POSTMODERN DECADENCE
IN CANADIAN SOUND AND VISUAL POETRY

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everythings too fuckd up today

–bill bissett
bend ovr so we can see whats in yr asshole, *1978*

In the groundbreaking book on Canadian modernism *Aesthet-icism and the Canadian Modernists*, Brian Trehearne concludes with a rather whimsical speculation about Canadian postmod-ernism. Having successfully demonstrated the dominant in-fluence of nineteenth-century European aestheticism on "an entire Canadian literary generation" (308) of modernists in the early years of the twentieth century, Trehearne openly won-ders about a similar colonial "lag" that might connect Canadian postmodern authors like Leonard Cohen to Aestheticism's suc-cessor, historical (capital "D") Decadence (308). His reference is to the "libertinism, pessimism, and sense of spiritual exhaus-

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> more daring artists, and audacity is a virtue which despite
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Trehearne's speculations on the influence of the historical
Decadents on Canadian postmodernism were based on a re-

curring pattern of colonial influence in previous Canadian art movements, including the colonial lag affecting Canadian modernism and, earlier, the lag between the English Romantics and their Canadian Confederation-era imitators. The model he works from seems useful and valid for explaining the colonial orientation of the writing produced in these earlier periods, but it does not fully address the dramatic shift that occurs in Canadian letters in the postmodern era. For while Trehearne claims that Canadian authors—what V.S. Naipaul might ungenerously describe as mimic men (and women)—are habitually behind the times, he does not consider the radical implications of a generation of postmodern writers and theorists who used historical reference and intertextuality to challenge the whole notion of linear, progressive time and literary influence. These same postmodern Canadian writers, in fact, used their writing to argue and demonstrate their belief that there was no "behind" time to be ahead of. Trehearne's lag model fails to acknowledge this radical reorientation of chronology in postmodern writing. Furthermore, it was not merely a Canadian phenomenon: similar reorientations were happening in postmodern writing around the world. Mexico's Nobel Laureate Octavio Paz, for instance, argued that humanity's experience of time dramatically shifted in the postmodern era: whereas earlier aesthetic moments were characterized by their relation to linear, progressive history, postmodern authors abandoned Western conventional notions of time: "We are living the end of linear time, the time of succession: history, progress, modernity" (269). In contrast to this transhistorical experience of time, Trehearne's centre-margin dissemination model relies on a modality no longer appropriate for or responsive to the particular ambitions of postmodernism.

Ironically, Trehearne was right about the relationship between postmodernism and decadence, but for the wrong reasons. Postmodern authors and theorists, and not just Canadians, have widely returned to the historical Decadent writers. Marjorie Perloff attributes this in part to the historical Deca-

dents' astonishingly contemporary sense of individual consciousness as being determined, shaped, or at least limited by the language they inherit (72–73). Thus, Rimbaud's enigmatic "Je est un autre" (I is another) resurfaces in Terry Eagleton's inelegant and less mysterious phrase "when I look into my most secret feelings, I identify what I do only because I have at my disposal a language which belonged to my society before it ever belonged to me" (10). Ludwig Wittgenstein's "Meaning and Understanding" addressed this problem of being outside of language directly through his idea of the language game: meaning and understanding and even identities, he argued, are less attached to an individual's consciousness than they are to the rules of the linguistic system. He compares, for instance, the ability to use the word "yellow" in the proper context to the ability to use the king piece in chess properly. Rules determine what we say and, furthermore, what is even thinkable. We operate (i.e., play) within the parameters of the rules, the grammar of the system without recognizing the social and discursive nature of such a "language-game." Wittgenstein's idea would prove to have a profound influence over the visual poetries of bpNichol and Steve McCaffery, who sought to play literary games that revealed the systematic otherness of language. Their prospective language revolution, discussed below, sought to overcome the divide between human subjectivity and language. Paz, for his part, found in Mallarmé a "conception of writing as the double of the cosmos" (273), a model of language that erases the boundaries of art and life by allowing language to create propositional or imaginary realities. Paz's observations recall Mallarmé's mysterious conceptualization of his art, of all art, and of the world's relationship to art: "tout, au monde, existe pour aboutir à un livre" (Mallarmé, "Le Livre" 378)—all the world succeeds (in the sense of both progression and fulfillment) within a book. The Spanish author Jorge Luis Borges explores a similar idea in "The Library of Babel" (1941), the title object of which, by the power of randomness, contains every possible utterance

available in all human languages including perfect (and imperfect) predictions of the future.

