguish the work of a particular named individual artist/author and to keep it pure from "outside" influences. This is exacerbated by *historicism*, where the form of the work tends to be understood as tied to its historical context and point of origin (and not, for example, to its possible future uses). Whatever else contributes to the mandate to preserve monuments (such as white supremacism), the preservation constraint is so thoroughgoing as to make violating it seem like taboo-breaking. Even anti-racist activists may feel a twinge at the prospect of altering racist monuments (as opposed to the easier-to-contemplate options of removing and warehousing or destroying them).

I have started altering the "universal" masculine pronoun when I quote William Blake. It's a violation of fundamental scholarly protocols, even though I (usually) footnote the fact that I am doing so. I do it because I value Blake's work so highly as to want it not to be held back by its masculinist use of language; after all, Blake was already a card-carrying abolitionist, feminist, and anti-imperialist, so it's not so much of a stretch. I tell people that Blake came to me in a dream and *asked me to do it*: in other words, I may be crazy, but I haven't violated "authorial intent"! If this tactic seems foolish to you, remember Blake's aphorism, "If the fool would persist in their folly, they would become wise."

To put it another way: what makes the idea of not just removing but altering monuments a good prompt is that the constraints against it are so thoroughgoing-- political, economic, aesthetic-- that being given permission to improvise in spite of them is *a joy*.

I love the idea of radically altering New York City's white supremacist statue of Theodore Roosevelt (proudly mounted on a horse being attended by a black man and a Native American man, who are *walking alongside the horse*), but what about Michaelangelo's Medici Tomb or Noah Purifoy's Outdoor Desert Art Museum, both of which I consider actual holy places? This is why the work of the RRMC is so important and its deliberations sometimes so involved and contentious, why its budget is so large, why it consults me when it wants to assess the kinds of magic performed by monuments, and why I've been making such a good living for so many years as a Freelance Magic Consultant.

My friend Alexandra Chasin conceived and directed the *Writing On It All* project (2013-2017), where visitors were provided with brushes, paint, markers and other implements and invited to write on the walls of an empty house. Artists and activists designed more specific prompts, but it was first of all the permission to do something otherwise prohibited that brought the joy and the potential for a transformative experience. Chasin described the project as "pushback against the exclusive dynamics of Writing and the hierarchical values of Literature produced in schools and universities." The taboo violation works to help not just to imagine but to create a world in which "everyone [is] author-ized to write . . . and everything [is] counted as writing."

For a few years now, I have been teaching freshman composition as an experimental writing class in which every prompt is an invitation to violate a specific rule of "good writing." Instead of practicing the *prescribed* (as the word suggests, that which is "already written"), we practice the *proscribed.* Weave together multiple heterogeneous modes and voices; don't use transitions but number or title your fragments instead; condense your 5-page paper down to a paragraph; develop a single sentence at least a page long; write a collaborative fake research paper that mixes real and invented sources and facts (more on this below); write one real "personal essay" and one fake one, and try to get people to vote for the fake one.

In addition to it being a pleasure to do things one is supposed not to do, you have to do it *better* in order to get away with it, which is why (for example) I often find that fake research papers are not only better argued and written, they even follow official citation forms better! Here again,

these kinds of prompts work because most students have been taught writing as a set of things that one is supposed or mandated to do-- that is, as constraints that are policed rather than taken as invitations to improvise. So you can't simply open people's cages and wave your hand and tell them to fly: it requires systematic counter-prompts to encourage students (for example) to stop padding to meet page requirements, stop choking up the flow with bullshit transitions, stop using a consistent tone that is flat and stultifying, stop rushing to pick predictable arguments instead of looking for what's interesting, and so on. And you can't just waggle your finger and tell them to stop doing it, either, because that's just more policing! The prompts require improvisation and invite you to find your own most pleasurable and meaningful ways to defy discipline and get away with it.

Good prompts reward risk, play, and even gratuitous experimentation. In designing a prompt for a class focused making jewelry and small objects, I upped the stakes:

> Take one of your nearest and dearest things and, after taking photos of it, alter it either to enhance what it already is/does, or to repurpose it, to re- or de-sacralize it. Or design a ritual for saying good bye to it and bury it or destroy it. Or sell it, unceremoniously, on the internet. Or place it in a time capsule-- along with the Object History you have written for it-- and bury it in some out-of-the-way place. You might want to document these steps-- or on the other hand, it might be vital not to document them, in order to be more present in the moment as you do them. If you don't have the heart to actually do these things, imagine how you might do them if you could, write about it speculatively and/or create mock-ups or renders. Baby steps!

I have experimented with systematically violating all the little superstitious constraints my brain generates. Although I don't tend towards OCD-- the habits don't run very deep-- it will occur to me (for example) as I am putting in my backpack some bills to be mailed as well as the printed-out draft of an essay, that *they should be in separate sections of the pack*. One might easily justify this kind of thing in the name of efficiency and order ("when I get to a mailbox, it'll be easier for me to grab just the bills"), but, honestly, I am also motivated by the superstition (a "pollution taboo," as it is called) that putting my writing and bills together will mix them as categories, bringing my writing down to the level of the joyless economic calculations represented by the bills. So, I've tried applying the meta-prompt whereby, whenever any such a constraint occurs to me, I do the opposite. The point is not to get myself to stop acting superstitiously. It's a form of self-research, inviting me to examine various core categories, contradictions and conflicts. To be honest, what most motivates the counter-ritual is probably not the search for wisdom but the simple joy of defiance in the face of arbitrary power, even when that power is exercised by oneself!

4. Farce and Tragedy When Prompts Aspire To Become Autocratic Algorithms

Edgar Allan Poe's still-canonical 1846 essay "The Philosophy of Composition" is an account of how he wrote his most famous poem, "The Raven": an exercise in poetical reverse-engineering. Basically, it offers prompts for exactly what criteria to use at each stage of the writing process. However-- and this is where it tips over into satire for me-- it can be read as implying that all poets who sit down to write a poem, if they rigorously apply Poe's prompts and criteria at each stage, will come to rewrite "The Raven."

