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# Poetic Practice Gone Rogue: Inquiry, Document, and Making Public in France in the Age of Mediarchy

Jeff Barda

SINCE THE TURN OF THE CENTURY, literary critics have observed in France a series of radical transformations: prominent amongst them, the rise of ‘documental’ practice, based on appropriation, repurposing, and plunder of ready-made materials. Poetic practice has particularly borne witness to this growing interest. In a climate characterized by information overload and the risk of its obsolescence, prevailing dominant modes of delivery, and hegemonic narratives, poetic practice has gone rogue.<sup>1</sup> What I mean by this is first that poetic practice is increasingly explored by practitioners outside the poetic sphere, be they amateurs, volunteers or hackers. And second, that poetic practice more and more engages with documents linked to cultural memory that are “forgotten, invisible, vanished or censored”<sup>2</sup>—such as domestic violence, war crimes, history of colonialism or low intensity conflicts—redistributing them to produce new formats and significations. This article examines various practices in French that fall under the banner of ‘documental’ poetics. By paying close attention to the various techniques of appropriation—*bâtonnage*, transcription, and redescription—employed by Sylvain Bourmeau, Eléonore Mercier, and Franck Leibovici, this article addresses how techniques of repurposing bring to light the network of power of our mediarchy,<sup>3</sup> give rise to alternative modes of political action, and lead to a redefinition of the public in contemporary culture.

To be sure, the past two decades have witnessed the emergence of various interrelated phenomena that have spurred further potentialities for literary innovation that can explain this ‘documentary mode.’ Recent technological and social transformation that now characterize our ‘remix culture’ where everything can be remixed, copied, and edited has dramatically challenged narrative forms, literary consumption, and the role of authorship in neoliberal economies. As media theorist Lev Manovich observed, the advent of digital technology tilted the balance from a syntagmatic to a paradigmatic model, from horizontality to verticality: the narrative as symptom of the modern has been replaced by the database, so much so that the world is now perceived as a list of items rather than as monolithic symbolic form.<sup>4</sup> In response to this economy of overabundance of data—number of words, images, sounds, docu-

ments—that surround our existence in our hypermediated environment, French literary critic Tiphaine Samoyault attributes to literary practice, and to writers, an ethical task: “le monde paraît être devenu un gigantesque réservoir de documents qu’il faut éclairer et mettre à la disposition des lecteurs [...] le recours au document indique que les œuvres littéraires ont à voir avec la référence, avec tout ce qui flotte et passe et à quoi on peut donner un statut.”<sup>5</sup> While many poets have taken possession of ready-made documents to explore or reinvigorate the everyday life and ordinary language that are typical of our current hypermediated and globalized world, many have used them as a way to tackle, in a context of post-truth, algorithms, and de-realization, the political issues of our time.

Tellingly, since 1990 poetic inquiries of current affairs and political issues have enjoyed remarkable prominence in France. This period, characterized by the decline of emancipation and critical thought in France, is often regarded by cultural historians as a schizophrenic decade.<sup>6</sup> On the one hand, it marked the rise of neo-liberalism and the triumph of conservatism—what Bernard Noël eloquently termed “la castration mentale”<sup>7</sup>—but also the increasing development of mass media and modern technological organization to the ends of the consumption industry—echoing Michel Deguy’s analysis of “le culturel”<sup>8</sup> or what Eric Sadin termed later as “la société de l’anticipation.”<sup>9</sup> On the other, it indicated the emergence of new movements of resistance and forms of political engagement within French cultural production. Notably, this period saw in poetry the revival of interest in praxis and action after a hiatus of several decades, which provides important reconfigurations of poetry’s relationship to politics. Crucially, Jean-Marie Gleize observes that unlike past models and postures, namely the neo-avant-gardes of the 1960s, which upended language conventions through opaque language (a ‘contre-usage’), an entire generation of poets, including Christophe Hanna, Thibaud Baldacci, Anne-James Chaton, Nathalie Quintane, Daniel Foucard, and Stéphane Bérard, but also Jacques-Henri Michot and Manuel Joseph, amongst many others, explores instead a ‘méta-usage.’ The common ground between them is that they take stock of “des langages dominants pour en faire la matière d’une écriture poétique critique qui va revendiquer comme lieu d’intervention et d’action, l’espace public—panneaux publicitaires, écrans-vidéos, posters, etc.”<sup>10</sup> in order to provide new forms of objectification and representation of the political.