The problem of Trehearne's model of "fundamental or canonical influences" (311) stems from its reliance on a model of an avant-garde of literature claiming new ground that followers, who are always presumed to be Canadian authors, will stop by to plough and harvest. But the same postmodernism that rejects linear time has also widely attacked the linear progressive model of literary development as an archaic and problematic teleological narrativization of history. Susan Rudy and Pauline Butling, for instance, in their provocative book on Canadian "radical" writing since 1957, reject the idea of avant-gardism for implying a singular projective line into the future, as well as for being too sympatico with dominant capitalist models of innovation (18)—a "poetics 2.0 (slightly smarter—to the max!)" model of contemporary aesthetics that Christian Bök also questions (Betts 58). Trehearne's colonial lag model depends on a clear delineation between literary leaders and followers, whereas a general proposition of postmodernism (and postcolonialism for that matter) has aimed to disrupt any sense of singularity, origin, or possession of language. As an art of rupture, historical Decadence, like postmodernism in general, opens texts forward and backward in time rather than working toward closures or teleologies of any kind.

Paz's writing on Mallarmé did not lead him to the now familiar revolutionary or radical avant-garde orientations, but, through a transhistorical conception of (lower-case "d") decadence, to a postmodern (di)version of avant-gardism. Notably, he adds Dadaism to this current of decadent writing. The postmodern crisis of the art object precipitated by Dadaism, Paz writes, "is little more than a (negative) manifestation of the end of time; what is undergoing crisis is not art but time, our idea of time" (273). In the latter half of the twentieth century, with the advent of postmodernism, there has been an increasingly common turn away from linear history. This fact, coupled with the

characteristic postmodern exploration of negatavisms (such as in the fields of ontology and theology), renders the proposition of a postmodern avant-gardism an oxymoron that is semantically impossible to reconcile. The etymology of the avant-garde, literally the front-guard, in the French military tradition makes it ill-suited to the non-militaristic, negativist, and non-linear orientations of postmodern art. A postmodern *decadence*, on the other hand, addresses the analogous revolutionary spirit of postmodernism to earlier avant-gardes while signalling the fundamentally different conceptions of time and history assumed by such a revolution. The consistency with which leading postmodern theorists have returned to authors from the historical Decadent movement, and to Mallarmé in particular, corroborates the association.

In response to the diverse body of literature that has already embraced and worked from the insufficiency of the concept of linear literary development, and of avant-gardism in particular, various studies by German scholar Jürgen Habermas, Romanian critic Matei Călinescu, and American theorist Charles Russell have begun to characterize the art that would be called avant-garde in the postmodern era as (lower-case "d") "decadent," but not in the historical or colloquial sense. Habermas, for instance, uses decadence to refer to a coupling of "the barbaric, the wild and the primitive" with "the anarchistic intention of blowing up the continuum of history" (10). Decadence, then, can here be understood as an aesthetic that invokes libidinal intensities, of the id in all humans, as a means of both revealing and undermining the arbitrariness of civilization and all its repressive conventions. Most important, through this conceptualization of decadence, literature and language lose their ability to approximate reality, but gain the ability to create reality. As in Alfred Jarry's pataphysical ruminations, imagination does not supplement reality but replaces it entirely: in his terms, "le signe seul existe" [the sign alone exists] (292).

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icated on a "theoretically unbounded, anarchic individualism [...] [decadence is] a style that has done away with traditional authoritarian requirements such as unity, hierarchy, objectivity" (171). Decadent authors react against the decadence (read: moral failing) of their contextual milieu not by attempting to redeem but by rejecting their responsibility to that milieu.

