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AUTHOR'S NOTE

This interview with Andi and Lance Olsen was conducted during the AFEA annual conference in Bordeaux on June 1 2022. The talk referred to several times in the interview is the keynote lecture Lance Olsen gave on that same day entitled "*Carnage Carnival: The Narratological Politics of What the Fuck?*"[1]

Lance Olsen published his first novel in the early 1990s, and his literary oeuvre is characterized by its sustained exploration of experimental writing practices. He is the author of more than thirty novels and short-story collections as well as of works of nonfiction, including the personal memoir *[[there.]]* which is discussed in the interview. Andi Olsen is a visual artist, using video, photography, texts and objects in her assemblages and installations. Over the years, Andi and Lance Olsen have become close collaborators in a number of joint creations, like the ongoing project There's No Place Like Time associating Lance's novel Theories of Forgetting (2014) and a multimodal installation.

The interview focuses on writing and publishing innovative fiction, on Lance Olsen's more recent fiction (Theories of Forgetting, My Red Heaven, Skin Elegies), and on the artistic collaboration between Lance and Andi Olsen, a deeply original aspect of Lance's writing that is inseparable from Andi's visual creations.

We are very grateful to Andi and Lance Olsen for their time, for offering so many insights into the way they work together, and especially for gifting Transatlantica with two original works that we "commissioned" to illustrate the interview. The collaged photograph and the video montage are respectively Andi Olsen's and Lance Olsen's creative answers to the question we asked them: "what does seeing mean to you?"

The interview ends with a video recording especially made for Transatlantica by Andi Olsen of Lance Olsen's reading of a passage from Skin Elegies.

YANNICKE CHUPIN AND BRIGITTE FÉLIX: Let us start with this: "I think I've heard of Lance Olsen. I wonder who he was. People in 50 years won't ever say."[2]

Lance Olsen: I just finished a novel, while a fellow at The Bellagio Center, about David Bowie called *Always Crashing in the Same Car*. It's slated to appear from FC2 next February and is a prismatic exploration of Bowie through multiple voices and manifold perspectives–the chameleonic musician himself, an academic trying to compose a critical monograph about him, friends, lovers, musicologists, and so on. At its core beat questions about how we read others and how we are read by them. In other words, it asks: Who is any of us?

Which is to say, like much of my writing, it's an exploration into Bakhtin's notion of unfinalizability. Read five biographies of Bowie, and you meet five different Bowies. Identity–which, from a certain perspective, is to say the past–is such a troubled place.

When we first meet a text (and we should recall people are a subset of texts), our usual instinct is to categorize it, finalize its being, its meaning, in order to make it easier for us to pretend we can control it. Our instinct seems to be to simplify, pare down into stability, knowability. But Bakhtin reminds us that every text, organic or otherwise, refuses finalizability. If we pay attention, look and listen, we notice no human becomes finalizable until they are deceased–and then, of course, the narratives we create around them continue to be written, unwritten, and rewritten … if they're lucky … if they're remembered at all.

We could put it this way: texts exist in a perpetual state of change. Bowie is emblematic of that in so many ways. He made his lifework out of researching Heraclitus's philosophy.

And so to your question, which is really my question: Who *is* Lance Olsen? The answer is clear: I have absolutely no idea. That guy becomes a little more unfinalizable for me every day. I'm always unlearning who I think I am, what I'm about. The books I write are ongoing lessons for me into the nature of uncertainty in our Age of Unanswerability. And I take a certain amount of wild happiness in that.

Andi Olsen: I think we will all be sitting here in 50 years, going: *You remember that interview*? And Lance will still be writing and we'll actually have more to add to your question. If not, then I think that through your teaching and writing, Lance, there will be people who will carry on versions of you. So things will be passed down, and things will be lost, and people will get things wrong, yet some thread of that Lance Olsen idea will have become circulated through others. At least that's what I'd like to think. Of course, once we're gone, the question becomes: Who cares?

YC AND BF: In *[[there.]]*, you describe how you were introduced to the notion of "literary activism" by Larry McCaffery and Lidia Yuknavitch. You insisted on the idea of "getting out the word any way you can, because innovative writing isn't just innovative writing, it's a cultural urgency."[3] Has that cultural urgency been a powerful drive to the writing of your novels since *Theories of Forgetting* and up to now with *My Red Heaven* and *Skin Elegies*?

Lance Olsen: My first novel, *Live from Earth*, a sweet love story in a magical realist register, was published in 1991. That was the most normative novel I've written. A New York publisher, Ballantine, picked it up. I learned from that experience that to enter the world of corporate writing is to enter a quasi-literary Ford assembly line, where novels function to maximize profits and minimize narratological risk. I soon came to realize that that wasn't the ecosystem in which I wanted to exist.

Not long after, I met Lidia Yuknavitch and Larry McCaffery at San Diego State University, where they were teaching. Both became models for developing alternative ecosystems of writing and publishing. Lidia has wired into her a beautiful way of forming creative communities in her vicinity in order to disseminate work she cares about. Initially she began a small journal called *Two Girls Review*. For several years she founded and ran a press: Chiasmus. Larry was sensational in championing new, important innovative novels and novelists he came across in scholarly articles and in conducting incredibly informative interviews with heterodox authors. He had a smart finger on the pulse of experimental writing practices, both here and abroad. You could always count on him for illumination.

Long before that, when I was an undergraduate at the University of Wisconsin, I stumbled across Fiction Collective (which in the Nineties, for economic reasons, became FC2) books after hours in the library and became immediately enamored by their aesthetic and existential daring. The press had recently been formed–in 1973 and 1974–by a handful of radical writers, including Ron Sukenick, Jonathan Baumbach, and Steve Katz, all unhappy with the world of New York publishing which I just described. They set up what they thought would be a short-lived experiment in which innovative novels and short-story collections would be brought out by innovative writers. What they published opened up countless doors for me. And FC and FC2's "short-lived" experiment is now nearing its fiftieth year, I'm happy to report.

In 2001, I had the good fortune of becoming the chair of its board of directors. Over the years, as you know, FC2 has brought out a plethora of extraordinary authors whose work is synonymous with experimentation, from Raymond Federman, Curtis White, Leslie Scalapino, Noy Holland, and Samuel Delany to Joanna Ruocco, Brian Evenson, Vi Khi Nao, Aimee Parkison, and, yes, Lidia Yuknavitch.

Lidia also brought into the conversation the necessity of reaching out to younger writers, inviting them into this universe of non-normative narrativity and publishing. For a few years in the early 2000s, we collaborated on the Writers Edge in Portland, Oregon, which was part conference, part series of alternative workshops, and part ongoing conversations about everything from experimental writing and publishing practices to what we all wanted to do aesthetically and politically and why. In other words, it was about helping literary activism spill into the larger world. We felt the cultural urgency in all this become stronger by the week and, needless to say, ever since 2016, when Trump won the White House, that feeling has transformed into a critical imperative.

With respect to my own novels, well, once I left New York publishing, everything in my writing became possibility space. As I argued in my keynote today, every form suggests a philosophy. What I mean by that is that writing doesn't simply embody its thematics at the stratum, for example, of character, dialogue, setting, leitmotif, symbol, or so forth, the textual loci we have become habituated to uncover and explicate, but also at that of structure itself, which is to say among the architectonics of everything from story organization to page design, image layout, sentence construction, font choice, and other cultural/interpretative invisibles.

It seems ever more untenable to repeat ossified forms as much as it does to repeat ossified conceptions of character (which is to say ossified conceptions of selfhood),

arrangement (which is to say ossified conceptions of epistemology and telos), setting (which is to say ossified conceptions of the world), and the rest, whose deep assumptions have led us to the calamity called 2022. Doing so strikes me at best as reactionary reflex, at worst as exemplar of a kind of willed blindness. The danger intrinsic in that move is that it consciously or unconsciously sustains received narratives, which is to say consciously or unconsciously sustains received systems of knowing, and, as Trump and his Trumpniks fathom only too well (to paraphrase a quote often inaccurately attributed to Goebbels), if you tell a lie big enough, and keep repeating it, people will eventually come to believe it. If we structure our narratives familiarly enough, reproduce them frequently enough, people will eventually come to assume those structures tell us something true about how our universe works–that, for example, complexity and conflict can unravel (as romantic comedy instructs us) into easy resolution; or that (as detective novels instruct us) reason and the careful collection of evidence can lead to certitude; or that the plot arc of life (as many memoirs instruct us) is fundamentally fundamentalist Christian in nature: a fall from innocence into sin that leads through tribulation to redemption.

We disrupt narrative structure, not because it's fun (though it most definitely is that), and not because it's gimmicky (it most definitely isn't that), but instead because, as one of the protagonists of Lidia Yuknavitch's new novel, *Thrust*, knows: "Stories are quantum." Stories–serious, self-reflective narratives written here, now–are the antithesis of Newtonian. They exist in multiple, from manifold perspectives, shot through with skepticism, active interrogation, set in relentless resistance to the received complacency, the received whistling in the dark, that has made the world this world.

That's how a novel like *Theories of Forgetting* came about. It thought itself into being through Robert Smithson's *Spiral Jetty*. I'd taken some graduate students out to the site, which lies about two hours north of where I live and work in Salt Lake City, Utah, while we were studying Mark Danielewski's *House of Leaves*, to help us think about the nature of labyrinths, the form that novel uses as its core structuring principle. I noticed within minutes that those students were completely engrossed in the *Spiral Jetty* and in its complex relationship to the environment. What I saw wouldn't leave me alone. I started to wonder: what would a novel look like that was in some way based on the *Spiral Jetty*? The result was a diptych narrative, where one of two stories runs from "front" to "back" across the "top" of the pages, one from "back" to "front" across the "bottom" of the pages, each spiraling around the other, both complicated with images, clashing facts, play with fonts, and so on.