In this context, the repurposing of found materials no longer entails, like earlier avant-garde instances, a questioning of originality or novelty, like in Apollinaire or Cendrars’ works. Instead of taking part in the new economy of

overproduction and technological determinism, and against the risk of a certain obsolescence of information, many authors have decided not to create *more* resources, but to take stock of them to create more accessible, expressive, and meaningful ones. But as Gleize notes, this is not an easy task:

Le problème est [...] d’inventer un système de notation adéquat à la démarche en cours. Collage, montage, échantillonnage sont, dans ce contexte, des procédures privilégiées: manipulation d’éléments prélevés dans une archive textuelle ou autre, image photographique ou dessinée (graffitée), multiplication de procédure de saisie (ou de description) du réel en autant de dispositifs ou d’“installations” que de situations en cause.<sup>11</sup>

Through reappropriation, contemporary poets not only seek to reactivate some structural properties present in the original documents that have usually gone unnoticed (the “documental ecologies,”<sup>12</sup> that is, semiotic traces, formats, affordances that make tangible the institutions and practices), but they also stage them differently: they repurpose, erase, aggregate, collate, restructure, rearrange them in a new fashion to reveal the gaps, the lacunae, the intervals of cultural memory, producing as a result, via new layouts, visual arrangements or media, a new representation of the political. Such techniques, as we shall see, eschew the belletrist tradition associated to rhetoric but retain of rhetoric the skill of drawing the reader’s attention to uncovered realities or aspects of everyday experience. The most prominent example of this tendency is for certain the poetic document. In 2007, French poet and artist Franck Leibovici put forward this concept that can be defined as a visual apparatus capable of gathering together heterogenous data related to public fora.<sup>13</sup> Striving for effectiveness, the poetic document consists in republication, understood both as ‘publishing again’ and as “making public again” (Villeneuve and Bobin 13) to produce both new significations and new modes of classification and distribution of knowledge that lead to a clarification of thought and an objectification of discourses:

le “poétique” des documents s’entend ici dans son sens étymologique: les documents poétiques se donnent pour tâche d’inventer de nouvelles formes, de nouveaux formats, lorsque les outils à disposition se révèlent inadéquats à une saisie quotidienne du monde. comme *technologies intellectuelles*, ils permettent d’effectuer d’un seul coup des opérations jusqu’alors disjointes, ou difficilement exécutable hors de ce cadre synthétique. ces documents sont “poétiques” parce que les *médiations* nécessaires à une représentation nouvelle et efficace des problèmes *publiques* auxquels ils se confrontent (au sens de John Dewey), sont aussi en partie, poétiques et esthétiques.<sup>14</sup>

Almost a century ago and nearly anticipating the Frankfurt School, John Dewey in 1927 diagnosed what some of the most influential thinkers of the

second half of the twentieth century were soon to call “la société du spectacle”<sup>15</sup> (Guy Debord), “le simulacre et la simulation”<sup>16</sup> (Jean Baudrillard), that is to say the conditioning of human experience epitomized by advertising, mass media (television, radio etc.) that allegedly provides customers with a genuine access to lived experience. The critical reappraisal and rediscovery of Dewey’s work in France<sup>17</sup> offered a way out of the theoretical framework and models, such as humanist Marxism, the utopian ethos of the avant-gardes or the logic of negativity that had dominated French thought. Dewey’s pragmatism, still very much rooted in experimentation, exploration of everyday life, and symbolic activities, offered a fertile framework to reconsider the social role of art in relationship to praxis and collective emancipation. In *The Public and Its Problems*, Dewey posits:

Telegraph, telephone, and now the radio, cheap and quick mails, the printing press, capable of swift reduplication of material at low cost, have attained a remarkable development. But when we ask what sort of material is recorded and how it is organized, when we ask about the intellectual form in which the material is presented, the tale to be told is different. “News” signifies something which has just happened, and which is new just because it deviates from the old and regular. But its *meaning* depends upon the relation to what it imports, to what its social consequences are. This import cannot be determined unless the new is placed in relation to the old, to what has happened and been integrated into the course of events. Without coordination and consecutiveness, events are not events, but mere occurrences, intrusions [...] isolated from their connections.<sup>18</sup>