Similarly, the revolutionary implications of Mallarmé's negative/Decadent dialectics led Julia Kristeva, in *Revolution in Poetic Language*, to rely heavily on his work in her articulation of a socially activist, postmodern, psychoanalytic semiotics. She argues that poetic language in avant-garde texts, with their deliberate grammatical errors, attacks meaning and thereby the possibilities of enunciation, creating a kind of writing that undermines the subjectivity of its speaker (57–58). This "destruction of the old" falls away from established experience with language in order to insinuate the formation of a new signifying system (59). By violating the system of language, poetic language insists on the possibility of new or different kinds of articulations, even without necessarily creating a complete alternative. Appropriately, Kristeva turns to Mallarmé's "Le Mystère dans les lettres," where he discusses a "semiotic rhythm within language" that is anterior to sign and syntax and therefore prefigures the role of the subject in language (29). While he proposes that this rhythm creates a lacuna between language and the world that raises the sceptre of an essential unintelligibility, Kristeva uses his proposed gap to argue that linguistic rupture decentres "the transcendental ego, cutting through it, and opening it up to a dialectic in which its syntactic and categorical understanding is merely the liminary moment of the process" (30). As Leon S. Roudiez explains in his introduction, Kristeva's idea of poetic language refers to language use that liberates the subject through "an anarchic revolt" that enables "an affirmation of freedom" in spite of "a society that extols material goods and profit" (2–3). Accordingly, Kristeva finds in Lautréamont, Mallarmé, Joyce, and Artaud a "shattering" of linguistic codes that

reveals the formation of subject and ideological orders (Kriste-va 16). Their literature in particular is "the essential element of a practice involving the sum of unconscious, subjective, and social relations in gestures of confrontation and appropriation, destruction and construction—productive violence, in short," which brings about in the mind of the subject precisely the same thing that political revolutions introduce into society (17). Productive violence, as a revolutionary negation, evokes a *postmodern* decadence by falling away, falling apart in a manner similar to the historical Decadent authors. By developing this essential rejection of Western ideology and linguistic practice, postmodern authors evoke or discover an implied but unstated and utterly unrealizable revolutionary alternative. Appropriately for the anarchic and individualistic orientation of decadence, however, this revolution occurs not on the streets but in the mind.

Even before Kristeva, in 1966, while working through the implications of a negative dialectics, Theodor Adorno also recognized revolutionary potential in a postmodern decadence: "In this world of violence and oppressive life, this decadence is the refuge of a better potentiality by virtue of the fact that it refuses obedience to this life, its culture. […] That which stands against the decline of the West is not the surviving culture but the Utopian that is silently embodied in the image of decline" (209). Adorno thus reverses and rejects the traditional Marxist associations of decadence as moral failing and begins to consider the revolutionary and ontological implications of letting go, of falling away from the trajectory of Western ideology. Jean François Lyotard, perhaps the most important philosopher of postmodernism, also returned to the historical Decadents to exemplify his rearticulation of the difference between modernism and postmodernism. Notably, and in accord with the postmodern dismissal of linearity, he rejects the chronology of modernism necessarily preceding "post" modernism. Instead, the two are presented as coexisting transhistorical phenomena: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodern-

ism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). Lyotard explains postmodernism as a denial of form, taste, and nostalgia—what has been called here a transhistorical decadence: it "searches for new presentations, not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unpresentable" (81). The American critic Peter Nicholls interprets Lyotard's argument as framing postmodernism as a disruption of the discursive systems upon which modernity and meaning depend (4). Rather than chronology or succession, Lyotard's "post" reflects an outsidedness or an otherness to the implied order that enables a modernist sense of closure and signification. This redefines the avant-garde sense of "rupture" from enabling a revolutionary, potential future to disrupting meaning and thereby opening a self-reflective moment that reveals the discursive nature of meaning and closure.