The idea behind that idea of that novel, behind many I've written, and of innovative writing practices generally, it strikes me, is to invite the reader to think of the text of the text, the text of their lives, and the text of the world other than they are, and thereby to suggest the potential of fundamental change in all three. In short, innovative writing practices are not only aesthetically essential, but politically as well. The apolitical novel is the most political there is.

YC AND BF: Delving further into that question of collaborations and literary communities, can you tell us how your work with FC2 and your long-running creative companionship with writers like Lidia Yuknavitch or Steve Tomasula have oriented your work?

Lance Olsen: I did my M.F.A. at the Iowa Writers Workshop, the oldest and probably the most well-known and highly thought-of writers' workshop in the U.S., between

1978 and 1980. It was founded in 1936 and based on the paradigm of the nineteenth-century French art academy. I didn't know what to expect, arriving as I did just out of college, barely 21. I was instantly unnerved to discover how commercially driven and competitive it was–the sort of place that brought in editors and agents from New York regularly, while creating a subtext that seemed to suggest (at least to me) that some of us wannabe authors were going to win and some lose. That atmosphere dovetailed with strangely myopic visions of what constituted fiction, and ones nearly devoid, at least at the time, of historical/theoretical perspectives, countercurrents, alternative ways of imagining what we were doing and why.

A small cohort there at some level sensed this. One of my friends, David Shields, and I would attend our institutional workshop Tuesdays, then often go out for pizza and ice cream afterward or meet during the week to think about and push back against the ocean of uncontested assumptions situating the program, challenge each other to consider what we wanted to be about as writers. That shadow government of support and disputation, these loose tribal affiliations that arose, I realized, added up perhaps to the most important education I received during those years. They got me thinking about how writing is institutionalized in the classroom, in publishing, in the culture, how the relations between authors develop and can develop, what "success" might mean in different contexts, what the theorization of such programs might teach us.

That essential questioning helped frame my later relationships with writers and the publishing/distribution apparatus. How can we sustain each other? How can we oppose, re-envision, re-deploy the pedagogical space? Gentle, caring, and fierce, Lidia conceives of writing zones as realms of social change. Through her and Larry McCaffery, through entities like FC2 and its wonderful board of directors I had the privilege of working with for sixteen years, I experienced collectivity and encouragement in the most transformative ways.

Steve Tomasula came onto my radar a little later. His absolutely game-changing novel, *VAS*, arrived at FC2, the board read it, and, for whatever reason, voted against publishing it. I knew that was a terrible mistake, perhaps one of FC2's worst, but the conversation about it and vote taken were fair and passionate, so there was nothing I could do except to get in touch with Steve and apologize for what I interpreted as our editorial astigmatism. That began what has amounted to a lifelong friendship. We meet fairly regularly at &NOWs,[4] have become rich comrades. *VAS* taught me universes in terms of formal revolution, writing as intense research, about a kind of postgenre writing that functions as much as argument as it does as what we once termed fiction.

Theories of Forgetting would never have been what it turned into without *VAS* and Danielewski's *House of Leaves* floating in the world. All literature is a conversation with other literature across space and time, methods of telling other works how much they've meant to an author. *Theories of Forgetting* is, among lots and lots of other things, a long love song both to *VAS* and *House of Leaves*.

With my own students, undergraduate and graduate, those studying literature and theory and those studying creative writing, I've been dedicated, have been for decades, to exploring ways of moving beyond that Iowa paradigm–the one still most prevalent in the United States. Roland Barthes talks about the academic space as a magisterial one. You know: the "master" enters the classroom or lecture hall, sits

knowingly, the embodiment of "wisdom," at the head of the table, or behind a podium, and delivers Deep Truth. Good god: just shoot me. Unfortunately, that continues to be how many workshops and literary seminars work, even if many have learned to disguise that Wise Master Reflex slightly in a superabundance of ways.

But what else might that space look like? How else might it function? I call my classroom spaces Askings, where the students and I try to find the right questions to pose to each other and the text at hand, rather than discovering the "right" answers, concerning which, cf.: unfinalizability above. We make no distinction between theory and other forms of writing. My goal is to foster a sense of curiosity, close reading, inspiration and motivation and perspiration, challenge and collaboration, a territory of hovering rather than tethering, and a simple (and complex!) interest in the universe and the universe of written texts–a less Euclidean space, as Barthes calls it. A space of opportunities. Polyphony, not monologue. Collectivity rather than hierarchy.

That's also the model I wanted to bring to the board of directors at FC2, a model that doesn't rely on sales figures and metaphorical stock markets, but on cooperation and radical vision.

YC AND BF: Is FC2 still unique in that?

Lance Olsen: No, thank goodness. By the late Eighties and Nineties other small, independent presses were emulating FC2 in response to there being fewer and fewer engaging alternatives on the New York scene, which had become dominated by five houses. Each indie press evolved its own model, but I dare say most, if not all, wouldn't have done so without FC2 paving the way. Now there are tons of superb alt-presses out there, from The Dorothy Project and Tarpaulin Sky to Deep Vellum and Coffee House. It's fantastic to see such mushrooming. (I wanted to say *metastisis*.) In many respects, the only thing they share with FC2 is that they're all looking for new ways of thinking about writing, the bottom line, distribution, and so forth.

How, in other words, they all ask, can we bring into the world the eccentric (in its root sense) books we relish? It turns out that it's actually not that hard. These days most presses support themselves by running contests. If you ask for a few dollars when people submit, you will have enough to bring out four or six books a year that otherwise wouldn't see the light of publication.

YC AND BF: Is that the case with Dzanc Books?

Lance Olsen: I think so. One of the two founders, Steven Gillis, was a lawyer. The other, Dan Wickett, a passionate online book reviewer. In 2006 they committed themselves to setting up and overseeing an unorthodox press. Dzanc's model is quite similar to FC2's, but it further attempts erasing the boundaries between literary activism and social activism. In addition to bringing out some amazing fiction and nonfiction that takes chances (by authors like Robert Coover, Peter Markus, Robert Lopez, Percival Everett, Nina Shope, Susan Daitch, Joseph McElroy, and Laura van den Berg), it runs the Dzanc Writers-in-Residence Program, which brings authors into elementary and secondary public schools to teach creative writing; the Disquiet International Literary Program, a writing conference in Lisbon; and an intern program for students wanting to engage with independent publishing from the inside out. Steve also has his fingers in various extracurricular social programs.

YC AND BF: *Not-Knowing* is the title of Barthelme's collection of essays and interviews and the phrase "not-knowing" recurs in your work. In *My Red Heaven*, for instance, a young version of Vladimir Nabokov awakes to the "not-knowing" of writing.[5] That idea is also reminiscent of a sentence by Roland Barthes you often quote, which says that "writing is the question minus the answer."[6] How does "not-knowing" feed your creative energy? Do you yourself wake up to the not-knowing of writing?

Lance Olsen: When I was in high school, where I should emphasize sheepishly just what a terrible student I was, I started coming across Barthelme's stories in *The New Yorker*. That marks my initial encounter with deeply disruptive, evasive stories that refused to settle, and it was love at first blight. I didn't possess a language with which to talk about them and that intrigued me to the marrow. I realized as I moved through college and graduate school that my favorite reading moments were those in which I couldn't quite stabilize a text, whether it be one by Joyce, Stein, Faulkner, Pynchon, Robbe-Grillet, or whomever. It was those flashes of not-knowing that drew me in, that made me feel I was among family and among the living.

Not-knowing is why I sit to write each morning. The idea of cranking out some version of the same novel I've written before is heartshattering. Deadening, too. For me, it's all about the sensation of being back on my heels, drifting in uncharted waters, coming ashore in what the Germans call *Neuland*–utterly new topography. I still remember with *Theories of Forgetting* waking up each morning with the hope that I might just write a novel nobody would ever want to publish. I like to think I came pretty close.

Which I suppose leads us to Barthes and his notion of literature being the question without the answer. This is absolutely essential to my understanding of the sort of writing practices that appeal to my heart and my mind. I want to finish reading a novel feeling rudderless, like all I am left with are question marks and lacunae. The rest strikes me as various categories of propaganda. If one really believes one has all the answers, well, one hasn't really thought or felt very hard. When teaching, I want to present texts to my students that set them into generative lands of ignorance. I teach Stein's *Tender Buttons* almost every year, by way of illustration. Beckett's *Unnamable*, too. Texts one can never walk away from thinking: that's it; I've got it; time to move on. One can repress them, pretend one never read them, pretend they don't exist, tiptoe around them and get on with one's life. But think about them a little bit, and solar systems open up around you.

They're the definition in my mind of limit texts–a variety of writing disturbance that carries various elements of narrativity to their brink so the reader can never quite imagine them in the same terms again. Karl Jaspers coined the word *Grenzsituationen* (border/limit situations) to describe existential instants accompanied by profound anxiety, a radical destabilization, in which the human mind is forced to confront the restrictions of its existing forms–instants, in other words, that make us abandon, fleetingly, the securities of our limitedness and enter new realms of self-consciousness. Death, for example, according to Jaspers. Limit texts are designed to put us into an analogous space of continuous re-flection and re-feeling.