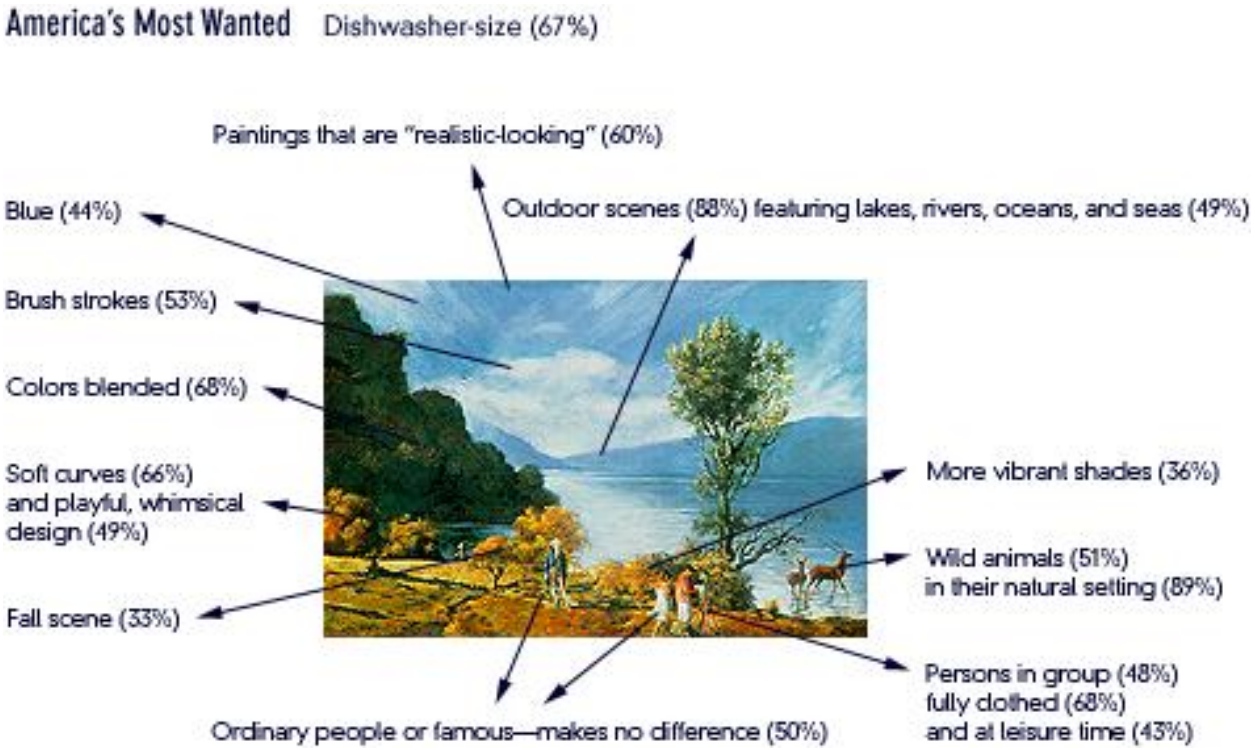
Having settled on stanzas with a one-word refrain as somehow optimal, Poe determines that the word "must be sonorous and susceptible of protracted emphasis," going on to select ("inevitably," he says) "the long o as the most sonorous vowel, in connection with r as the most producible consonant." In searching for such a word "in the fullest possible keeping with that melancholy which I had predetermined as the tone of the poem," of course "it would have been absolutely impossible to overlook the word 'Nevermore.'" Of course! But each solution creates new problems and constraints. Determining that it would strain credulity to have a single word "so continuously and monotonously spoken by a human being"-- since such repetition would be irreconcilable "with the exercise of reason on the part of the creature repeating the word," of course it occurred to Poe to feature instead "a non-reasoning creature capable of speech," and "very naturally, a parrot, in the first instance, suggested itself, but was superseded forthwith by a Raven, as equally capable of speech, and infinitely more in keeping with the intended tone."

Is this serious? "Superseded forthwith by a Raven," *really?* Might there be a mischevious twinkle in Poe's eye?

The generous way of reading the essay is that it shows how, when you're "in the zone," you often feel that you're following a scent, taking the "one road . . . paved in gold" (as Patti Smith put it) versus each of the others that is "just a road." That's how you recognize that you're really onto something. By taking you out of your comfort zone (where you can stay on the roads you know), prompts can take you where you may catch such a scent.

In the 1990s, conceptual artists Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid made a series of "People's Choice" paintings based on polling in various countries, using the data to create "most wanted' and "least wanted" paintings. In one example of the former-- a sunlit landscape with trees, mountains and a lake-- George Washington stands in a field in the middleground while a white nuclear family seem to be on a holiday walk and two deer graze nearby. Komar and Melamid also applied the formula to songs. In their Most Unwanted Song, "an operatic soprano raps over cowboy music featuring least-wanted instruments bagpipes and tuba while children sing about holidays and advertise for Wal-Mart."

Although I, for one, find these hilarious, there is something mean-spirited and hypocritical about Komar and Melamid's satires. To the list of "most wanted" paintings, we can add their own "ironic satires of middlebrow taste that make one feel superior." This is simply an avant-gardist and elitist variant of "historical figure in a landscape."



Aside. Also back in the 90s, I came up with a quick prompt for a successful American Studies dissertation in an English Department. I think it may still be basically sound, though it needs updating. All you have to do is choose one of each of the following items, establishing resonances (shared tropes and logics) among them as you go: (1) a canonical literary text (this legitimates you in the traditional discipline and suggests that you can teach a survey course), (2) a lesser known and non-canonical literary text (this establishes you as a researcher and implies the breadth of your knowledge of the period), (3) a nonliterary text (which gives the flavor of interdisciplinarity), and (4) a historical or political incident or framework-- it has to be very specific-- from the same period (which establishes your historicism-- still a commandment of the discipline-- while adding another interdisciplinary note). Having chosen these four items, simply toss lightly and serve. Or for extra punch you might also (5) add other interdisciplinary flavors by drawing on the science, technology, or economics, of the period (but see that these flavors don't compromise the disciplinarity required for employment in English Departments) and/or (6) play the tropes and logics forward in time before finally, (7) in a short concluding chapter or coda, establishing resonances with the present

(but be careful not to include more than a sentence or two that looks ahead to the future).

I was being satirical, but just as painters want people to buy their paintings, professors want their graduate students to get jobs. We all must "render unto Caesar what is Caesar's"-- or to put it another way, if you can't serve God and Mammon at the same time, you can't get a job in academia. At the very least, the prompt may enable you to deploy disciplinary mandates *"under erasure"*-- that is, to reduce to strategy and tactics what had been situated as first principles. That's something. Isn't it?

It's not much of a step from Komar and Melamid's satires to the so-called "science of attraction," which purports to study empirically (and without irony) what people find beautiful and attractive in prospective partners. We are told over and over that people find *symmetry* beautiful, that they are drawn to people who look like them and mistrust others who don't, and that such preferences-- otherwise known as *racism*-- are hardwired in us by evolution.

Prompt: An obvious prompt here would be simply to juxtapose such assertions with photos of fantastically sexy assymetrical people and maximally different-looking, happy couples.

Such accounts are known in evolutionary theory as *Just So Stories*: you reductively identify a trait or tendency, then try to imagine how it must have evolved. As a hoax, neuroscientist V. I. Ramachandran wrote an article purporting to explain in evolutionary terms why "Gentleman Prefer Blondes." The article was not only published and accepted as serious by many scientists, but when Ramachandran revealed it as a hoax-- in which his aim had been to satirize the specious reasoning of Just So Stories on behalf of a "trait" that was egregiously over-generalized to begin with-- many of the positive responders replied that, hoax or not, it was a compelling argument. Sometimes the emperor can't be made to understand that he has no clothes!

Just So Stories prompt: Pick some random and not-very-universal trait (say, the way we outgrow the love of peanut butter-and-jelly sandwiches, or the tendency to binge-watch the TV series *Game of Throne*s, the use of the "Oxford comma," foot fetishism, glottal fry) and imagine how it could have evolved-- that is, what factors would have given an advantage to early human ancestors who possessed some precursor of the trait. Advanced version: add footnotes and submit to scientific journals for publication.

Alternately, at a more personal level, find some random gesture or habit or tic that a person has, and imagine the emotionally and psychologically charged childhood history of how it developed and what triggers it. Here we are approaching what is simply known as a *backstory.*

> Our brains are very, very good at filling in the blanks, and finding or inventing pattern and backstories. Arguably this is their Job One, even at the sensory level (before even getting to higher-level cognitive functions such as narrative-making).
>
> Novelist James Hannaham brought to Poetics Lab a prompt that demonstrates this in the most economical and magical way: one person writes a sentence that begins a story at the top of a page folded into three sections. With the first sentence folded out of view, a second person writes, at the bottom of the page, a sentence that ends a story. A third person gets the page with the two sentences and writes, in the blank space left in the middle, a single sentence that links the first and last sentences into a coherent story. It is remarkable how routinely, deftly and delightfully people are able to accomplish this! In another version, I hand out randomly selected beginning and ending sentences-- many from famous texts (I especially like using theory and philosophy texts in addition to fiction and poetry) and people are asked to write the linking middle sentence.
>
> These prompts seem to create a single gap or *synapse* across which a spark of pattern-creating and/or narrativizing intelligence leaps. The big question: how can you access that, outside the prompt, in your creative/cognitive process?