Canadian postmodern decadence coincides with a growing interest in historical Decadence among influential postmodern theorists. Here, especially in sound and visual poetry, the liberating turn away from convention, order, and Western traditions led to the hopeful embrace of so-called primitive cultural traditions, such as chanting, dancing, and oral awakenings, appropriating and deploying a distorted version of First Nations cultural forms and practices. A poetics of rupture emerged that gleefully cast aside meaning, closure, and denotative signification. Working in Vancouver in the 1960s, bissett, Roy Kiyooka, Copithorne, and many others began experimenting with deliberately disruptive literary and performance techniques designed to explore and expose the limits of an overly conventionalized language. A sense of possible redemption or even revolution, never quite formulated or realized, lurks behind a great deal of this experimental activity. bissett's "awake in th red desert" (1968), which has appeared as both a sound poem and a visual poem, provides an example of the redemptive possibilities of increased linguistic consciousness.

```
                    awake
                in th red desert a
                wake in th red desert a
                wake in th red desert yawn 2
            they came galloping across th hot
            dragon in purse golden stolen rays yu
        farhenheit today tell finger th yard is
    swollen re-incarnated as sumbodys front lawn
        movr r ya too blue 2 cum in this yawning red
    desert a wake awake in time th buicks wheels
    were tender more than yesterday gravul left in
    arms a laying just on th sand peaceful like nd
    hot muscul hair touch love suck here eyebrow
    her fill of bells ringin branches swaying time
    ta entr th sea garden of lasting treats me in
    th swollen suck kiss red juicus ovr hairs en
    twind awake in th red desert yu melting into th
    sun on time melting ij hope ijitalow lingr ovr
    me melting into sand ijihalow melting into yr
    spine th highway melting into th cactus th own
    melting into th dream on time of no time to
        hold only to love th white line melting into
    yu can tell were on th side of th highway
        makin love on th hot sand at sunset
        time were me or undr blankits it
        is a joke it is love is flesh
        nd blood flashing is all
        together naked nd
            immaterial
                2
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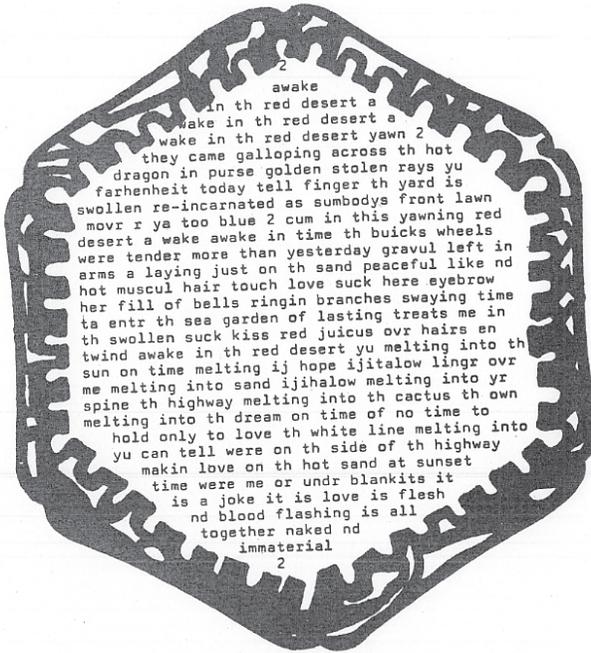
Figure 1: bill bissett, "awake in th red desert" (1968)

As a performance piece, the poem features chanting, singing, and a recursive narrative of a visionary desert experience that provokes an awakening to life, death, and sex. As a visual poem, it features the frequently repeated paragram "a wake awake," which bissett similarly uses to draw attention to the slight linguistic space between death and consciousness. The realization and awareness of this link, through language, leads to the poem's orgiastic conclusion: "it is love is flesh / nd blood flashing is all / together naked nd / immaterial / 2." Though the poem on the page reads left-to-right and top-to-bottom as by convention, it is framed by an ambiguous mandible or mandala pattern that suggests bissett's circulatory, improvisational destruction and construction of the root text in his live performances of the piece. The piece as eruptive, ever-changing sound poetry, then,

rescues the textual poem from the hungry jaws that encircle it in print. While ostensibly building from Dadaist typographic and performative precedents, this multidisciplinary aesthetic shares with the surrealist revolt a faith in the irrational, in the body, and the belief that a surrational materialist aesthetic could revive literature by accelerating or admitting its decline.

While writing specifically on bissett's libidinal destruction of form in joyous rebellion, McCaffery imagines "an anti-reading of an anti-text" through which the human self can be liberated by a disintegrative linguistic practice ("Bill Bissett" 93). Published in Toronto around the same time, bpNichol's chapbook *ABC: The Aleph Beth* (1971) presents a manifesto of contemporary poetics accompanied by a sequence of visual poems (see Figure 2). Like the enigmatic riddles in bissett's sound and visual piece, Nichol announces "poetry is dead" but that "the poem will live again" when there are no "boundaries between ourselves & the poem." The twenty-six images that accompany his manifesto depict copies of each letter of the Phoenician alphabet, which is superimposed upon itself in elaborate and defamiliarizing patterns. Like Cubist works, these visual poems seem to animate the image of