YC AND BF: Gertrude Stein is a great way to introduce first-year students to literary experimental texts, with a deceptively "simple" sentence like "dining is west."[7]

Lance Olsen: Yes! Sentences like that make me outrageously happy. My favorite from *Tender Buttons* might be: "Let it strange."[8]–letting it strange as a reading mechanism,

a writing mechanism, a way-of-being mechanism, how we might move through the world of the world and the world of texts in a perpetual state of shock, inquisitiveness, excitement, unconcealment, discovery, and discomfort.

YC AND BF: You describe your volume *[[there.]]* as a "trash diary," and that term reappears in *Skin Elegies* in the Fukushima section. Can you tell us more about your notions of trash diary and waste aesthetics?

Lance Olsen: I spent the spring of 2013 as a fellow at the American Academy in Berlin, where I was working on *Theories of Forgetting.* I noticed myself beginning to collect little bits of data on the side–quotes, reminiscences, observations, reflections, all kinds of incoming information.

Andi Olsen: One night we would go to experimental theater and see something that just blew our socks off. The next night we would attend a concert of *neue Musik*. We'd go to performances, art installations, you name it. You [Lance] would come back, grabbing from here and there, and somehow it all got absorbed into *[[there.]].* Everything became material because everything was intent on reinventing the idea of art.

Lance Olsen: Exactly! And, before long, that collection began to grow like barnacles on a rock or wreck. I started asking myself what this agglomeration might look like if I simply let it become itself, which it did in the form of a critifictional collage-contemplation–I coined the term "trash diary" to describe what I was doing–about what the confluence of curiosity, travel, and innovative writing practices might feel like.

Many years later I came across Olga Tokarczuc's *Flights,* which she refers to as a constellation novel. I was amazed by its amalgam of seemingly unrelated narraticules that were connected, not by plot, but by metaphor, image, trope. The result is an anti-teleological activity on the part of writer and reader, wherein process supersedes product, where not-being-at-home is more fundamental than being-at-home, where forward motion is attained through other means than character development and the rest we expect to purchase in that old rag and bone shop of the heart.

This leads me to recall another, perhaps more distant anti-teleological influence on my work: Kathy Acker. I frequently teach *Blood and Guts in High School* for its exceptional fusion and confusion of transgressive fiction and nonfiction, genres, pla(y)giarized and so-called "authentic" passages, multiple discourses, image and text, all in the keys of Bataille and Kristeva, both of whom Kathy was reading as she wrote it. At core, Kathy–we met in the early Nineties and remained good friends until her death by cancer in 1997–was concerned with what Larry McCaffery, speaking of Donald Barthelme's project, once dubbed an aesthetics of waste–that which cultures must expel or at least repress in order to remain functioning and whole. While my work exists in a very different register from Kathy's punk work, it couldn't be what it is without her work's presence, its insubordinate formalistics and thematics.

YC AND BF: Andi, did you also keep your own visual trash diary while you were in Berlin? *[[there.]]* (p. 96) reveals how you conceived the project for your film, *Denkmal*,[9] from a

collection of photographs that you'd taken every day of the same view of the villa where the Nazis held the Wannsee Conference, during which the Final Solution was laid out.

Andi Olsen: I've always conceived of my creative process as a sort of garbage disposal. The assemblage sculptures I make are all about taking disparate objects–animal bones, mannequin parts, birdcages, and so forth–and bringing them together in unexpected juxtapositions. So it's something I naturally gravitate toward. Berlin provided new, fiercely rich terrain.

Denkmal materialized because I was drawn to the beauty off our balcony at the American Academy, which looks out across Lake Wannsee. I started taking photos from there every morning. At some point well into the process, I learned that the Wannsee Conference Center–where, as you say, the Final Solution was imagined–was tucked away in a stand of trees on the far side. You can't actually see it from the balcony, but there it is–the horror of the past inside all that beauty. I was compelled to catalog it. I photographed it mornings, afternoons, and evenings. I didn't know what I would do with those shots, just that I needed to take them, my visual trash diary, deeply aware that had the Second World War gone differently, Lance the intellectual and Andi the Jewish artist would most certainly not be in a position to take in that view. Rather, we'd be ash and debris. I shot over 3000 stills and whittled those down to something like 1200. And it's from those that I constructed *Denkmal*.

Lance Olsen: You have to understand: to walk into Andi's studio is to see trash aesthetics at work everywhere you look. I'm ostentatiously neurotic. A neat freak. A desperate lover of order in this disorder we refer to as reality. I have a very clean, well-organized desk and computer desktop. Literally if I have a nice view out my window, I pull the heavy shades so I don't get distracted by all the sparkly particulars. Andi is the magnificent opposite. She possesses an explosive imagination. If I open her computer desktop to look up something, I'm struck down by a wave of anxiety. Everything is everywhere. Everything is one of those shots from the James Webb telescope.

Andi: It's like folder, folder, folder...

Lance Olsen: You adore collecting things. In Andi's studio there's a pile of animal bones here, a collection of doll parts there. False teeth. Glass eyes. It's an extraordinary and extraordinarily stimulating space. The other thing is ... I'm thinking of Kienholz ...

Andi: Edward Kienholz. Absolutely! He did these fantastic large-scale installations–rooms you could walk into with scenes comprised of strange beings and various cultural detritus. A bar. A cell in a psychiatric institution. A lonely apartment in New York City. He was the first assemblage artist I think whose work, which I came across in graduate school, spoke to me deeply. Small world, by the way: he moved to northern Idaho, where Lance and I were teaching at the University of Idaho, and bought–yes, bought–a small town called, I kid you not, Beyond Hope. We met him shortly after we moved. He was a large man of few words, a kind of avant-garde semi-aphasic Buddha. Ed referred to what he did as tableaux. His work taught me about how one can combine disparate artifacts into gripping if dismaying environments. He used resin to create these cocoons around his figures, employed animal skulls in his sculptures. That kind of thing changed me.

YC AND BF: Lance, would you say that your attraction for the *Wunderkammer* is inspired by Andi's own creative work and imagination?

Lance Olsen : We're the *Wunderkammer* kids. Andi helped introduce me to the concept–another mode of trash aesthetics, a three-dimensional trash diary, and one that goes back to, apparently, sixteenth-century Italy and England. In many ways my work is the literary expression of a *Wunderkammer*. That dimension couldn't have existed without Andi's visual expression coming first. [*To Andi*] One of the things that's so engaging about your *Wunderkammers* is that they are all sites in which different voices collect. A polyphony of voices means a multiplicity of contradictory realities, a refusal to welcome any single absolute epistemological or ethical point of view. That suggests different ways of existing in the world without hierarchy.

We are back, then, to what Derrida conceives of as the artist/thinker as bricoleur, where apposition leads to new methods of seeing and feeling. One can, at least from one point of view, conceptualize *Theories of Forgetting* or *Skin Elegies* as *Wunderkammers*, which by nature embrace anti-teleological visions. One doesn't necessarily have to read either from beginning to end (indeed, the ideas of "beginning" and "end" don't really hold up in the former); both gain meaning through juxtaposition of incommensurate narraticules; there is a sense in both of some sort of collection of heterogeneity. One doesn't–one can't–read the *Wunderkammer* in a linear fashion. The eye never quite knows where to fall or how to proceed. And every detail is significant.

Andi's work has this quality of incendiary simultaneity to it. If you look at her assemblages or videos, you'll notice how busy they usually are, how frenetic, how much is going on in a very limited space or time. They overflow with minutiae–a little plastic ant crawling on the dress of some big sculpture; Adolf Eichmann's manipulated voice bits in *Denkmal.* It's as if whatever medium she's working in, she's really working in that tradition of the *Wunderkammer*.

YC AND BF: Going back to the trash diary, can you tell us a bit more about Hamari's in *Skin Elegies*?

Lance Olsen: Three or four years ago Sandeep Bhagwati, a composer based in Berlin, asked me to contribute a poem to a sonic memorial he was composing about the Fukushima disaster. I wrote an erasure poem backwards, as it were–one, that is, in which more and more words materialize as the poem takes shape on the page–based on several first-person accounts of the nuclear accident. That slowly grew into what you read in *Skin Elegies*, which itself, at least in my mind, is a gathering of narratives about emblematic moments that made the second half of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first incomparable and incomparably overwhelming. (Boy, did Ecclesiastes get it wrong: Everything is always new under the sun.) At the same time, cell phone novels–a popular medium in Japan that allows commuters to read easily on their way to and from work on trains–caught my attention. I studied a good number of them and, in all honestly, found them just awful: threadbare romances and flying dragons, mostly, if you know what I mean. What I found bewitching, though, was how they looked on the screen. The very form turned prose into poetry, estranged the architecture of the page. So the first-person accounts about Fukushima–a kind of trash diary of quotes from interviews, news articles, and videos–distilled into a single account, written as a cell phone novel (or, more precisely, cell memoir) by a more-or-less fictional school teacher in an attempt on my

part to ruminate on how the contemporary comes to terms with how we put into language that which can't be put into language. How, through that, we might develop a sense of radical empathy for others involved with us in this ahistorical fiasco we think of as the present.

YC AND BF: Many sections in *Skin Elegies* are about one moment, which you expand into a fragmented narrative. Is this a way of working on the encounter between narrative prose and poetry?

Lance Olsen: I've told my creative-writing students for years now, somewhat truthfully, somewhat mischievously, that I used to know what the difference was between prose and poetry, but I've long since forgotten. For the last couple decades I've been finding it ever more complicated to separate the two alleged categories in any meaningful, revealing way. I'm more drawn to considering writing practices in post-genre terms, in projecting beyond–or at least perplexing–the belief in "borders," which is such a fraught concept both aesthetically and politically, not to mention in terms of gender, race, physics, or philosophy. Another way of saying this: I like to wonder what happens to writing and thinking and feeling that doesn't picture itself as either-or, but rather both-and: prose/poetry, fiction/nonfiction, text/image.