The notion that there is one kind of beauty that people have evolved to love or one kind of attraction is damaging not so much because it's reductively distorted (to the point of laughable falsehood), but to the extent that it's *performative*. It sells a particular kind of beauty, derogates others, normalizes racism and makes cross-racial attachments into outliers or renders them unintelligible. The thing is, it is just as easy to emphasize countervailing forces that draw us to the assymetrical and to those who are different from us. Assymetry can be understood simply as the visual complexity neurologically necessary for *interest*. Universal taboos on incest (whether these belong to nature or society) are manifest in various *exogamy* principles, which mandate that we seek out people who *don't* look too much like us. Even plants run the gamut from self-pollinating hermaphrodites (the extreme of the "sex with those who are most like oneself") to those who doll themselves up into the most extravagant shapes and patterns to attract pollinators such as bees or humans as intermediaries that enable them to have remote sex with geographically and genetically different members of their species. And they've been doing that for millions of years, *even without the internet*-- go figure!

Which end of the endogamy/exogamy spectrum are *you* on?

The reductionist notion that there is a single prompt or principle at work in a given area-- a single algorithm that leads inevitably from a given input to a given output-- is the opposite of how we've been using the notion of a prompt to open up the possible pathways and ends of the creative process.

The algorithmic process prevalent in artificial intelligence-- the "if you liked X, you'll like Y" model-- has the same problem as the "science of attraction": not that it's false, but that it tends to operate performatively-- independent of its truth or falsity-- as a kind of self-fulfilling prophecy, feeding you more of what you've already demonstrated that you like. This is (for starters) explicity anti-rationalist in that it caters to what is called "confirmation bias," whereby you gravitate toward whatever evidence supports the view you already have. It is, arguably, devolutionary in a dumbing-down way, since even our senses seem to have evolved to counter confirmation bias, enabling us to get better and more heterogeneous kinds of information by "crowdsourcing" to a maximally diverse group of senses.

On the other hand, the most generative prompts are those that, whether by their design or contrary to it, serve an Open Process: a creative process in which the product or even the goals are not absolutely fixed in advance. Even if you start off making a dress (for example), you might go on to make a video about making the dress, then decide to set the dress aside in favor of an essay about making the video-- or, how about incorporating the video and the essay into the dress on some kind of wearable screen? In Open Process-- as in biological evolution-- speciation occurs and mutational pathways diverge but they also weave together and even converge.

When Wittgenstein came to design a house-- including what would turn out to be a famous doorknob-- was he practicing philosophy by other means, or was it the other way around? Wittgenstein's doorknob operates circuitously: downward force applied to the lever is translated rotationally (via the cylinder or tumbler) to the perpendicular force that withdraws the latch bolt. The project of *circuitous opening* performed by the doorknob is very much the project of Wittgenstein's philosophy as well-- and of prompts as we understand them here-- but it is important not to let this insight deteriorate into the idea that the doorknob and the philosophy and the prompts are mere tropes or metaphors of each other-- except insofar as tropes (literally *turnings*) perform the same kind of work. Magic is to be sought where mechanical and conceptual exertions of leverage are not metaphors but members of the same family.

Machines don't do Open Process. Computer programs have been created (for example) to mix-and-match features to generate dresses, but such programs cannot decide to go in other directions, toward other products or goals as these evolve. If true Open Process is something that programs and algorithms can't do, then maybe it amounts to a new kind of Turing Test. By the same token, just as painting adapted to photography in the nineteenth century by de-centering verisimilitude, could art and design now adapt to computer-driven and heavily algorithmic intelligence by increasingly embracing Open Process? What would this look like?

Like play, like making it up as we go, like maximally diverse collaborative teams following their collective noses, like democracy, like anarchy-- which is not something one falls into or back into but s*omething we haven't yet achieved*.

5. From Fake News to Collaborative World-Building

Fake News

> Prompt: First, study a few accounts of fake news that you can readily find online. Now write up a fake news story of your own. As you craft the content, consider also how fake news is planted, how it circulates and spreads, how it casts doubt or otherwise parasitizes other news, how it will be subject to verification and how that will or will not matter, and above all what *affective labor* it does (see below).

The main reason that this prompt can access joy in a classroom context is that we are told that, in the public arena represented by the classroom, fake news must be countered by vigilance and reason, its opposites. Composition classes and the like are places where we are supposed to learn to do that (as by argumentation, evidence, analysis).

This is the "official position." Meanwhile, fake news is lamented and denounced by everyone-- nobody more strenuously than the most flagrant purveyors of fake news themselves. What's wrong with this picture?

Linguist George Lakoff, known for his research on "metaphors we live by"-- metaphors that he argues become hardwired into our brains-- has repeatedly made the point that voters are recruited politically not by discussion of facts and policy but by appeals to *values,* and that values tend to be anchored to specific, emotionally charged metaphors (the "strong father," the "nurturing family" and so on). He argues that Republicans have been good at such appeals, while Democrats remain more attached to eighteenth-century notions of rationalism.

The appeal to values and metaphors and emotion is not in itself anti-rationalist. It recognizes that even our (plural) rationalisms operate in the service of other definitive commitments.

If you have in mind a gullible and not-very-bright person who simply believes whatever supports his worldview but can perhaps be be taught how, via the use of reason, to distinguish fake news, then *good luck with that.* My sense is that "belief" in fake news is the wrong word, as it is so often when we talk of people who "believe in God." *Meaning*-- like faith and value and affect-- ultimately belongs to a realm where belief or disbelief are beside the point. When a mother says, "I don't care how many scientists you line up, I still won't allow my child to be vaccinated," you should probably not waste your time thinking of how you might teach her to reason better or whether she might or might not be capable of it. Ask yourself instead what paradigm could be so vital that she would sacrifice her child for it, and whether there might there be some way of leveraging it. Such a question is likely to apply as well to the hyperrationalist scientist as to the

anti-vaxxer conspiracy theorist. What is so meaningful for you, so emotionally charged, so paradigmatic, even so *autotelic*, that your rationality merely orbits it?

To understand how fake news works-- and when writing your own-- consider what specific kinds of *affective labor* are done by each item. *Affective labor* refers to how something or someone acts on your feelings and emotions (together known as *affect*), whether to invoke them, reinforce and intensify them, oppose, balance, distract, steer, or otherwise direct or shape them. Note that this kind of labor is performed almost constantly by mothers, politicians, artists and art, therapists and many others. But affective labor is a component-- often a much larger component than we acknowledge-- of most of our daily interactions. It is differentially required of you depending on how you are positioned by power, gender, race, and other dynamics. Even so, it is worth considering that the affective labor done by, say, a ranting narcissist with power may be in the form of *a demand* (operating to incite, to beat others down, to puff himself up by doing so, and so on) but it is still functions as affective labor. (Don't believe me? See how late into the night you can sustain ongoing righteous indignation while watching Fox News and tweeting at the linguistic level of an eight-year-old.)