the letter by including the trace of its path in time and space. The result is a series of images recognizably built out of the alphabet but that has distinctly broken the familiar use and experience of the icons. Brian Henderson describes Nichol's creative-destruction process as a "*via negativa*"—that is, an act of cancelling an already empty sign creates an iconicity that allows it to "overflow with its own being" (1). Furthermore, the repetitive structure of chanting in the Buddhist tradition and in Canadian sound poetry offers a similar "emptying [of language] as a process of transformation" (19). This transformation carries with it the same appeal to utopian revolution that is implicit in the negative dialectics of postmodern theory. Canadian postmodern authors seized on the formal possibilities of this negative revolution—that is, a revolution through dissolution. The act of breaking language in sound poetry led Nichol

to use McLuhanesque language to describe its great potential in overcoming what has been described in this essay as the semantic gap: sound poetry could "heal the split that has become more & more apparent since the invention of the printing press" ("From Sound to Sense" 335).

Toronto scholar Marshall McLuhan's ideas on the same subject enjoyed a strong currency during this period, particularly his argument that electronic media was accelerating the interconnection of the planet and creating a resurgence of "tribal" culture (*Understanding Media* 24). For McLuhan, print technology led to the standardization of culture—from the standardized spelling of dictionaries and typesetting to the abstract experience of global news—which in turn helped create the distinctly Western phenomenon of fragmented specialization and individualism. It was this very fragmentation that created the spiritual split against which Nichol and many others (includ-
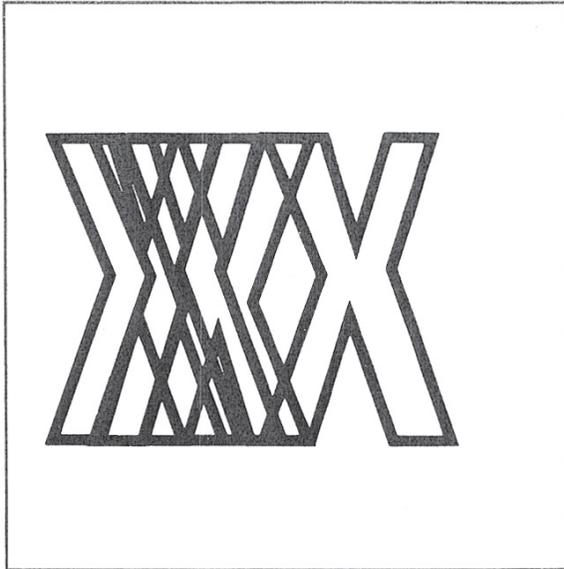

Figure 2: bpNichol, Untitled (1971).

ing Wittgenstein) reacted. However, the advent of the instantaneous experience of mass media was creating a "global village" of pan-human consciousness that was already undoing the particular prejudices and experiences of "literate man" and creating a new post-literate primitivism (McLuhan, *Gutenberg Galaxy* 21–22). Though McLuhan was himself ambivalent about the revolution he foresaw (especially in *The Gutenberg Galaxy*, less so in subsequent texts), many used his ideas to support their own sense of and desire for a paradigm shift that would escape the malaise of present conditions. In 1970, McCaffery published two visual poems (see Figure 3), one of which depicts a McLuhanesque pre-literate, unified consciousness emerging from an explosion of print technology, signalling the possibility of human consciousness reborn, renewed, and remade through the destruction of previous orders.

In Figure 4, a more ambivalent McCaffery piece, the explosion of print, space, language, and typography resolves into a dominant, almost threatening globalized eye, creating a haunting image reminiscent of Orwellian surveillance that puns on a cosmetic ad for mascara (mask-era). The eye, which also suggests a new, McLuhanesque pan-global "I," is an atomic culmination that "charges from" language with a new kind of vision enabled by the opening experience of language. The poems were later reprinted in McCaffery's suggestively titled *Broken Mandala* (1974). In his decidedly optimistic—indeed revolutionary—1970 manifesto "for a poetry of blood," McCaffery pronounced an "utter faith" in sound poetry's capacity to disrupt the shroud of linguistic convention and thereby awaken a link to "the true cosmic organism. the true cosmic orgasm" (275). Exploding language, exploding conventions and traditions, left the human body as the sole but necessary continuum in whatever the next, post-revolutionary phase might contain.

For many postmodern decadent Canadian authors, the turn to the body represented a redemptive turn away from an over-rational, Apollonian social contract. As Quebecois sound poet Raoul Duguay said, "I am serious when I fuck up your system

Figure 3: Steve McCaffery, Untitled (1970).

Figure 4: Steve McCaffery, Untitled (1970).