What we once labeled poetry has an ability to condense or blur time, reconceptualize it, condense language in ways that normative prose writers haven't tended to do. Yet then one recalls writers like Ben Marcus in *The Age of Wire and String*, or any of Barthelme's or Anne Carson's work, or, obviously, Stein's, Joyce's, Faulkner's, or Laurence Sterne's, and that facile observation breaks down. Prose writers have usually had an urge toward the chronological, toward prose as transparent window, toward rounded characters. I'm curious about how and why we might disrupt such moves, bracket them, turn reading into a difficult event from the shape of the page to how we view selfhood, no longer boxing these concepts into the language of those dumbed-down creative-writing textbooks written in what feels like 1735.

Too, I'm drawn to timeless moments, moments where temporality doesn't function as we've been taught temporality should–those last few minutes, for instance, after the Challenger has disintegrated, when the crew apparently remains alive and conscious. That retelling of the Icarus moment in the grammar of technology and spectacle. What happens to a minute when you know it's your last? Asking if that moment is more fit for poetry or prose seems beside the point, evidence of imagination idling. Rather, the question I'm interested in is how one writes it in a way that captures its full-bodied, unhabituated intensity.

YC AND BF: What you say about trying to figure out what goes through someone's mind in a dramatically short time span evokes Tobias Wolff's story "Bullet in the Brain,"[10] which first tells how a man called Anders, a literary critic, gets shot in the head during a bank robbery. Then the text proceeds to narrate what happens in the man's brain, where the bullet does not travel as fast as the neuronal connections. The second half of the story presents itself as the list of what Anders might have on his mind at the exact time of his death, which turns out to be none of the supposedly significant moments of his adult life. Defying the bullet's speed in neuronal temporality, the narrative–as if in slow motion–reaches the core of the man's existence: that seminal childhood memory when for the first time Anders heard another kid speaking with a Southern accent say "*they is*" in a phrase that sounded

wonderfully incorrect and liberating. At which point the story stops, before the bullet exits Anders's skull, with the resonating "*they is.*"

Lance Olsen: I don't know that story, but I have to tell you: I wish I'd written it. What an exquisite idea. That's exactly what I'm talking about. Robert Coover, whom I admire to no end, pulls off the same move, only in reverse, in "Going for a Beer," where he encapsulates a man's whole life in two and a half pages and just a few sentences. This drastically subjective notion of temporality intrigues me.

YC AND BF: In your essay "Reading/writing as tangle: metafiction as motion" you write that "[a]rt willfully slows and complicates writing/reading, hearing, and/or viewing."[11] Could you say more about that slowing down process in your writing? Andi, would you also care to comment on the variations in speed that we often see in your videos—whether it is slow motion, as in *Where the Smiling Ends*, or extremely rapid montage as in *Denkmal* or in some parts of *Theories of Forgetting?*[12]

Lance Olsen: I suppose this returns us, in a fashion, to the view of making reading into a difficult event–Espen Aarseth coins the term "ergodic" to describe what I'm talking about, moving through a text as non-trivial activity–an event whereby we can experience the incredible strangeness of the act we forgot sometime when we were children: deploying bizarre squiggles on a page to empathize with other humans across space and time. What a crazy enterprise.

Behind that observation floats Viktor Shklovsky's famous essay on the defamiliarization effect in art–the attempt, I would argue, not only to make the reader sense the stoniness of the stone, as Shklovsky claims, but also to teach them at an existential level to become more present in the world by teaching them to become more present in the world of deliberately challenging texts. We usually read Shklovsky in terms of technique (after all, his essay is titled "Art as Technique"), but I would argue behind his discussion of technique is a crucial phenomenological contention.

Andi's riveting work in *Where the Smiling Ends* is the embodiment of that, isn't it, Andi: this anthropological undertaking where you see across cultures that, as people stop smiling after their photo is taken, and they move from the public to the private again, there is something forlorn that emerges in their body language: this dropping of the head, this gesture of giving up and turning inward. We didn't pay enough attention to the world until Andi's piece taught us how.

Andi Olsen: What about this at the larger level of art *vs* entertainment?

Lance Olsen: Totally. Entertainment, we could say, is all about speed–those movies, you know, where lots of things blow up in the dark, yet you can barely remember whether or not you've actually seen them a week after you've left the theater. My students are keenly, painfully aware that they're members of the Distracted Generation, plugged into the continuous bewilderment of surfaces. Art, however, is all about the opposite: an invitation (an intervention, maybe, is closer to the point) to slow down, embrace Heidegger's sense of *Dasein*. N. Katharine Hayles makes the helpful distinction between two cognitive modes, deep attention and hyper attention. Deep attention, associated with conventional writing and reading practices, enables us to concentrate on a single text for an extended period of time. Think of our experience with a novel by Flaubert or Dostoevsky. Hyper attention, on the other hand, switches focus rapidly and often while skimming across digital veneers. Think of our experience navigating the latest *Grand Theft Auto* or *Call of Duty*.

On the first day of each semester, my students and I take a little time to talk about how one reads difficult work, how unplugged focus gives one a very different experience of reading–reading as this act of loving, caring, discomfort, uncertainty, elation. We spend a little time thinking together about what we even mean when we say the word *reading.*

Andi Olsen: Which is a form of seeing, isn't it. And that kind of seeing is all about a process of putting on the perceptual brakes. So I think of *Where the Smiling Ends* as an investigation into what photography leaves out–that second after the photograph has been snapped, what happens beyond the frame of a picture. That's the alluring story. To get at it, I needed to slow down the video clips that comprise it and really *see* what happens. I recall you and I, Lance, were sitting in a cafe near the Trevi Fountain in Rome. I said why don't you go ahead and have another cappuccino–I want to wander over there take some footage of all those people getting their pictures taken. As I videoed, what I thought I'd been observing, that gesture we've been talking about, became more apparent to me. Then, as I started editing, I was like: Will you look at that.

Somewhere I read people visiting museums spend an average of 30 seconds in front of a masterpiece. You know: been there, done that, time to take a selfie and move on. I've always been committed to providing enough detail that one is tempted to stick around a little, come aboard and take a journey with me.

Paradoxically, there's another way that urges seeing, and that's to infuse a video with a certain kind of unusual speeding up. I'm thinking here of *Denkmal*. I wanted to fit in as much information as possible into as few frames as possible, so that the viewer could see seasons changing, weather changing, place itself changing and yet staying the same, time undergoing continuous metamorphosis in a state of historical irony.

Either way, if all goes well, one re-experiences the nature of temporality, the nature of *being* somewhere. That's what art can do that entertainment can't.

YC AND BF: Does this also happen in your writing process, Lance? You said you like to be able to pay attention to the acoustics of your sentences. When you reread a sentence you've just written, do you see or hear things you didn't think would be there?

Lance Olsen: Always. It's the oddest occurrence–editing my work. It feels like somebody else wrote every single syllable I'm reading. Each morning I go up into my writing studio and work. I start from where I began the morning before. I write and rewrite a few pages until they feel like I can leave them alone for a while, then push forward with the promise of going back when the first draft is complete. I rework again, both at a global and local level. Each time I move through a passage, a sentence, a phrase, I hear something I didn't hear the last time, see some turn, some image, that surprises and delights me–or disappoints me, chagrins me, demands rejiggering. That may be another reason some have the sense of slowness and/or condensation when reading my work. I'll write a sentence again and again. Often what I thought was one sentence will grow into a paragraph or page. And, as Andi said about her work, I love texturing my writing with specificity–full-on sensory particulars. When I feel like an area of the text I'm working on is nearing completion, I read it aloud. Over and over again. That invariably leads to another series of astonishments and disappointments.

YC AND BF: Could you expatiate a little more on how you created the video for *Theories of Forgetting*, Andi?

Andi Olsen: Lance was far enough along in that novel that we knew the protagonist, Alana, was going to die in a pandemic called The Frost, which caused an increasing sensation of coldness and growing amnesia in its victims. (One could call it a bad case of the twenty-first century.) He had written a passage that talks about a so-far non-existent video[13] Alana had made, ran that passage off, and said, Let's see what we can come up with around this, okay? The first thing I showed him was a little *too* busy. And that's where our collaborative spirit kicked in. We started going back and forth, forth and back. I wanted to create cascading images of the landscape around the *Spiral Jetty* that paralleled Alana's increasing psychological disorientation and physical decline because of her illness. Then, in the second half of the video, the recited narrative from the novel that accompanies those cascading images begins to reimagine itself visually through an erasure.

The key idea was to have the novel extend past its borders into the world by way of a video. Somewhere in that process we decided not to stop there, but rather to put together a whole video retrospective of Alana's work and show it in actual galleries under the title *There's No Place Like Time*–hence a novel you can walk through that doesn't stop at the usual novelistic borders.

YC AND BF: There is a pervasive sense of anxiety in *Skin Elegies,* which can be linked with this impression of speed and slow motion. *Skin Elegies* is somehow difficult to read at one fell swoop for that reason: it's a book that is "difficult" to experience. You have to take breaks, lifting your eyes up from the book because of the intensity of events described and that pervasive sense of anxiety running in the text. Can we connect all this to a phrase in *[[there.]]* which defines reading as a "mode of pain"?[14] What about your own experience when you write those fragments: do you physically feel that tension? Is it a productive energy into your work or the opposite?