In most cases, fake news (like politics generally) operates to shape and direct-- usually by reinforcing-- feelings that are already there. It attaches the feelings to what it presents as an objective reality: *see, it's not all in your head!* As with conspiracy theory generally, it often takes something structural and complex and assigns it to something or somebody very specific. Accordingly, it often provokes indignation by assigning willful malevolence to a specific other or others, just as infantile frustration (the core of all frustration) is directed not at a mother who happens not to be available when wanted but at a mother who must be cruelly and punishingly witholding satisfaction *from me in particular*. This Bad Mother (*shut your mouth!*) is *the original Other*. Paranoia-- known as a "delusion of reference"-- affirms my own centrality (via the delusion that other people's behavior refers to me), but even more fundamentally works to reassure me that the world is full of meaning because it is full of things that are threatening and dangerous and/or charged with intense symbolic significance to me personally. Fear, anger and indignation-- or on the other hand, various kinds of self-numbing-- are compensatory reactions to advanced capitalism sucking more meanings, purposes and joys from more dimensions of our lives.

> Prompt: Is it any wonder that studies have shown that fake news that promotes fear, anger and indignation is most likely to go viral? How can you counter this and/or redirect or re-purpose it in the fake news you write?
>
> Consider the fake *New York Times* printed and handed out by the activist performance group Yes Men at the height of the US invasion of Iraq in 2008: what affective labor was performed by the big headline "IRAQ WAR ENDS" and by its other frontpage stories telling of the new public ownership of ExxonMobil, fundamentalist Christian churches taking in Iraqi refugees, and so on? What is the effect of inducing a heart-leaps-up feeling (at least in left-leaning readers) just

> for the briefest instant ahead of the realization that it is fake? How does the feeling persist or evolve into other feelings through the almost-simultaneous realization? Fake news, on the other hand, seems to operate *to defer* the realization-- or can its affective labor coexist with the sense of "yes it's fake, but..."?
>
> These are *open questions*. Rather than formulating definitive answers (which may be beyond you; I think they're beyond me), I just want to plant the questions in the hope that the fake news you write may end up being the vehicle for thinking them through.

The Fake Research Paper

Take one step along from fake news. I like to call this project a *fake research paper*-- rather than something more legitimate-sounding-- to embrace the stigma up front; that's part of the joy and magic of it.

In what follows, I explain the basics of the prompt and then show how, for me, it evolved into prompts that enable the collaborative creation of a speculative-fictional world (oops, that's already too legitimate-sounding; we'll slow down). I've left the narrative form because the *evolution* of the prompt (in this case, both within individual classes and over several years and across three different classes) is the life of the thing; it's what I want to convey more than the specific content of the prompts.

Many years ago, when I regularly taught Romantic Literature, I started assigning a final paper in which students were asked to invent a Romantic artist and discuss the relationship of that artist's work to its historical and cultural contexts, citing primary and secondary sources we had read in class as well as freely inventing any sources as they saw fit. It needs to be stressed that, while biography may play some role, the focus must be on the work rather than the life. I also found it necessary to explain carefully upfront that (for example), if you invent a novelist, you need not write a whole novel but just enough very short excerpts and analysis to make it seem real. Another option was to invent new work by actual artists.

> There is a range of tones you may adopt for this exercise, from parody to something so earnest that it could pass for a real paper. In any case, the more you can draw from the texts and issues we've discussed, the better.
>
> You may want to consider some of the following questions, focusing on how the text illustrates some of the typical Romantic characteristics we've discussed. What kind of a story does it tell about personal change and development, but also about historical, social, economic, scientific change? What politics or ideologies does the text serve, and how is its language or imagery coded with political values? What kind of ideological spin does the text put onto its representations of

class, gender, race, nation, empire? How does the text access or deploy sublimity? Self-reference? Dynamism? Nature as a political category? How have subsequent interpretations and/or adaptations of the text (as imagined by you, of course) adapted its themes according to their own historical contexts?

And one more thing: although you are strongly encouraged to cite actual Romantic texts as points of reference and comparison, anyone caught focusing their paper on what turns out to be an ACTUAL Romantic text will be subject to disciplinary action :).

Some Random Examples

> The recently discovered letters between James Parkinson and Mary Shelley provide a fascinating glimpse into the relations between Romantic science, fiction, and politics.
>
> The 1833 sonnet, "On First Looking Into Shelley's 'Mask of Anarchy,'" by the radical shoemaker and poet, Erasmus Chartiston, attracted only dismissive attention from previous generations of literary scholars. Professor Sneerling's 1975 article, "Working-Class Romantic Poetry: A Contradiction In Terms?" was typical. Sneerling argued that working-class poets of the period relied on obsolete, 18th-century poetic techniques, and therefore cannot be called Romantic.
>
> Last month, a librarian at the British Library rocked the lit-crit world by announcing the discovery of diaries written by the leech-gatherer whose meeting with William and Dorothy Wordsworth is described in Dorothy's diary and in William's poem, "Resolution and Independence." In a poem entitled "Resentment and Indifference," the leech-gatherer provides a very different version of his encounter with the poet and his sister.

I kept using the assignment because I found that, as I hoped, you have to more fully marshall and deploy your knowledge about Romanticism in order *to invent* a Romantic artist and texts than to consider actually-existing texts (about which, in effect, your script is already written). I have also found that fake papers tend to be better written and even use standard research-paper format better: there's more positive motivation to conform to MLA citation style when you're doing it in order to get away with something! As an added bonus, it's much harder to plagiarize a fake paper-- and last but not least, fake research papers are a lot more fun to read: I have been repeatedly impressed and delighted by how a range of students have risen to the occasion.

A student's work inspired this prompt to evolve. This happened in a "Modernism and Postmodernism" class where (only slightly adapting the earlier prompt) I had the students invent a modernist and/or postmodernist artist, designer, writer or architect, and write a paper on that person's work, again mixing theoretical and other sources we had read in class with invented sources.

The student, Alexander Roth, imagined that an official commission had been formed to postmodernize various modernist buildings and other sites in New York City. In the course of the other student presentations, I realized that the members of a Postmodern Design Collective invented by another student (and several artists invented by other students) would have made great appointees to the Roth Commission! We started to discuss this possibility, and I invited them to share (in character) what their invented characters would have to say about postmodernizing particular buildings and sites. This was the end of the semester, but if we had had time, we could have taken this to the "next level" by staging full-fledged commission meetings (either in writing or as improv in class) in which students, in character, would argue about the best ways of postmodernizing particular modern landmarks and be charged with collaboratively coming up with action plans. We could even have made site visits (taking notes on the requisite clipboards and tablets, of course). I would have liked to see what the students imagined for particular *retro-modernist* sites such as the Oculus subway station and nearby 9/11 monument:

> NYCPC member #1: There's nothing more postmodernist than retro-modernism, so the Oculus can be left as is. Our work is done here.
>
> NYPC #2: One of the principal design mandates seems to have been to *optimize selfies*. And what could be more postmodern than the beat-you-over-the-head way that the Oculus gets its aesthetic value by the contrast of its elegant, soaring, empty space in downtown Manhattan with the cramped and marginal apartments that *we* can afford?
>
> NYPC #3: Exactly, but the resentment, if nothing else, makes me want to ruin that effect and *make it avow its postmodernism*-- by, say, hanging a mishmash of wierd stuff from that soaring, elegant ceiling: life-size statues of historical personages, motorcycles, inflatable Hello Kitty figures, orreries and terraria, what have you.
>
> NYPC #4: The terraria will trigger animal rights controversy. But in any case, we could hold a competition: call it *Ruin the Oculus*.
>
> NYPC # 3: Great idea. Let's take a straw poll. All those in favor? Motion carries! I'll draw up and distribute the competition guidelines, and we'll consider proposals in next week's meeting.

Spurred on by this idea that could not be realized (like a musical piece stopped just before the final chord), I had in the back of my mind the notion of a prompt that would mandate collaborative and speculative world-making. The prompt evolved to the next level in a Freshman composition class.