of communication" for "the pathway between one and the other [...] is the experience and presence of the body" ("On the Vibrant Body" 32, 29). Duguay's sound poetry, like bissett's, involved extensive chanting and a mystical (his preferred term was "esoteric") attempt to de-authorize language. Though his sound work is deliberately solecistic, it was, he explains, part of a conscious attempt to connect his voice to the "vibratory energy" of his body and the physical world (29). The ambition was to use an unhinged language to reprogram both his own and his audience's brains by disrupting the accustomed vibratory patterns of words and communication: "I'm not laughing at people, I'm trying to use magic to make this illusionary culture of yours disappear" (32). Chanting, or mantric music, involves a gradual mutation of a motif—be it a phrase or melody—that turns in upon itself by breaking apart the constituent elements of word or harmony. In doing so, sound poetry turns away from expression and becomes a sublimation of the body and all notions of individuality and authorship into a collective unity between the author, the audience, language, and the world. In an interview with Nichol, Duguay explained that disintegrative language can help an author and an audience transcend the limits of individual consciousness, for "the body is the sanctuary of sound [...] [and] letters explain your perception of the universe" (Interview" 70, 72).

Something similar occurs in Copithorne's visual poetry, especially her distinctive handwriting poems. If the body offered a potential alternative to the moral failings of that contemporary period, the force of the tradition it opposed was daunting and clearly understood. As Duguay sought to distil the body into poetic practice by singing, improvising, and addressing the material dimensions of poetic practice, selections from Copithorne's book *Arrangements* (1973) attempt to bring the body into the text by breaking the monotony and standardization of type. Anticipating Derrida's work on the signature in the 1980s, Copithorne's visual poetry asserts an authorial presence and authenticity through her cursive hand (see Figure 5).
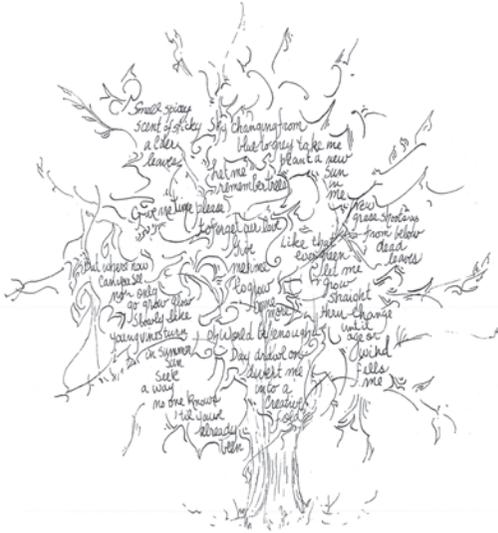
Figure 5: Judith Copithorne, Untitled (1971).

Figure 6: Judith Copithorne, Untitled (1973).

While McCaffery's visual texts address the more disintegrative and disruptive implications of the body, the idealism implied by Copithorne's handwriting texts can be connected to bissett's faith in linguistic redemption, discussed above, as well as the Four Horsemen's rejection, in their sound poetry, of digital effects in favour of organic human voices. Other poems by Copithorne from the same book recognize the looming shadow of modernist violence that opposes and counteracts the possibility of such a revolutionary presence (see Figure 6). Copithorne's more overtly political poems, such as "Unpress" and "Mania," directly address the repressive mechanisms curtailing drives and desires and potential unities. Her more recent work continues to explore and expose the moral quagmire of the new millennium.

Though bissett has managed to keep the magic, shamanic, and merry prankster playfulness alive in his poetry and performances over the decades, the violence and unrest of the 1970s, from the FLQ crisis to the failed democratic revolutions in Czechoslovakia and Poland to the various American outrages (from the race riots to Kent State to Vietnam), punctured the idealistic and hazy utopian illusions of technological and/or primitivist revolutionary unity. While early Canadian visual and sound poetry retained an avant-garde sense of history, a revolutionary, if vague, sense of future fulfillment, the decadent turn away from inherited traditions led rather quickly to a disillusioned sense of history and progress. This transition could be characterized as a shift from revolutionary decadence to postmodern decadence. As Paul Chamberland, a radical sound and visual poet intimately associated with both the 1960s Quebecois independence movement and the Quiet Revolution, wrote in 1974, "The idea of revolution has gone mad—it is now applied to detergents…. Fully aware of what is entailed, I decline the title of revolutionary. […] I won't give in to naivetés" (5, 6). Even during the Summer of Love, Northrop Frye was already arguing against Marshall McLuhan's technocratic primitivism with

reference to Marxist notions of alienation. Frye agreed with his University of Toronto colleague that the rate of technological progress had accelerated to the point that constant paradigm change had already become the dominating feature of our civilization. He countered, however, that with no stability, no new order was coming. Utopias present clear visions of closed, stable societies, but, as suggested in Copithorne's political visual poems, the end-of-modernism era is conditioned as much by anxiety and alienation as it is by the failure of progressive, linear notions of time. As Frye writes, "We are constantly learning from the alienation of progress that merely trying to clarify one's mind is useless and selfish" (74). Hardly utopian, the future from this perspective is decidedly bleak: "In our day, [the fear of Hell] is attached, not to another world following this one, but to the future of our own world" (41).