Lance Olsen: I guess at the largest level I wanted to apprehend in *Skin Elegies* this cultural agitation we're all feeling in our contemporary beyond belief, beyond our ability to navigate, where, thanks to the climate catastrophe, a perpetual pandemic, the proliferation of war, surveillance capitalism, and the rest, we as a species are writing ourselves into our own extinction. I sought to generate a concomitant sense of instability in my readers, a continuous sense of disconnection–perhaps the literary equivalent of Freud's notion of free-floating anxiety. So, yes, I wanted, as it were, to make *Skin Elegies* into an anxiety machine.

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[*To Andi*:] It's like *Denkmal*, to that degree, isn't it, an exercise in what Ted Mooney in his prophetic 1981 novel *Easy Travel to Other Planets* called information sickness–those occasions he describes when overwhelmed pedestrians now and then simply drop in place along the streets of New York and curl into fetal balls, bleeding from the nose, when it all becomes too real and too much.

I also wanted to mine the sense of pain as a productive reading mode. I don't understand why reading should always be a pleasurable undertaking. I know at first that sounds odd. But we all remember times when reading has been the opposite of effortless. It can be hard. It can be bewildering. It can be frustrating and boring and

mystifying–all in the same sentence. Barthes talks about a certain kind of reading as bliss, which is absolutely the case, but I think there's another side to it, a shadow side few speak about, which involves distress, something approaching suffering that can be wrapped up with that bliss–watching Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, by way of example, reading his *Unnamable*, traversing the arduous passages in *Gravity's Rainbow* or *Infinite Jest*, or, in a very different way, Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*, a transcription, during the course of a year, of a minute of each day's weather report from 1010 WINS. These are trauma texts, not in the sense that they portray trauma, but rather in the sense that there's an element of trauma that comes into the very act of reading them. Often these sorts of experiences are easier to talk about, work through, after the fact than while submerged in the text itself. Yet the distress is usually–at least for me–ever so worth it. Counter-intuitively, it's part of the joy of taking on such texts.

Some readers have certainly found *Skin Elegies*'s relentlessness tough going. There's not one sequence that I would describe as an especially happy one. (*Laughs.*) I get that. The book also jump-cuts between narratives mercilessly. And many readers want, at the end of the day, to locate a wink of solace in the reading process that I'm afraid I'm simply not interested in. Solace strikes me as an overrated concept. In fact, *Skin Elegies* is probably one of my most relentless novels because, I would suggest, this has been our most relentless world. We need to contemplate what that means, yet we want to do the contrary. Our addiction to New Age quackery masquerading as Zen wisdom and wacky Pollyanna[15]-ish religiosity aside, solace is not exactly in abundance–unless one has drilled deep into the practice of self-delusion. I know most people don't want to hear this, but so it goes.

I was asked recently by an interviewer, as I mentioned in my keynote today, why exploring the dark spaces doesn't lead me to give in to despair. I discovered myself answering that I suppose I see what I'm doing through a very different optic. First, talking about giving in to despair hits me as the wrong way to put it. That metaphor connotes losing a struggle. But why should entering a state of despair be conceptualized as failure? It is simply (and complexly) an emotion we find ourselves inhabiting among the myriad others that make humans human. I don't get why at this turn in history we would want to repress, distract, or self-medicate ourselves away from a frantic sense of helplessness. This, after all, is who we have become. This is what we have done to ourselves and what we should consider. We reside in the city of extremis among a flood of antidepressants, conspiracy theories, and digital distractions, the consequence of our society's choices, and that feels bewildering and dismal. Examining and articulating our despair is an essential part of what it means, not to heal, but rather to be a thoughtful, fully feeling individual.

Second–and this may sound contradictory in light of what I just said–engaging in defiant narrativity, in reminding ourselves that trying to maneuver through the world using someone else's choreography is both dangerous and deadening; in reminding our students in the classroom and our readers outside its doors that we don't have to live this way, that we can continually at least *imagine* the act of rewriting our scripts, despite the evidence, despite the untellables, at least locally, at least for a while–engaging in defiant narrativity is the precise inverse of despair, or, rather, a further complication of despair's complications.

I often wonder if it is syntax and grammatical encumbrance that are to blame for our belief that we can only experience one category of emotion at a time.

Andi Olsen: The mind upload sequences in *Skin Elegies* is such a perfect metaphor for capturing that anxiety–that sense, as the mind you describe is being uploaded, of digital static.

YC AND BF: In *My Red Heaven*, there is that other sense of anxiety for the reader which is linked with the several layers of temporality running through the book. Most of the time the readers are immersed into the lively and enjoyable present time of the characters back in 1927. But very regularly a voice just comes out of the contemporary moment and reminds the readers of what will befall these characters in a few years or so.

Lance Olsen: To ask how we experience time–something none of us can even define (here I'm reminded of St. Augustine's observation on the subject, which Steve Tomasula uses as an epigraph for his brilliant hypermedial work *TOC*: "What is time then? If nobody asks me, I know; but if I were desirous to explain it to one that should ask me, plainly I do not know.")–to ask how we experience time is to ask how we experience narrative. As soon as that voice from the future appears, as it sometimes does in *My Red Heaven*, something off-kilter transpires: the present becomes suffused with further texture, terrible irony, an ironic resonance. It's one thing to show a young man eating a pound of chocolate daily because he's addicted to the stuff, another to allow the reader to realize that that man, whose friends call Adi, will become the Adolf Hitler we know only too well.

In *Skin Elegies* something else happens, too, temporally speaking. It's told in a perpetual present tense, except for the intrusions from that future voice. That absolute presentness, I hope, adds to the novel's relentlessness. The reader in many cases already knows what's going to occur (the Challenger waiting on the launch pad is always-already doomed, for example, has always-already come apart and is tumbling toward the ocean in pieces), so a different sort of dramatic irony blossoms that doesn't need to be stated. Each narraticule in the novel is part of some larger catastrophe, and one comes to feel it's horrific present, followed by another horrific present, followed by another. The resulting anxiety on the reader's part, I should like to think, forms resistance to formulaic, normative responses to how we are used to telling catastrophes. Humans have a tendency to want to narrativize catastrophes in such a way that they ultimately offer reassurance, or at least catharsis, but these times we're living in ... They can't be told with the old formulae. (Here we're raising the narratological ghost of Christianity again, that narrative need so deep in us we think it's natural to crave redemption. But why? The data doesn't support the assumption.) So how *do* we tell so that readers can *feel* the terror of the present and, all going well, use that emotion as a tool to help think critically through it?

Andi Olsen: It's equally important to disrupt how the stories get repeated endlessly in the media cycles and then utterly forgotten. Thinking of the Columbine shooting: hideous as it was, we do nothing in its wake as a country save wait for the next one. We have become habituated to fear and crisis. [*To Lance*] I think you wanted to take some of those moments and show different aspects of them and not focus on that thing we always see and know about them.

Lance Olsen: The history behind the history. Exactly. That's the difference between journalism or an academic history book–both, from a certain vantage point, subsets

of fiction–and self-conscious fiction: the latter is engaged in imagining consciousness, in deploying all five senses in summoning a world from the inside as well as the outside. The consequence is, all going well, the creation of an intimate empathy, a deep-structure humanization–or, if nothing else, the approximation of that, since the idea of "empathy" is itself riddled with complications. After all, if we can't over the course of a lifetime come to fully understand ourselves (and we most certainly can't), then how in the world can we expect to fully understand another, someone of a different age, race, socio-economic and education background, gender, whatever? And yet our job as writers is to keep trying and keep failing.

While each of the historical moments I tell in my novels stays very close to the exterior facts–or as close as one can when speaking of a past event, an event that by nature always makes yesterday into a narratological problem–each also attempts inhabiting those instants in a fashion only self-conscious fiction can access, utilizing those two things that fiction can do that other writing genres can't: extended explorations of interiority and extended celebrations of language.

YC AND BF: We would like to ask you about the importance of "skin" which is very much present in *My Red Heaven*. We're thinking of Anita Berber for instance, or "the skin that people call Anita Berber."[16] The novel after *My Red Heaven* has this beautiful title *Skin Elegies*, such a startling association of words. There is also that fragment from Vladimir Nabokov's *Pnin* that you quote in *[[there.]]*[17] that says that "Unless a film of flesh envelops us, we die." We would love to hear you on the notion of epidermic sensations in your novels.

Lance Olsen: Isn't that crazily beautiful, how Nabokov writes about our skin as the equivalent of an astronaut's fragile spacesuit?[18] Over the last, what, twenty or thirty years, our social domain has wrestled with the trouble called the body in manifold ways. What is the complex relationship of those false binaries, mind and body, thought and sensation? Where does the body stop and digital prosthetic begin? In what sense do the bodies we refer to as ours remain a stable site in the face of time's arrow? How does that help us nuance notions of selfhood? Temporality itself? As mind upload technologies are imagined, do we need to reconceptualize what William Gibson calls "the meat" as we visualize leaving the body behind entirely–something it looks like we'll probably be able to do within the next fifty years or so, just in time for the death of the planet–thereby attaining a very *un*christian immortality?

We sometimes conceive of our skin–erroneously, I would argue–as the primary site of home. During our pandemic that changed. Or, rather, our perpetual pandemic brought to the fore something that has always been the case (we need only look to a text like Kafka's *Metamorphosis* for confirmation): that our bodies are forever radically other, estranged, sites of potential dread, disease and dis-ease, reminders that we are all astronauts in fragile spacesuits, strangers to ourselves and others in a strange land. My students, it turns out, felt that profoundly as they were cut off from others, cut off from serious education, by a welter of screens, made to fear the consequences of their own bodies' actions. It was, it is, fiercely disconcerting for them, for us.