The Kafkanator

In the composition class, we read Kafka's "Metamorphosis" as the literary text that accompanied the "Cultural Theory Concept of the Week," which was *system*.

The students took to Kafka. They recognized, as if it were their own, narrator Gregor Samsa's anxiety to be what he thinks he is expected to be, and his dissociation and failure to understand his own desire and anger. (Note to self: next time, ask students to imagine Gregor's Facebook posts before and after he wakes up as a giant beetle.) They glommed onto Judith Butler's characterization of Kafka's narrative voice as "a neutralization of outrage, a linguistic packing away of sorrow that paradoxically brings it to the fore": exactly how it feels to wake up every day to the latest horrors of the proto-fascist shitshow under which we live-- or simply (as every 18-year old knows and some of us have never outgrown) to wake up and discover, "oh, I'm a giant insect today" and then, "well, better get myself to work."

So I assigned more Kafka short stories, along with relevant critical and theoretical texts. I had them write a new paragraph for "Metamorphosis," trying to make it so Kafka-like and so "in the flow" of the story that it could be inserted without anyone knowing. They did so well with this that I wanted to keep building on it.

What if we pretended their paragraphs had been written by a computer program designed to mimic Kafka? They decided to call this program *the Kafkanator*, and we started to assemble and invent sources that would allow them to write fake research papers on it. The papers were to assess the Kafkanator's boosters and detractors, its cultural and theoretical repercussions, and so on. We set aside the remaining weeks of the semester to concentrate on this project.

At Pratt, research papers are usually reviewed by a team of faculty; we hoped to fool the reviewers into thinking it was real, at least until they tried to find it online. Although I never said so, I think the students got the idea that they had to do well in order for me not to get into trouble. When the reviewers came to realize it was invented, we wanted them to feel that it had been carried off so well that they would, in effect, have to tip their hats to us: "you really had me going for a minute there!"

We started to invent a backstory about the Kafkanator founders (a scholar, a programmer, and their venture-capitalist backer) and at least to think our way into the "Kafka Trope Library" and "Kafka Stylistic Devices Archive" they might have developed for progamming purposes. They invented headlines and citations from various souces (the *New York Times*, *Wired* magazine, posts and comments on techie websites) and they assembled a long interview with the founders.

I posted some comments from a grumpy old scholar horrified at the Kafkanator; this filled a vacuum because, as we discovered, the students were brilliant at mimicking lots of styles and voices, but scholar-speak was mostly beyond them. I was pleased-- and only a bit horrified-- to find how easy it was for me to improvise a Humanist Jeremiad: method acting!

Since demonstrating their theoretical literacy would go a long way to selling the papers as real-- and, needless to say, since I wanted them *actually* to acquire and use that literacy-- I provided relevant theory texts such as Baudrillard's *Precession of Simulacr*a, Butler's "Gender Insubordination" (a deconstructive take on *imitation*), Deleuze and Guattari on Kafka as "minor literature," Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," and Byung-Chul Han's "The Copy Is the Original" (on the longstanding positive take on copying in Asian cultures). We divided up readings among them and they posted what they felt were the most relevant citations from the texts for all to discuss and use. We found sources online about related (real) technological developments: new video tools that make it easy to create new films with long-dead actors, a program that designs clothes, another that functions as an Artist's Statement Generator, several sonnet-generating programs.

Drawing on all this material, they each wrote and posted first drafts of their papers. I was impressed with how the project worked against the typical pedagogic mandate to make "arguments," whereby students are pressured into reducing complex ideas into caricatured oppositions. The fake research paper does the opposite, inviting you to bolster and complicate your straw men in order to make them-- and your critique of them-- more complex and real. I was struck by how well they achieved the mix of voices and textures, the zooms in and out, the interweaving of immediacy and hypermediation, sub and meta that I had been telling them all semester is the way writers "make it real." And, as with the fake research paper, the mix of actual and invented sources made even their bibliographies a pleasure to read.

I held individual conferences. I found the project worked productively to position me as a collaborator with each student in our common goal of building a believable world rather than an assessor of their individual contribution. It's a subtle but all-important distinction: we have only each other to work with and a world to build; our focus (yours and mine) is not on how well you're doing but on how to make it all work: eyes on the prize. We found (for example) that we all had to work together to compare papers and resolve various inconsistencies. We agreed (for example) that no full short stories by the Kafkanator had yet been released, and that the project had only reached the stage of individual sentences and paragraphs being generated by beta-testers using keyword prompts.

I mandated that, in addition to drawing from what we had already assembled and invented, students were required to cite by name at least one of their classmates. I was surprised by how much I loved reading "as my classmate X has argued..." and resolved always to ask students to post papers and cite each other! And I encouraged them to *steal without citation* any ideas they liked from their classmates that would help knit our speculative reality together. For example, several of them took up their classmate's idea that beta-testers and others had organized online

into "Prokafs" and "Conkafs." Again, they worked to complicate, heterogenize, elaborate and nuance these opposing positions and to distinguish individual voices within each group.

There were moments when I questioned my sanity in having committed to such a project, moments when I feared it would flop. Although these passed and it became very clear that the project would go into the "win" column, I do *not* want to promote this particular idea; in fact, I'm pretty sure I won't use it again. I think it likely that it'd be a *bad idea* outside the context of this particular class and their surprisingly strong Kafka karma/chemistry. The idea grew organically out of that conjuncture, out of the theoretical issues we'd already begun to explore, and because I was on the lookout for such an opportunity. It worked because we stumbled into it together and (guided by me) the students helped design the game and the rules as we went along.

> The dream is everything-- technique you can learn.
> (Jean Tinguely)

Entity World

"Entity World" is a collaborative drawing exercise, with a writing component, if desired. No special drawing or writing skills are necessary: the collaborative aesthetic is such that the project *improves* with a wildly varying set of skill levels, styles, levels of abstraction and realistic detail, simplicity and complexity.

This prompt was developed in my Poetics Lab course on the theory and practice of play. We devoted about 90 minutes of classtime to the exercise and decided to revisit it later in the semester for about another half an hour.

Although the exercise comes out of my own theorizing of "entification" in science and religion, I didn't even mention that: the idea is to enable students to download collaborative world-building and play into the DNA of their creative and cognitive processes.

> All that you touch, you change.
> All that you change changes you.
> God is change.
> Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*

> To begin, you are asked to choose which kind of entity you want to be, understanding that this can evolve as things go on. Come to class on the appointed day having developed your initial entity; see guidelines below. As you sign up, please keep in mind that diversity is key to robust ecosystems, so it'd be nice to start off with as many different kinds of entities as possible: (a) animals, (b) plants, (c) micro-organisms, (d) collective entities, (e) parasites, (f) demons and imps, (g) gods (but if there are going to be gods, there have to at least three), (h) angels and bodhisattvas, (i) fairies, elves, or other earthly supernatural

creatures, (j) androids or mechanical entities, (k) humans, or (l) other (please specify).

Given the size of the paper (a 36"-wide roll, three seminar tables long), I suggest that micro-organisms be about the size of a postage stamp or smaller. All others should be somewhere between that and the size of a saucer or small plate, with the understanding that collective entities that may evolve later might get bigger, and that we can move to new paper if/when we feel the visual field is as full as we like.