This anti-utopian, anti-progressive, anti-avant-garde, constant flux model helps clarify the increasingly decadent inflection of postmodernism, arriving in Canada as it did during the Vietnam war, which both Frye and later bissett recognized as an event that precipitated a loss of faith in America (and subsequently in Canada, too, for supplying American troops with horrifying weapons, including napalm and Agent Orange) and a loss of faith in empire that recalls Baudelaire's own disillusionment. In Frye's words, in "the lemming-march horror of Vietnam [Nuremberg] was forgotten and the same excuses and defiances reappeared" (45). More succinctly, bissett advised, "never trust a president," "the fukan pigs […] can have ther / culture" (*Stardust* 124). Constructive idealism was dissolved by the disruptive energy of a growing recognition of failure and limitation: a desire to fall away and fall apart is increasingly apparent. As Kroetsch put it in his famous riddle, "to fail is to fail, to succeed is to fail" (1).

The shift between revolutionary decadence and postmodern decadence is subtle but pronounced: consider the similarly rich constellations of typewritten language in "disintegrative seriali-

ty" (McCaffery, Introduction n.p.) in both of McCaffery's two panels of *Carnival*. The titles allude to Mikhail Bakhtin's attention to the possibility of genuine revolutionary social upheaval. The very different epigraphs to the two panels, however, signal a shift from a transcendental avant-garde decadence through negative dialectics into a transhistorical postmodern decadence. In the first panel, produced in the late 1960s, McCaffery quotes a 1920s modernist manifesto declaring that "form will have a directly spiritual meaning" that will lead to "a constructive unity of form and content." In contrast, the second panel (see Figure 7), completed in the mid-1970, and published in the year after Bahktin's death, quotes Ann Smock and Phyllis Zuckerman, who replace "a coherent position of truth" with "a series of contradictory voices that cannot know themselves, which do not constitute a point of view, which repeat themselves and fall apart" and begin again. The postmodern decadent spirit of *Carnival*, with its sensually indulgent explosion of order, including the instructions to destroy the book, draws attention to the economy in which text and language operate, but the Bahktinian revolutionary carnivalesque in the first panel is recoded as the explosion of a constipated mathematician, an eruption of the systemic effluvia of language. Years later, in an article on McLuhan, McCaffery would argue that "Art's authentic purpose" lies in "making visible those environments that operate upon us by the power of their invisibility" ("McLuhan" 84). This definition evokes Peter Bürger's sense that the primary effect of the avant-garde has been revelatory, revealing the institution of art, rather than revolutionary (19). For McCaffery, as for Lyotard, as for Frye, postmodern art becomes increasingly focused on "chopping holes in the rhetorical facade" (Frye 71), accelerating the modernist retreat from teleology in favour of an art that "is not going anywhere" (72).

In the 1974 *boundary 2* Canadian issue which is often heralded as the first salvo in Canadian postmodernism, a meta-poem by critic and poet Douglas Barbour addresses the decadent spir-

it of the emerging postmodern aesthetic: "who cares any longer: / new theories, running / down the universe, our poetry, fading, slowly but inevitable the talk is not sustained / sustains no faith" (178). Copithorne's contribution to the issue (see Figure 8) highlights a postmodern exploration of paradox and stasis (and her "Oh Yes Oh No!" provides a neat summary of my answer to Trehearne's speculations on Canadian postmodern decadence: yes, in that historical Decadence is relevant to Canadian postmodernism, but no, in that its relevance does not follow the colonial lag model of earlier Canadian writing). In a similar way, Nichol's pattern poem "Christian Cross #2" restages answers as paradoxical questions: the Christian Cross is remade by using only the word "theory," which is itself divided by italics into *the* or *y*. The definite article and the religious icon are suddenly opened to questioning from within by the iconography of a meaningful letter. Theories no longer provide answers, or potential answers, but leave only declarative statements and undermining questions. The visual orientation of this poem draws attention to the fact that even the letters of the word "theory" can be seen to speak out against certainty. Such texts foreground indecision, irony, and the possibility of multiplicity: a visual recognition of alterity. As Derrida says of the act of writing a letter by itself, "It 'is' not and does not say what 'is.' It is written completely otherwise" (74). The "I" in postmodernism is, indeed, once again an-other.