Behind all this dis-ease stands our stubborn aging. Believe as we might, time's arrow flies in only one direction as far as we're concerned: right through our unsteady hearts. This awareness imbues *My Red Heaven*, *Skin Elegies*, and that novel I'm just completing, *Always Crashing in the Same Car*, about David Bowie's last months–those during which he worked on his acclaimed album *Black Star* while battling liver cancer

and the consequences of his sixth heart attack. It's about being on the far, far shore of youth.

Bowie was all about continuously reinventing music, reinventing self, but our culture had moved on after the Eighties and in many respects he became an increasingly marginal figure. The question he asked himself during the years that followed was how to come to terms with the fact that one's voice doesn't sound like it did in one's thirties because it's shot through with the effects of myriad drugs, those accruing heart attacks, that eruption of liver cancer, which is to say Mr. Blue-Eyed Death himself? And yet how does one not give in to the habitual? We walk unceasingly through this blast furnace we call our flesh … and then what? Which is to say, interestingly enough, we inhabit a society permeated by agism that doesn't know it's permeated by agism. It's striking to me how few novels confront aging and agism as a core concern.

This obsession with the body, with what we might call the Aesthetics of Disability, are essential to your work, Andi, from Freak Show and your assemblages to your fascination with skin in your video *Written on My Body: The Scar Project*, which documents a number of writers' stories about their physical scars which the world has etched on them.

Andi Olsen: This might be a good time to recall that the working title of *Skin Elegies* was *We Held Hands*. That leitmotiv still runs through the novel–that anchor of human touch. I remember you, Lance–we were having coffee one day, talking about possible titles, and it occurred to you that, because it's such a robust leitmotiv, it couldn't be the title. That would be too obvious, philosophizing with a hammer. "Skin Elegies" became its own little poem instead.

Lance Olsen: That's a great point. Yes. When you touch someone, you know, your blood pressure actually goes down, a calmness is wont to enter you, and you all of a sudden feel connected with another human being in a way that no device (at least so far: be still, virtual reality) can duplicate. And yet there are always, not just one, but two spacesuits separating you at that instant, as well. And yet you forget that's the case. That's what we're hardwired to do. And yet to touch someone for the first time is always the beginning of touching them for the last time. So every inch of skin forms the first syllables of an elegy. Continuously.

Andi Olsen: Even as it constitutes a home chord. The first months of the pandemic underscored this: that physical separation, those spacesuits, that essential isolation so many felt.

Lance Olsen: As you say that, I'm reminded of my mother's long, slow death by cancer in 1993. Andi and I were fortunate enough–"fortunate enough" is a galactic understatement–to be the only two people in the room at the assisted living center when she changed tenses. How can I describe what a crucial instant it was for the three of us? The human touch we shared felt absolutely direct, despite her morphine fog, her semi-consciousness, her undone flesh. My mother responded keenly. She may not have known where she was, but human touch was the language we spoke at the end. We spoke her out of the world.

YC AND BF: Going back to the working title for *Skin Elegies,* is there a trace of the idea of "holding hands" as a vital form of connection in the way some sentences from one section are repeated at the beginning of another, "holding hands," so to speak?

Lance Olsen: What a wonderful insight. Thank you for reading my work so closely. Yes: I wanted to weave each disparate narraticule into the next through some kind of unique procedure, and settled on that narrative hand-holding, as you perfectly put it, which also struck me as a form of musicality–you know, one set of sounds, or one set of images, echoing another.

We haven't talked about that component of *Skin Elegies* yet–that idea of musicality as shaping tool. My work has been tremendously influenced by two musical forms: Bach's fugues and Coltrane's jazz, each of which seems to me a version of sonic perfection. How, I've been asking myself for a long time, can such structures help us reconsider narrativization? I'm currently reading an excellent collection of essays on narratology in preparation for my graduate seminar this fall on Narrative Theory and Practice: edited by Marina Grishakova and Maria Poulaki, it's titled *Narrative Complexity: Cognition, Embodiment, Evolution*. Last night I finished a marvelous essay by Martin Rosenberg, "Jazz as Narrative: Narrating Cognitive Processes Involved in Jazz Improvisation," that's helping me continue to wonder in deeper and deeper ways about these things. Rosenberg talks about how members of an improvising ensemble must work wholly differently from, say, those in a classical string quartet. They must tell their story "in sophisticated harmonic, melodic, and rhythmic contexts, while responding at the same time to other musicians." The result is that several cognitive processes must be going on at the same time. Rosenberg shifts attention in narrativity, then, from the already-written to story-writing as emergent property, which feels much more like what I'm doing most of the time when composing.

I know all this can sound quite calculated and abstract, but that's only a sliver of what we're really discussing. The other is fanatical intuition, which is simply another way of pointing to the subject performing as multiplicity.

YC AND BF: You talked about the writing moment as the creation of this "existential space of contemplation." Many descriptions in *My Red Heaven* and *Skin Elegies* seem to aim at plunging the readers into the midst of a world of sensations, a sensory, sometimes very sensual world. In "Reading/writing as a tangle," you explain how experimental reading/writing practices imply that you "thinkfeel" the text.[19] Can you tell us about this phenomenological dimension of your writing, so to speak, being in the midst of the world, in the grain of things and writing about that?

Lance Olsen: One of the greatest pleasures I receive from my writing is trying to put into language–which is to say trying to articulate thought and feeling–the countless experiences of being alive: what this smells like, what that really looks like, what something else sounds like. At that stratum, all my work feels like an extended journal about observation. In other words, the actual process of writing coaxes me into contemplation. The act may seem slightly ironic, naturally, since I pull the curtains in my writing studio and never look out the window while I'm working. But that's an optical illusion. Turning inward turns me outward, gives me the focused opportunity to exist more fully in the world beyond the walls of my house and the walls of my skull. Isn't it odd, how while I write I'm completely separated from every other human being on the planet, yet more connected to the act of being human than ever. This is what I mean by writing as tangle … in the best sense of the word–with

the world, with the self, with others I will never know, with the problematics of existence.

In my creative writing classes, I notice, because of our screen-based globe, my students tend to privilege sight in their writing while concomitantly repressing or failing to attend to the other four senses. Another way of saying this: they tend to render scenes as if they were part of a film script. When I point out that short stories and novels don't want to be films when they grow up, my students display dismay. But we all know, as Truman Capote said of Kerouac's *On the Road*, typing isn't writing. Composing veneers isn't fiction. Not paying attention isn't narrative, neither deep thought nor feeling. Skating on the surface of life isn't living.

It goes without saying that the thing itself, as Derrida underscores, always escapes. Of course it does, absolutely, and much to the chagrin of the phenomenologists, yet that inevitable failure is precisely the motivation for authors and intellectuals, I have to believe.

I recall when Andi and I started dating, we would go to a museum and stand in front of a Monet and try to *really* see what we were seeing. I'd say something dumb like: "I see an icy river in the snowy countryside." And Andi would counter: "But look: there's no white at all used to render winter. It's all shades of blue and gray." Andi helped teach me how to see. *Seriously* see. I like to think we've helped each other sharpen all our senses like that through our engagements with art, with writing, with the universe. I like to think we've helped each other over the course of the last 42 years gather experiential richness–meaning that we've helped each other sharpen our curiosity, the questions we ask.

But the phenomenological engagement is always fraught, because we never actually encounter the universe, do we. We encounter, rather, our perceptions of the universe–the various constructions we've set in place, or which have been inculcated into us. The thing itself always slips away. That brings up an attendant dimension to my writing: how keenly aware I am that it is motivated by dilemmas rather than solutions. This returns us to Barthes. Writing for me isn't solely about contemplation, though it is most certainly that, or at least not the sort of contemplation associated with, say, a meditative state, but rather also an active investigation into the complications of a thought, a metaphor, a disturbance I sense around me.

YC AND BF: We're curious about the titles of the subsections in *My Red Heaven*: two phrases united by a kind of colon, which is not exactly a colon.

Lance Olsen: I talk about this a little bit in *[[there.]]*, both seriously and puckishly: that the English language is bereft as it is, in part, because it contains only 14 punctuation marks. *Fourteen*. That may be the saddest sentence I have ever spoken. Punctuation, after all, is the musical notation of the sentence. And we only have 14!

So what would happen, I ask daily, if we invented more punctuation marks, a greater range of said notation? Each section of *[[there.]]* is preceded by four colons. To me those four colons express an introduction to the inexpressible. In *My Red Heaven*, I use the colon in the manner you describe as the expression of metalogic, a skewed micro-poem about what's to follow, two words or phrases separated by a space, a colon, and another space. What appears on either side of that notation is sometimes a vital metaphor, sometimes a principal phrase that sounds beautiful, a pretty image, a jarring one. In other words, one might think of the colon in this context as the mark

of a clash (which, after all, is a kind of signature for the whole novel), the mark of undecidability. It points to a larger movement in the text, too: a mark of collage, that juxtaposition of unlike objects or voices that opens up and out.

As you can tell, I'm embarrassingly entranced by punctuation. One of the things I love most about *Tristram Shandy*, to cite a case in point, is its use of the em dash. It's such an underused, underrated mark–and one students are often at a loss to employ correctly. Sterne uses it as a sign of hesitation, of connection between two ideas that don't seem to go together, of Locke's associative thought that Sterne simultaneously examines, celebrates, and lampoons … and which unwittingly looks forward to William James's assertation in *The Principles of Psychology* that consciousness is a stream, an assertation the modernists took up wholeheartedly. There's something comic about an em dash, too. Ever since reading *Tristram Shandy*, I can't feel them as a fully serious gesture. In *Dreamlives of Debris*, I quote the em dash as used in *Tristram Shandy*–to some extent as a way to thank Sterne, but also to some extent as a device to introduce a certain breathlessness into prose.