The issue of media is not only that it conceals its mediations but also that it does not inform the public or contribute to its organization as it is always driven by competing (and private) interests. To rectify those shortcomings, Dewey advances the idea of a social and political agency in which publics are no longer passive, diffuse or fragmented, but carry out, inquiries through explorations of those hidden “relations,” “coordinations,” and “connections” for reflection, deliberation, and action. If such reorganization of the public constitutes perhaps more a horizon for a new democratic model, it is also, however, a valuable framework to understand the primacy of aesthetic experience and how it can be situated in practical and social life. Guided by research, the poetic document seeks to achieve this goal. To that end, the repurposing of documents linked to the public arena enables a shift from the ‘private’ to the ‘public’ that aims at bringing people together from different backgrounds and whose deliberations do not require expertise or prior knowledge but a practical intelligence so that they can carry out their own inquiries. As we shall see, aesthetic experience, understood in pragmatic terms, is first and foremost ethical and cannot be separated from observation and deliberation: it is a means for the

formation of a public that recreates hybrid agoras outside the political arena, through the convergence of political, symbolic, and material assemblages.

### Bâtonner

In a small volume entitled *Undoing Art*, Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville remark the prominence of what they call “erasure art,” a practice that implies acts of deleting, destroying, cancelling or wiping out as creative operations.<sup>19</sup> From Stéphane Mallarmé’s scattered spatial layout to Robert Rauschenberg’s laborious erasure of De Kooning, including Gil J. Wolman’s *art scotch*, a technique consisting in tearing off strips of printed matter to then scotch-taping them on wood or fabric, forms of removals—disfigurations or blatant obliterations—constitute a vital strand of twentieth- and twentieth-first century poetics. Yet, instead of adding an umpteenth technique to the repertoire, French journalist Sylvain Bourmeau, who worked until 2016 as a deputy director and editorial writer for the daily newspaper *Libération*, decided to resort to “bâtonnage.” This technique widely used in the press and that consists in “raturer les mots ou les morceaux de textes estimés superflus”<sup>20</sup> seeks to improve the quality of a text (that is, to use concise sentences to be comprehensive and avoid excess jargon) to maintain the reader’s attention. From his professional practice came the idea of publishing an eponymous book entirely composed through the repurposing of *ratures* stemming from journalistic material. Ranging from *faits divers* to incident, scandals, political events, and cultural mores of ‘la vie française,’ *Bâtonnage* can be read as a compendium of what ceaselessly captures our attention in our current mediasphere. What drew Bourmeau to carry out this project was his growing concern regarding the way information in the digital age was being shaped, reported, and organized:

J’étais face au journal comme devant un paysage dévasté [...] Temps mort sans deadline, toujours libérés des bouclages, passé à regarder, de côté, le défilé de l’actualité, s’exposer sans relâche aux flux qui saturent l’espace à mesure qu’ils recouvrent nos multiples écrans, assister en transat, interface en main, à l’horizontalisation à perte de vue de la sphère publique, spectacle hypnotique d’un recouvrement perpétuel de mêmes qui aplatit autant qu’il abrutit, nivellement sans fin parce qu’ici et maintenant tout s’équivaute. (Bourmeau 133)

Like numerous contemporary media theorists, Bourmeau is aware of the way media casts “envoûtements”<sup>21</sup> as it conditions our attention and synchronizes our thoughts and emotions. Today, the dissemination of information is increasingly characterized by a collapse of hierarchy (horizontalization): newspapers mix terrorist attacks with the ecological crisis, international treaties with the fluctuations of stock markets and so on. In reaction to the

banalization of information, Bourmeau favored another model of dissemination. Like many poets of his generation (Christophe Hanna,<sup>22</sup> Jean-Charles Masséra) Bourmeau investigates the way one processes information by making readers aware of the forms of transmission, extraction, and utilization of information. Bourmeau works within predetermined formats by maintaining the host structure of the column with its spatial and physical limitations and by keeping the original headlines. But in doing so, he turns *bâtonnage* against itself. Rather than produce more articles in line with the correctness and codes of newspapers, Bourmeau's idea is, first, to exhibit the residual, that which is precisely crossed out:

la fusion de  
l'hexagone  
so what?  
du "one click"  
en dur  
en ligne  
martèlent  
"multicanal"  
et inversement  
ses gentils vendeurs  
en gilet gratis  
dématérialisé (Bourmeau 109)