In developing your entity, consider (1) what you are capable of drawing relatively quickly-- say, in two minutes or less-- so that we will be able to produce as many generations as possible in the time we have-- but *without rushing or time pressure*. Also consider (2) what kinds of powers you will possess and what modes of engaging others and the world, what drives you, what you desire and fear and what hurts you. Remember that most others will not let you simply run roughshod over them (though, knowing how these things go, some might). Consider what and how you will receive and emit-- namely, (3) what modes of sucking in things you will have-- ways of sensing, breathing, eating and drinking, processing, metabolizing-- and (4) what products or by-products you will produce (and how to draw them): hopefully some of these will be edible by others, but they could also be pathogens or mutagens, signs, language, gifts with magical powers, things with potential exchange value. Also please remember (5) that *all entities are plural* (there-- I said it); they have internal structure and processes, and, in Entity World, entities tend to be translucent, with at least some of the main outlines of their internal structures visible.

All encounters are negotiated by the participants, and this is the first ironclad rule of Entity World: nothing happens that the participants don't agree on. The participants decide what constitutes an encounter: they can form some kind of team or partnership or system or hybrid entity that both subsequently draw and manage together; their encounter can transform each of them in different minor or major ways and each can go off alone to populate other areas with their transformed entities, and so on. Practically *nothing* can also happen in an encounter; each can go their separate ways virtually unchanged. Or (by mutual agreement), one entity might destroy or ingest the other; an ingested entity could become part of the first entity's internal structure, but even if you consent to having your entity destroyed in an encounter, you can go off and make another of the original entity elsewhere (and you might want to avoid further encounters with your destroyer until you've acquired more powers or defenses-- just a suggestion). If you consent to have your entity go extinct, you must have arranged to participate in drawing another entity. This is the second ironclad rule: everybody stays in the game.

> For the sake of creating a visual record of evolution and allowing past and present to co-exist in the same space, I suggest that, once drawn, entities be left as is and not be drawn over or into: in other words, as entities change, new versions of them should be drawn rather than altering the original. If an encounter changes the entities involved, I suggest that the default mode be to draw the new entity or entities adjacent to the old, with a little arrow pointing from old to new so that the evolution will be legible. I also suggest that you make a very small written note next to each drawn encounter, noting in the briefest way what happened in the encounter; because these are basically explanatory footnotes, I suggest that this writing be as small as you can legibly make it.
>
> The objective is to keep playing, collaborating, and enjoying it. Do what you like. If you want open-ended transformation, go for it. If you want to persist unchanged, avoid transformational encounters and keep drawing the same entity over and over, then figure out how to do that for as long as you like until you get bored or someone convinces you to do otherwise. If by collective agreements a stable ecosystem emerges in which exactly the same encounters keep on happening among exactly the same entities-- or, on the other hand, if everything collapses into a sea of uniform micro-organisms or merges into a single meta-organism-- then presumably this situation will go on until somebody makes something new happen.
>
> Depending on how you look at it, there is either no sex or gender or reproduction as such in Entity World-- that is, no encounters between different members of the *same* species-- or just about everything could be categorized as sex/reproduction, since entities meet constantly and new entities are produced out of their encounters. This paradox could be important, if anyone wants to make something of it, but since the idea of the game is to *re-negotiate* how entities can engage with each other, I suggest that the "no sex / gender / reproduction" side of the paradox is the larger, more generous and open-ended frame.
>
> This is a collaborative drawing exercise. The point is simply to make up the figures and narratives and rules of engagement as we go, and above all, simply to be continuously making a drawing-- that is, a visual document-in-process. I emphasize this to keep you thinking about *what can be made visible and how*.

I loved working with the students who were all busy drawing and discussing (usually in character) what would happen between them when they met. The drawing evolved quickly into the maximalist panorama I'd hoped for. Afterwards, when we were discussing our experiences of it, we decided that everyone would write out brief in-character narrative accounts of their experiences, how they evolved, and so on. This was an afterthought but turned out to be an important component of the project; I had hoped that students might have integrated more

language into the drawing (there were several writers in the class), but these narratives made us think of doing this in a next step, combining the drawing and written accounts into some kind of book or website.

We all wanted to revisit the drawing but didn't have time to do so until weeks later. Since we had photos of the whole thing, we had talked about altering the protocols to allow us to radically alter and even destroy the first iteration in the process (using more opaque media, allowing overpainting and cutting it up and collage), but when the time came, the students wanted to elaborate and preserve the original rather than treating it as "raw material" for the second iteration. We agreed to guidelines emphasizing entities (such as micro-organisms and distributed, constellational entities) that would occupy the remaining ecological niches (that is, fill in the fairly small blank spaces among the original entities). This worked well but some of us still wished we had let go of our attachment to what we had originally made and risked ruining it to see what kind of new world might emerge. As was typical, I would have wanted to spend more time discussing the philosophical implications of these choices. My running joke was that I wanted fifty minutes of theorizing for every ten minutes of practice, but much to everyone else's relief, I settled for the reverse.

Later in the day we worked on the second iteration, I ran into co-teacher Jennifer Miller, and I found it immensely satisfying when she volunteered, in a matter-of-fact way, that "Entity World was good today"-- as if it were an established and ongoing part of the everyday world, like a television series, psychotherapy, or breakfast!

Art Machine Project

Objective: to create an Art Machine app that generates deconstructive art projects. We may not get so far with this as to actually make the app, but we can think our way some distance into it.

The exercise was designed as a prompt to show artists and designers how to use deconstruction as a collaborative and creative practice. Rather than just reading deconstructive texts with the goal of acquiring deconstructive *knowledge* (we did read Derrida's "Structure, sign and play" and Butler's "Gender Insubordination"), these prompts are designed to manufacture deconstructive *know-how* by exercising it together as a kind of art-making collective disguised as an app.

Phase One: Research and Analysis of Selected Examples (ALL REAL!)

Overall Question: How would you begin to break down (into a relatively simple algorithm) the reversals and other conceptual maneuvers by which these pieces (see below) were made? How would you apply the same algorithm to different source material?

Also: Suggest additional examples for each category, and/or additional categories you think may be meaningful. Please add relevant design and architecture examples as well, following the "transgressive/deconstructive" paradigm established by the art examples.

Additional question: Why does the transgressive/deconstructive mode lend itself so well to assholes? Is there some particular criteria by which assholish art can be distinguised from non-assholish art (such as among these examples)? The answer must have to do with the operation of various kinds of privilege and especially on the differential effects on various kinds of viewers according to their identities and experiences, but can you try to specify this in individual cases? Above all, *how can you make non-assholish deconstructive art?*

I. Postmodern Examples

1. German concentration camp scenes recreated with Lego.
2. "Funny" novel set in German concentration camp.
3. Horizontal line tattooed at same height on the backs of various people who are paid to be tattooed and stand in a row, facing the wall of the gallery.
4. A person seems to be hanging himself in an art gallery as people's reactions are videoed.
5. Balloon animals rendered in polished metal fifteen feet high.
6. Autopsy report of black man killed by police, read aloud by white guy at poetry conference.
7. The novel *Gone With the Wind* tweeted over a period of months, along with a "mammy" image.
8. Human head cast in frozen human blood & displayed in refrigerated plexiglass box.
9. Artist sits still for many hours at a time in atrium of musem and people line up to sit across from her and maintain eye contact for as long as they can.
10. Classical ballets performed by all men.
11. *Pride and Prejudice* rewritten with zombies.
12. A black artist offers his blackness for sale on the internet.
13. Silhouettes of hyper-caricatured slavery-time black & white people in assorted highly sexualized and/or violent scenes, shown in galleries & museums.
14. Giant sphinx with stereotyped "mammy" head, made of sugar and constructed in an abandoned Domino Sugar warehouse in Brooklyn.
15. Painted portraits of non-celebrity black men and women selected in public auditions, done up as Renaissance and Old Master paintings with elaborate wallpaperish backgrounds, exhibited in galleries and museums.
16. Shakespeare performed with women cast in major men's roles.
17. Fictional website offers North American corporations Mexican labor-without-the laborer via virtual-reality-controlled robots that pick fruit, do construction work, etc.; website is included in group art show at gallery, eventually made into a Hollywood film.