Andi Olsen: And that says nothing about the double bracket…

Lance Olsen: Oh, my god. So. Much. So. Every use of those is a thank-you letter to Heidegger, who spoke about bracketing concepts that, as it were, can't fully land, that we take for granted without critical reflection. My double brackets are Heidegger's on steroids. What, I ask through the title *[[there.]]*, for example, do we even *mean* when we use such a pregnant word? Why do we think of it (as that period connotes) as somehow finalized, when it is just the opposite. The operation of bracketing defamiliarizes what the brackets try to contain and can't. "There" is such a haunting, haunted word. It's a word that one can never actually believe in in a work of fiction because in a profound way there's never any "there" to be found "there." Fiction is indeed always about what isn't there. And nonfiction: well, don't even get me started. It was trendy for a short time in creative writing courses during the Nineties to talk about a sense of place." But needless to say that's the one thing no piece of writing will ever evince except in delusive terms.

YC AND BF: Sometimes in *Theories of Forgetting* the brackets are open and sometimes don't close.

Lance Olsen: Visually, I hope, that move creates a jarring effect in the reader. For me writing like that sure did: it signals that the contemplation, the problem, the strangeness will never end.

BF AND YC: How do you work with your publishers? How difficult is it to publish novels that are formally and materially experimental? Andi, as a visual artist, are you a part of the dialogue with the publishers about the book cover and general design?

Lance Olsen: I don't know how things work in France, but in America, in New York, in corporate publishing, which consists of only a handful of houses (as opposed to the Sixties, when there were well over 100), when you sign your contract, you give away rights to design and covers. You only own the actual words of your text–and really, economically speaking, only a small percentage of those. This, for me, is emblematic of current Big Publishing, which has very much bought into Big Capitalism. It's from there my first novel, *Life from Earth*, appeared in 1991. The process felt to me a lot like riding a Ford assembly line.

(Agents, by the way, have essentially taken on the role of gatekeepers for corporate publishers over the last twenty or twenty-five years in the U.S. So I haven't used one of those, either, since, I want to say, around 2000.)

From a very early date, I tried to have as much control as possible over my writing by working with smaller, independent presses committed to experimental writing practices. It was exactly the right decision for me. Actually, I think they found me even as I found them. What I mean is writers ferret out their audiences serendipitously, even as audiences ferret out their writers.

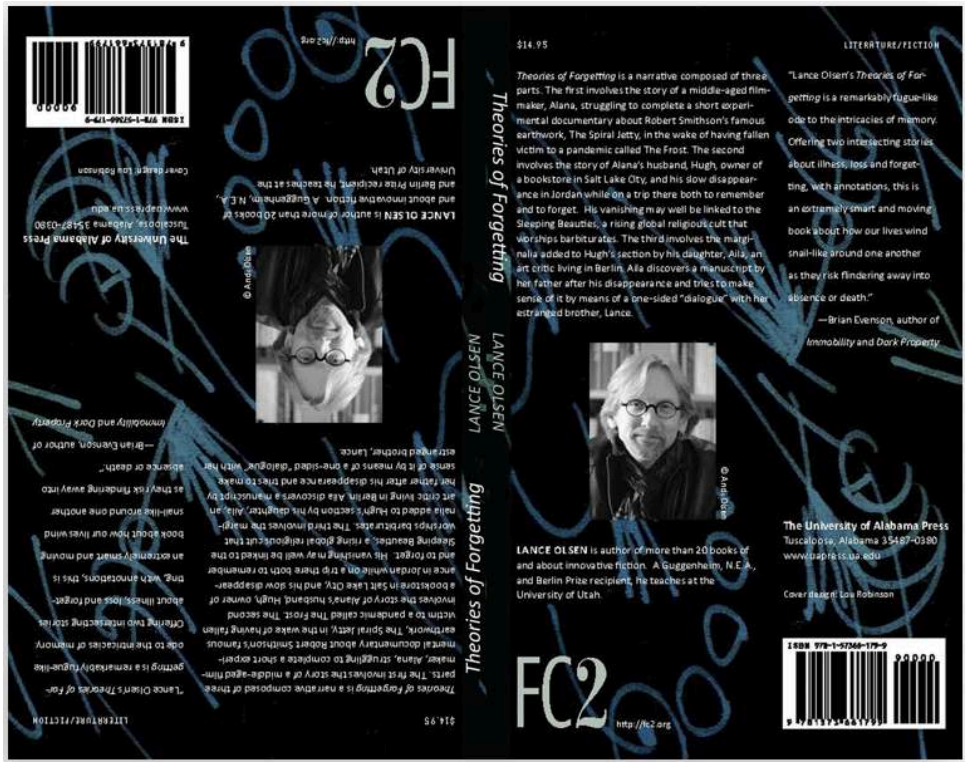
An example: with *My Red Heaven*, given the text was about Berlin in 1927, I wanted the cover to mimic the look of posters in Germany from the Weimar years. Matt Revert–the amazingly talented designer who invented the cover–and I spoke, at first through the publisher, Dzanc, and then directly. He was all about it. That way I got to control the novel from cover to cover. That's something that almost never happens in Manhattan.

And you can imagine how nightmarish *Theories of Forgetting* proved to lay out, given its anti-normative design. I've become increasingly engaged not only in writing novels, but also in what I think of as genuinely building them. I worked quite closely with FC2's wonderful designer, Steve Halle, on *Theories*, and with a novel like *Dreamlives of Debris* I laid out everything myself in InDesign, then sent Dzanc the file. What a sheer delight it is to work at that level. It demands a thoroughly distinct skills set, where the visual supersedes the linguistic.

Andi Olsen: In *Theories of Forgetting* the protagonist's daughter–a performance artist–enters marginalia in pen into the allegedly found manuscript one is reading. Lance wanted a very specific color: that of the Great Salt Lake on a sunny day. Not just any blue, mind you. It took a while to hit on exactly the right one. And Lance didn't want a front cover on the novel, either, since that would suggest a privileged beginning, so he asked the publisher to create identical back covers. FC2 obliged.

Bookstores didn't know how to display the novel on their shelves because of that lack of a front cover. [*Laughs.*]

Double spread of the book cover of *Theories of Forgetting* by Lance Olsen



Lance Olsen: Bookstores would receive copies of *Theories of Forgetting* and ship them back to the warehouse, saying there must have been some sort of printing malfunction–there were two back covers. That Keystone Kops situation was amusing to watch, because on some plane it flagged what the novel was really all about at the end of the day: the act of reading itself; how we make sense of unfamiliar data hurtling in.

I first encountered artists' books in the late Nineties, began to look back at their history and their present instantiations. The library at the University of Utah has an extensive collection with more than 70,000 titles. So I take my graduate and undergraduate students over there when teaching creative writing to urge them to think of books in a less parochial context. And, it goes without saying, I've been profoundly infected by my own rendezvous with the opportunities artists' books present.

And *you've* been very involved with the design and layout of each of my books, Andi, perhaps none more so than *Theories of Forgetting*, which has, as we say, become an ongoing collaboration in the form of *There's No Place Like Time*.

Andi Olsen: Oh, just another example. Lance had also asked that the pages in *Dreamlives of Debris* form a perfect square, suggesting that each page was a kind of room in a readerly labyrinth. At first Dzanc said no, that wasn't salable, then they came back a week or two later, having realized what a cool idea it was, and said not to worry, they'd figure it out.

Lance Olsen: At times even independent publishers think they understand what a book should be, what it should look like, only when you give them something that doesn't look like what they expect in some very basic way, they resist initially.

YC AND BF: In children's literature, deviations from the traditional book form are accepted and even encouraged. There is a lot of visual invention in illustrated books for children, for instance.

Lance Olsen: So true. But adult books are treated as a whole other beast. Isn't that odd? And sad, too. I mean, we've been talking in large conceptual terms. But there's obviously also something incredibly fun–in the sense of childhood-wonder fun–about getting a book that you don't know how to open, don't know how to read, must explore in embodied terms to understand. We've been taught through enculturation, indoctrination, how to forget all kinds of joy, haven't we.

Plus I'm a sucker for a little impish impulse: Why not a square book like that? Why not a book with two back covers? Let's play. Let's enjoy ourselves.

Or, to reprise that Gertrude Stein line: "Let it strange."

Because through those exercises we come to see our world anew.

YC AND BF: When exactly did you start collaborating together in the creation of books? Was it with *Girl Imagined by Chance*?

Andi Olsen: We've been doing collaborations for a little more than 20 years. "Deathwatch," a small DIY SF graphic comic, I think, was our first and that was in the mid-Nineties. We exhibited it in a gallery as part of a cyberpunk installation.

Lance Olsen: While the short-story collection *Sewing Shut My Eyes* consists of several of our early text-image collaborations, I guess *Girl Imagined by Chance* was the first novel we collaborated on in a fairly extensive way, very carefully thinking through the relationship of text and image. Andi supplied manipulated photographs–the novel was all about Baudrillard's notion of simulation–one that sat as an epilogue for each chapter. The most complete sense of collaboration, though, remains *There's No Place Like Time*. Often when artists or writers work multimodally, they have a real strength (visuals, say), but aren't particularly strong in some other area (narrativization, say, or language). What's been so special for us is sharing our strengths. It takes all our talents, such as they are, to produce a hybrid novel, catalogue, videos, gallery-space design, "found" objects, you name it, in that ever-growing retrospective.