While 1960s Canadian visual and sound poetry began with a vague belief in the utopian potential of decadence and the possibility of revolution or reform, the idealism fell quickly to postmodern disillusionment—a broad calling into question of the linguistic and ideological order. In a recent interview, McCaffery discusses his experience of the transition directly:

> Well, that utopian belief in a language revolution is long gone but at the time it was instrumental. […] Both bp and me felt that in 1968 we could change language. […] This utopi-

Figure 8: Judith Copithorne, "Oh Yes Oh No." (1974).

an belief that linguistic change is the necessary prelude to so-cial-political change led me into conceiving my poetics as a critique of language under capitalism. That belief and opti-mism is now gone. (Cox n.p.)

In Book 4 of *The Martyrology*, bpNichol directly compares his long poem to McCaffery's *Carnival* and links them for enacting a similar process of "dissolution" and "disillusionment" (n.p.). In turn, the second panel of *Carnival* is dedicated to Nichol. Disillusionment, it is worth noting, means to break free from illusions; the negation sustains the possibility of something else—avoiding the compromise of prescription by remaining deliberately indeterminate.

Stephen Scobie connects Nichol's disillusionment to his move away from single-voice sound poetry, which Nichol called in 1979 the trap of the "lonely genius in his shell routine" (Sco-bie, *bpNichol* 19), to collaborative group work and a willful sur-rendering of the determining I (23). To be clear, Scobie situates Nichol at a crossroads between late modernist and deconstruc-tionist writing: the disillusionment and deconstructive tech-niques are often still influenced by an idealistic new humanism (26–27). However, Scobie's own sound work, especially with the group Re:Sounding, utilizes the deconstructive decentred

subject erupting into postmodern polyphony. The group, which consisted of Scobie and Barbour, performed long improvisational pieces involving the gradual deconstruction of words and phrases often descending as far as grunts, screeches, screams, and body noises. Such works, though similar in all respects to Nichol's own group sound work, reject authorial unity but without any hope of restoring or reconstituting language or alienated subjectivities.

Postmodern polyphony, Scobie notes, does not make either his writing or Nichol's writings avant-garde in the historical or directional sense: it denotes an experimental troubling of the possibility of language-use with significant historical precedents. As such, he writes, "[d]econstruction has been implicit within modernism right from the start" (*Earthquakes* 22). Scobie locates the earliest manifestations of this deconstructive impulse with Gertrude Stein and Ferdinand de Saussure, an appropriate gesture with respect to Nichol's work. Other postmodern scholars such as Kristeva, Derrida, and Lyotard, however, have pushed further into the roots of modernism and found links between that work and the historical Decadent/symbolist movement. In fact, McCaffery positions Mallarmé's metatextual irony as a contemporary origin of destabilization and deconstruction ("'Strate and Strange'" 187), declaring Derrida and Mallarmé's projects to be "symplegmatic," which is to say intimately connected ("Nothing is Forgotten" 114). At the same time, Jack David begins his survey of visual poetry in Canada with Mallarmé's *Un Coup de Dés* (1897). Postmodernism becomes, from this perspective, an acceleration of textual phenomena present in early modernist, notably historically Decadent works that are, according to one scholar of historical Decadence, "no longer fraught with the nostalgia of original unity" (Benamou 472). The question of a linear influence raised by Trehearne in the late 1980s, however, implies a colonialism or mimicry that simply does not apply to the diverse range of Canadian and non-Canadian postmodernists who have recog-

nized themselves as sharing with historical Decadence a radical engagement with rupture. A transhistorical consideration of decadence, of the *via negativa*, on the other hand, is itself part of a project begun by Baudelaire and furthered by a great number of twentieth-century authors and scholars. This approach connects the most disruptive and disjunctive Canadian texts by way of their shared resistance to hegemonic structures. Self-conscious and self-reflexive decadent texts are not merely about desystematized meaning—they embody it.

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