II. A few Modern examples (additional question, if you're interested: what makes these modern and the ones above postmodern, other than when they were made?):

1. Actual urinal signed "R. Mutt 1917" and displayed in art gallery/museum.
2. Framed reproduction of Mona Lisa with moustache, and letters "L.H.O.O.Q." (racy French pun) printed at bottom.

3. Sealed glass flask titled 'L'Air du Paris" ("The Air of Paris").
4. 6000 tons of rock and gravel shaped into a spiral jetty 15 feet wide and 1500 feet long that extends into the Great Salt Lake.

III. Postmodern examples that might be art but aren't (additional question: if not, why not?)

1. Star Wars rewritten in Shakespearean language and published as a mass-market book.
2. Talking Barbie and Ken dolls replaced on toy-store shelves with reverse-gender scripts.
3. At height of US invasion of Iraq under George W. Bush, facsimile copies of *New York Times* printed and distributed in NYC with headline IRAQ WAR ENDS.
4. Violent video game *Red Versus Blue* made into "machinima" in which characters mostly stand around talking, obsessing about existential issues, etc.

IV. Algorithms and Combinatories that might be relevant to consider:

1. Charles Bernstein's experimental writing prompts: http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/experiments.html
http://writing.upenn.edu/bernstein/wreading-experiments.html
2. Brooklyn Bar Menu Generator:
http://www.brooklynbarmenus.com/

Phase Two: Creating the Algorithm.

Overall question: After trying to specify the transvaluations, reversals and other conceptual operations by which the art and other cultural productions listed above were generated, how can we create an app to put various such transmutations (see below) into operation?

Most likely, this would be a simple *combinatory* in which, for example, the user would pick Source Material A, Subcategory ii and Transmutation 6; and the app would offer a result-- that is, a description of the piece of art that might be generated. The app creators will have had to decide in advance which subcategories and which transmutations can be applied to which materials and will have had to write out in advance all the results.

Note that the examples given below of possible source material categories and subcategories, and of possible transmutations, are just that: examples. You may use and/or adapt some of these or come up with your own.

To start, I suggest that small groups try this as a collaborative exercise. The task of each group is to specify at least ten different sequences of Source Material, Subcategory 1, Subcategory 2, Transmutation, and Result. Among these, at least some should involve applying different transmutations to the same source material. Then the groups should present what they regard as their best sequences to the class and the class should discuss what makes the good ones good,

how they can be improved or fine-tuned, where and how they fail. After that, groups can re-form for Iteration Two, and/or individuals can go off to create sequences of their own.

This can be done as often as you like; when you have assembled enough sequences, you can create a simple prototype of the app. This could be done with as few as 50-100 sequences, but of course it will be more satisfying with more. If there's nobody with the requisite digital skills in the group, you could always produce it in the form of flow charts on paper.

Additional question: Since many of the transmutations listed below are overlapping, should they be specified more carefully and multiplied, or grouped together under fewer broad categories that each include multiple sub-categories?

1. Source Materials and Subcategories

Source materials would include categories of art and other objects and of their leading characteristics, such as: poem, story, novel, painting, performance, 3D object (large or small, consumer product or art), and so on.

If the invitation to come up with categories leaves you cold, just pick some object from your bedroom or your kitchen or your purse or backpack, and then see which of the transmutations you can apply to it, and what results that application generates.

The transmutations transform and otherwise repurpose the source materials. Users might pick a source category "novel," a subcategory such as "novels about race in the US" or even "whiteness," "blackness" and so on, and then an even more specific selection such as *Gone With the Wind*, *Invisible Man*, and so on. Of course, the number of such categories and subcategories-- and then the question of which transmutations could be applied to each-- will be limited by how many people are working on the project and how many ideas they can follow through. Since the potential sources, transmutations and results are each infinite anyway, don't worry about whether you've picked the most exemplary sources, transmutations, and results-- or whether you've achieved any kind of "coverage": *you can't*. The obvious way of expanding the range is to crowd-source: to make a website and invite people to contribute transmutations and results of their own.

As an example, if you performed the "trans-genericize" transmutation on *Invisible Man*, what might be the result? The results should be in the form of roughly tweet-length descriptions (so as to fit nicely on a phone screen), for example: "an *Invisible Man* virtual-reality video game in which each of the novel's chapters are levels of the game that you reach simply by surviving, with the final stage being the narrator's light-filled underground retreat."

But hang on: the source materials and subcategories should also include a range of phenomena that are not art or design in themselves-- and not necessarily even objects as such-- but can be mined (transmuted) to produce art: historical and other events, social relationships and behaviors,

politics, and so on. The best way of finding these is simply to think of some specific events or politics you think it'd be fun to riff on, and start building categories around them.

2. Possible transmutations of source materials

Trans-identify: take something that belongs to one social identity (ethnicity, economic class, cultural class, gender, sexuality, national culture or language) and reimagine it in terms of another. Queer it, straighten it, trans it, whiten or blacken or latinxate it; relocate it to North Dakota or Kashgar, reset it among taxi drivers or venture capitalists. Suggestion: try not to be an asshole.

Trans-genericize: take something in one genre and reimagine it in another (but note, genres should be in heirarchical opposition; e.g., monumental and hand-made versus small and mass-produced, high-brow versus kitsch, etc).

Trans-contextualize: In conjunction with other transmutations, radically shift context/setting of object/theme (e.g., non-art in classic gallery setting, public performance of private/intimate theme, etc.).

Trans-materialize: Re-render something in a radically different and surprising material, or with very different physical characteristics, usually describable as a reversal on an axis such as small/large size, conspicuously natural/artificial materials, cheap/precious materials, hard/soft.

Level or hyper-value: take something extremely important or politically, emotionally, or intellectually charged and render it in terms of something petty or neutral-- or vice versa.

Deconstruct: This includes many (maybe all) kinds of transmutations that reverse and displace heirarchized binary oppositions such as (1) commodified and non-commodified, (2) private/intimate/shameful and public/celebrated, (3) human-made/unique and mass/mechanically reproduced, (4) natural and cultural, (5) original and copy.

Serialize and/or Pluralize: take some unique source material and re-iterate it over and over (in some case where this has not already been done, as it has with, say, reproductions of the Mona Lisa), or vice versa (take something very plural and make it very singular), or re-iterate it with new variations/mutations each time (e.g., the Mona Lisa in an app that changes hairstyles, race, gender, facial features, etc-- or has this been done?) .

Document: painstakingly document something ephemeral or not normally documented.

Transvalue: take something bad/evil/depraved/sad/violent and put it in terms of something good/innocent/happy/nurturing, or vice versa. Kinda hard not to be an asshole here, but try, okay? Examples: (1) capitalism; (2) the virtual and real worlds in the film *The Matrix*; (3) William Blake's "Proverbs of Hell."

Aestheticize or de-aestheticize: take something that is fundamentally not art and put it in terms of art, or vice versa (note: when used alone, the former is likely to yield a purely Modernist result).

Consecrate or deconsecrate: take something mundane, utilitarian, inconsequential, trashy or even actual trash and make it into something sacred and sublime. Or do the reverse.

Mash-Up: Additively (and maybe randomly) juxtapose several heterogeneous themes, genres, transmutations, etc.

Maximalize/Minimalize: take something characterized by *minimalism* (elegant formalism, austerity in design, modernist and stripped-down form-follows-functionality, unity and clear subordination of parts to whole, etc.) and *maximalize* it (such as via heterogeneous elements, edge-of-chaos complexity and dynamism, anti-formalist privileging of "content," eccentricity and creative anarchy, entangled hierarchies and pluralities, etc.) Or vice versa.