Andi Olsen: We've had such a great time nudging the reader out of the text of *Theories of Forgetting* and into the real world,[20] beginning by inserting into the novel that URL to one of the protagonist's videos. How, we've kept asking ourselves, might we explode the binding of a book further?

With collaboration, one plus one always equals three–something, that is, neither person could have anticipated producing on their own, something greater than the sum of its parts. That's a blast–that process of conversation, creative problem-solving, instinctive searching, and the rest usually takes the form of good-humored, exploratory exchanges between us. We provoke each other, egg each other on, sustain each other, find enchantment in what the other comes up with. The consequence is that there's much less ego involved than many might assume. Brainstorming sessions are the best. We're also quite good editors of each other's work. We have a long history–over 40 years!–know the conditions in which each of us is working, and know what we're each capable of.

Back to that erasure I mentioned earlier. In the *Spiral Jetty* video, the one that links from that page in *Theories of Forgetting*, there's a passage in the novel that Lance narrates. That passage is then erased in the video–parts of it drop away to manifest as another story, a poem that has been hidden in the original text. I think we had both recently met Jen Bervin's exquisite book-art project, *The Desert*, and had begun wondering how we might allow it to influence us. In any case, I wanted to be the one to do the erasure of the original text, but the more I tried, the more I was reminded how I'm most definitely not a wordsmith. I passed it off to Lance, and he's all like: "Oh, cool, let's see what I can do." And he goes away for half an hour returns with just what we needed.

YC AND BF: Does that mean you never disagree on essential decisions?

Andi Olsen: When Lance has a manuscript ready, I'll read it and I might suggest a cut or an addition here or there. He might do the same with a piece I'm working on. We both know it's never the final word. Sometimes the suggestion floats between us for a while. Sometimes we need to let it sink in. Sometimes we'll say that isn't quite what we have in mind. More often, however, it will lead us into productive territory. Our work always comes out stronger because of those back-and-forths, that openness to creative possibility.

Lance Olsen: I'd simply say it all goes back to that idea of warm-hearted give and take, an attempt to bring out the best in each other and each other's work.

A parable: once upon a time I was working on a long SF novel called *Time Famine*, which came out in 1996. I passed off the manuscript to her and, well, as you can probably guess, then there's this long silence while she carefully works through the text. That gets to be unnerving. I'm the kind of guy who wants to accidentally on purpose wander into the room where she's reading every five minutes and ask how things are going. But anyway, in this case, if not in them all, I controlled myself, waited patiently, and, after going mum several days, finally stuck my head into the kitchen where she was reading–and saw her with a pair of scissors, scotch tape, a magic marker, and part of my book scattered everywhere. She was cutting up parts of the novel, splicing them in elsewhere, and … um, that may not have been the most ebullient moment of our marriage. [*Laughs*.]

Seriously, *Time Famine* turned out to be tremendously better for Andi's efforts. I'm so grateful. I always am.

Andi Olsen: While I clipped and pasted, I kept thinking, what's the worst that can happen? You know, I cut this thing up and put it back together in a different way. Lance runs off another copy… But I could feel his eyes on the back of my neck, just like: "What are you *doing*?"

Lance Olsen: What was worse was that I looked at what she had done after the fact and thought to myself: "Damn, that's good." So I had to both perform anger, and then repentance, and then penitence. Seriously, though, it was all gratitude all the way down.

Andi Olsen: Back to our collaborative video *Denkmal* for a minute by way of another parable. Originally, I had set it to a Philip Glass piece called *Metamorphosis.* I showed Lance and his response was, well, you'd already made a similar classical acoustic choice with *Where the Smiling Ends*. How about trying to go somewhere else? And that

was so dead-on. We started thinking about other possibilities and before long drifted into the idea of an aural collage–something we were especially interested in at the time because of the *neue Musik* we were listening to in Berlin. Lance suggested I pull snippets from the transcript of Eichmann's trial in Israel, where he spoke about the infamous meeting at the Wannsee Conference Center. I isolated several phrases, developed it into a sonic piece, and, bam, we had it.

YC AND BF: *There's No Place Like Time* is still traveling, still being shown. Do you plan to expand it?

Lance Olsen: Andi's working on a new piece right now. Alana is an amorphous-enough figure that, even after her death, work she's made keeps showing up.

Andi Olsen: This one in part has to do with what we were talking about earlier–the unfinalizability of history and identity. I'm using photos of myself, something I haven't done before and don't usually care for. Invisibility suits me. But here it feels good. I'm working with ones from my childhood, ones taken in the house in which I grew up in Des Moines, Iowa. I happened to notice one day on Zillow that that house was for sale. An idea caught me: what if I could gain access to it, to the same spaces in which I was a child, and try to duplicate–or at least approximate–the earlier photos, then somehow overlay them, so the past ghosted the present, and the present ghosted the past, thereby raising into view that great philosophical thought experiment, The Theseus Ship Paradox: if each plank of Theseus's ship has been replaced over time, at what point does that ship become no longer the same ship it was on the day it was built? In what way am I that kid in those photographs, even though I'm not? In what way is that kid a familiar stranger to me?

"What seeing means"

© Andi Olsen – photo collage, June 2022

Lance Olsen: In what way is Alana, who in a sense was never in those photographs, in those photographs, and not in those photographs, and not-not in those photographs?

YC AND BF: So the fiction expands…

Lance and Andi Olsen: Exactly. Hopefully forever until we're … finalizable, in a manner of speaking.

BF AND YC: Do you think there might be other works in the future, other collaborations that would have this opening-to, like a text leading to a video, or maybe an installation?

Lance Olsen: We'll have to see. Right now we're having a fantastic time mining the gifts Alana has given us. We keep thinking *There's No Place Like Time* might be done, and then … no … it keeps augmenting. Unfortunately, the pandemic stopped the live-exhibition version of the show, although much of it is present online at its website.[21] We hope the live part will soon start up again.

Andi Olsen: So far, Alana keeps giving.

YC AND BF: We would like to conclude by asking you the same question Katya Fischer asks Alana Olsen at the end of *There's No Place Like Time*: "Is there anything else you'd like to add?"[22]

Lance Olsen: No. [*Laughs.*]

YC AND BF: Which is what Alana basically said … but her exact answer is: "No. I've probably said too much already."

Lance Olsen: Oh, we must end with that. It's absolutely perfect. Alana always knows just what to say.

[General laughter.]

1 This media file cannot be displayed. Please refer to the online document http://journals.openedition.org/transatlantica/20393

NOTES

2. Lance Olsen. *[[there.]]* Anti-Oedipus Press, Fort Wayne, IN, 2014, p. 132.

3. *[[there.]]*, p. 74.

4. A biennial festival of innovative writing hosted at various universities since 2004, when the first edition was organized at Notre Dame University by Steve Tomasula. &NOW Books, an imprint of Lake Forest College, published Lance and Andi Olsen's fictional exhibition catalogue, *There's No Place Like Time: A Retrospective* (2016).

5. Lance Olsen, *My Red Heaven*, Dzanc, Ann Arbor, MI, 2019, p. 53.

6. The quotation appears in Olsen's *Architectures of Possibility: After Innovative Writing* (Guide Dog Books, Bowie, MD, 2012, p. 16 as well as in *[[there .]]*, p. 72 and is taken from an essay on Robbe-Grillet where Roland Barthes writes: "What do things signify, what does the world signify? All literature is this question, but we must immediately add, for this is what constitutes its specialty, *literature is this question minus its answer*" (*Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard, Evanston,

Northwestern University Press, 1972, p. 202). The original French text can be found in Barthes's *Essais critiques*, "Le Point sur Robbe-Grillet?," Paris, Points Seuil, [1963] 1971, p. 203.

7. "Dining," in the "Food" section of *Tender Buttons* (1914).

8. "Dinner," in the "Food" section of *Tender Buttons*, just before "Dining."

9. The film is part of an online exhibition of works by fictional filmmaker Alana Olsen. See www.zweifelundzweifel.org.

10. First published in *The New Yorker* (September 25, 1995), then in *The Night in Question* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1996).

11. In *Revue française d'études américaines*, n° 159 (2019), p. 89-90.

12. *Theories of Forgetting* is not only the title of Lance Olsen's novel but also that of one of the films made by Andi Olsen and attributed to the fictional filmmaker Alana Olsen. The three films can be viewed on the website of the (fictitious) Zweifel und Zweifel art gallery exhibiting Alana Olsen's work: zweifelundzweifel.org/#films.

13. The passage from the novel *Theories of Forgetting* that is used in the eponymous video is on pages 146-152 (on the side of the book which tells the story of Alana's husband, Hugh, after Alana's death).

14. *[[there.]]*, p. 40.

15. From E.H. Porter's novel and the derivative « Pollyanna principle », referring to the main character Pollyanna's bias towards optimism.

16. *My Red Heaven*, p. 14.

17. *[[there.]]*, p. 25.

18. This idea immediately follows the preceding quote from *Pnin* when the narrator meditates on a seizure the character is experiencing and his ensuing sense of dissolving into the landscape: "Man exists only insofar as he is separated from his surroundings. The cranium is a space traveller's helmet. Stay inside or you perish" (Vladimir Nabokov, *Pnin*, New York: Vintage international, p. 20).

19. See *Revue française d'études américaines,* n° 159, p. 91.

20. On page 146 (on the side of Hugh's story), there is a footnote with a link to the URL of Alana's film about the *Spiral Jetty* titled *Theories of Forgetting*.

21. zweifelundzweifel.org.

22. *There's No Place Like Time,* 2016 (unpaginated).

1. The video recording of the lecture is available on YouTube (www.youtube.com/watch?v=QmTWZMTk3g8).

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