APPENDIX: Assorted Prompts

a. Gamified Writing Prompts

For each of these prompts, developed for a freshman composition class, students are asked to write two short pieces, one real and one fictional. Students read through all the pairs and vote for the ones they believe to be real. (In my class, the students did this before classtime via our school's online "learning management system.") We discuss what it is that makes each one seem convincing-- and, on the other hand, what breaks the spell and why-- and then it is revealed which are real and which fictional. As in all sports, you are not allowed to "throw the game"-- and it would be considered the most serious breach of ethics if you did-- by artificially making your real piece unbelievable. The students who get the most votes for their fictional pieces get a prize; you could add in their scores for how many of their classmates' pieces they correctly identified as real or fictional.

In addition to the motivational effect of gamification and the goal of fooling your classmates, the pedagogical value here is the very practical focus on what makes writing believable and compelling, and on fiction and experimentation as ways of *hatching* from standard modes of writing nonfiction, making it more performative and aspirational.

Learning To Lie Better

Describe one place you've been and one place you haven't been *as if you actually have*. (Spoiler: people that study such things have discovered that witnesses tend to describe scenes they actually remember from an embodied perspective in space and time (e.g., "I came into the room and it was crowded, but then I caught sight of the accused, who was standing along the wall to my right..."). Lies, on the other hand, can often be recognized by accounts that are more impersonal, more objective (sometimes via an omniscient perspective or bird's-eye view), less narrative (e.g., "The room was big and crowded; the accused was standing along a wall on one side"). While this can be a clever way of distinguishing students' fictional from real accounts, it obviously only works if they don't know this principle in advance.) I use this one as a quickie in-class exercise, sometimes on Day One.

Writing as Dreaming

Write out one dream you actually had (the more recent the better) and one that you make up, including real-life context and points-of-reference as is necessary to get a better idea of what the dream is about.

This exercise arose because I noticed that most people cannot invent believable dreams, and it's worse when they try too hard to make them sound dreamlike. So we prepare for this exercise by reading excerpts from Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams*, with particular attention to the accounts of dreams but also to how "dreamwork" narrativizes the "dream thoughts" (such as by condensation and displacement), the lack of yes/no logic in the unconscious, the almost universally misunderstood process of how affect is or isn't attached to its proper objects in dreams. Obviously, the "side" benefit of this exercise is learning some psychoanalytic theory--and putting it to the test to see if it enables you write believable dreams. Again, the nice thing about the voting process is that functions as an *empirical* assessment of what works and what doesn't.

Dreams don't stop when you wake up; "secondary revision" goes on as your waking mind continues to consolidate ambiguous images and tidy up nonlinear constellations of events into a coherent narrative. But this image-making and narrative-making is part of the same "dreamwork" that constituted the dream from the "dream thoughts" in the first place! In other words, the dream that you consciously invent is not categorically distinct from the dream you dream while sleeping. It's true that more "tidying up" leads further away from material too difficult or disruptive to confront consciously, just as a mother bird flops around to lead predators away from her nest, but if predators were smarter, they could use the flopping to find the nest. That describes how analysts can work to find the dream thoughts.

Self-Reinvention

Tell the story of an important event that was transformative or otherwise definitive in your becoming who you are. The event should involve cultural/historical contexts; identity questions such as those around race, class, ethnicity, gender, sexual orientations, culture and culture-crossing, language. Then make up one.

This prompt works against the often stultifying "personal essay." First, it suggests that the personal is not set apart from the political and historical; what you get in return for displacing the personal is a sense of the historical *stakes* of your identity. Second, it rejects the notion that who you are can be *found* or *expressed* (that is, by simply revealing what you already are, essentially, on the inside), suggesting instead that your identities (and the possibilities for self-reinvention) are about ongoing *experimentation*.

The fictional account sometimes turns out to be the more revealing, aspirational, opening.

Artist's Statement + Creative Nonfiction

Describe your work and/or philosophy: what guides and motivates you in your art, design, architecture, writing, or whatever it is that you do or hope to do? If you have no idea of what you want to do (or if the notion of "my work" seems too presumptuous for you), you can consider something more like your philosophy of life, why you think you're on the planet. Are there leading principles, particular pleasures or goals, some particular high that you chase, a narrative of how you found your way? You may decide to use one particular work or two (or some particular incident or event) as an example; if your work is visual you can include a still image; if your work is written or performance-based, brief written description is probably best.

For the fictional version, use examples from your actual work/life but make up your motivations, philosophy, narrative, etc. Again, this invented version may offer fresh insights as it departs from the stories you're used to telling yourself about yourself.

In a variant of this prompt, students describe their own work, keeping these descriptions to themselves for the moment, and then bring examples of their work to class. If the objects are too unwieldy (as they generally are), bring an image or set of images (in this case, writers will have to bring excerpts of pieces, and performers will have to bring videoed work on flash drive; others can bring photos that illustrate something important to you). In class, the works are re-distributed; each student receives work by someone else in the class and they go home and write an "artist's statement" about the work as if it were their own. Before the next class session, students vote for which statement they think is the real one, and the next class is devoted to discussion. Again, you may find that what somebody else thinks might believably be behind your work-- even if it is invented-- is not necessarily "just a projection" but may have something important to say about your work. This exercise always produces surprising and sometimes uncanny resonances and discoveries.

In a third version (a separate game), pick somebody else's work-- the more famous the better-- and write about it as if it were your own (in the first person): how did you come to make it and what were you aiming at? To adapt this to allow for voting, students would have to find examples of what particular artists said about their own work and juxtapose with their own fictional accounts in the voting process.

Thin Line (Between Love and Hate)

Describe one thing that you love and one thing you hate-- drawn from your immediate life and environment or from current culture or politics-- with a very brief statement of why or how that's the case. These should both be things that are fairly definitive for who you are and for how you are positioned aesthetically, culturally, politically. Now write up another account in which the things are reversed-- that is, in which you say why you love the thing that you actually hate, and vice versa. Please try hard not to let this slip toward satire, though you will be tempted and it will be hard to resist. As usual, you will get credit for all the votes you get from people who believe your fiction.

Reading: Excerpts from sociologist Pierre Bourdieu's *Distinction*, which describes how thoroughly people's tastes are determined by their class and cultural class positions. It is outdated in many ways and doesn't fully translate cross-culturally: you will have to consider and discuss how Bourdieu's notion of distinction works in our current cultural contexts. The necessity of translating it into the here-and-now turns out to be one of the virtues of using this text. I have repeatedly found that it is still profoundly scandalous in a transformative way *to the extent that you think your tastes are your own*.

Reverse-Engineering Epigraphs

Find a book or other text (short story, poem, film, etc.) that has an epigraph or multiple epigraphs. Write up a very brief account that shows how the epigraph applies to the work (Example: "The 2009 film *A Serious Man*, about an Jewish math professor who undergoes a series of Job-like trials, begins with the epigraph, "Receive with simplicity everything that happens to you," which is basically the opposite of how the always-anxious professor lives his life.")

Now imagine an epigraph (supplied by you) for some written text or film: this could be something you write, or even better, some relatively short and pithy statement that already exists and that you think could be applied to the text in question. Again, it is key that you describe the text very briefly, the epigraph, and what it means or how it applies to the text.

Expert Tip: Try starting with some lines you admire from song lyrics or a poem and then go on to think of a book or film for which they might work as an epigraph.

Readings: Assorted epigraphs. Discuss and try to specify the various and dynamic relationships that epigraphs bear with their texts.