Clearly this approach yields a meta-usage and provides a fitting response to information overload, the attention economy, rampant sensationalism, and the urgency to report the last coup of current affairs. Akin to Goldsmith, Bourmeau is interested in "valueless practice" and seeks to "quantify and concretiz[e] the vast amount of nutritionless language."<sup>23</sup> But their approach differs. While Goldsmith famously transcribed in *Day* (2003) every single word of the *New York Times* of September 1, 2000, in a mammoth volume of 900 pages to make apparent the saturation of signifieds that conceal the essential, Bourmeau subtracts words, preferring being called a "nauteur" (a play on words that indicates a rejection of the authorial posture, and an understanding of writing as an activity of taking note, but also as an act of noticing and leaving a mark) rather than "auteur" (Bourmeau, 136). The reappropriation of the textual and its remediation in the form of a poem introduces another relation to time, that is, the temporality of the poem. If such an approach evidently echoes some of the foundational gestures of modernism—the ready-made, the exploration of the ambient "prose of the world"<sup>24</sup>—Bourmeau's repurposing provides a fitting response to the new forms of experience and forms of order-

ing of human dwelling in neoliberal economies. Media theorists have shown how our current mediarchy constantly explores dynamics of retention and pretension that determines what is relevant from what is not. Daniel J. Boorstin makes a plain distinction between what he calls “news” (which is unpredictable) and “pseudo-events” (events that are planned with the only goal to generate media attention).<sup>25</sup> Jay David Botler has shown how the concept of “real time,” allegedly construed as genuine, should rather be understood as “near-real time.”<sup>26</sup> As he observes, “we can see distant events as they happen, where the gap between the occurrence and our consumption of the images may be measured in seconds, minutes or hours. In that gap, the communication system (both as a technology and as a cultural and economic force) ‘processes’ the signal: in other words, those in control of the technology both manufacture and constrain the spectacle for us. Sometimes a matter of seconds is enough to reshape the image” (Botler 10).

With the advent in the press of ‘digital first, print last’ and the development of social networking services and microblogging (Twitter...), not only are we constantly overloaded by information, but our mechanisms of trust and belief are constantly put to the test. What Alvin Toffler had predicted in his utopian *Future Shock* (1970) seems truer than ever: information overload exceeds our cognitive capacities, ways of being in the world, and sense of temporality. Today, news bulletins are no longer consumed at a given time of the day, like they used to be, but throughout the day. The verticality of the poetic form makes visible the horizontality of information. On the one hand, the poetic form re-enacts the lack of transition, the combination of multiple (contradictory) spaces and times. Each segment begets the following one, and they throw each other into relief. By shifting from digital to print, Bourmeau shows how reiteration enables the emergence of the other from the same, freezing words in their tracks so that the reader can pause and reflect. On the other, Bourmeau also shows how the ambient jabbering can be renegotiated in poetic terms and transformed into speeded-up versions of headlines, compact synopses. This economy of words, as opposed to the constant nausea, captures the flash, the event, the point of impact as in the following poem alluding to the Paris terrorist attack of 2015:

LA NUIT LA PLUS LONGUE

fusillade explosions massacre  
retour sur (Bourmeau 113)

Bourmeau thus attributes to poetry the ambivalent power to capture the flux of the surrounding buzz of our hypermediation and to overturn it or disrupt it



to create new images and associations. This approach guided by the fact of making legible what has been crossed out makes tangible a differential mark in language. The emphasis on the legibility of what has been erased calls attention to the presence and absence of the signifier-signified, echoing Derrida's conceit of "écriture sous rature."<sup>27</sup> Through this concept, Derrida sought to show both the inadequacy and inevitability of language. Language possesses conflicting signifiers (a word is not always suitable for the concept it represents) and yet, sometimes, no better words can be found. If, like Derrida, Bourmeau's practice is here to remind us of the relativity of language, the gap between language and experience, and the fact that meaning is always derived from *différance*, his use of erasure is not driven by a metaphysics of language, but by what Harold Garfinkel terms accountability, that is, "everyday activities as members' methods for making those same activities visibly-rational-and-reportable-for-all-practical-purposes, i.e. 'accountable,' as organizations of commonplace everyday activities."<sup>28</sup> By emphasizing *editing* over *writing*, Bourmeau brings to the fore the settings of organized everyday affairs, making visible mediations of content, gestures, decisions, the contextual chains, and the multiple operations that usually remain mute in the production of any artefact. In doing so, *bâtonnage* makes readers aware of the way they are affected by public issues, providing them with the means to conduct their own inquiries for new forms of deliberation and action.

### Transcribe/Compile

Eléonore Mercier's 2010 *Je suis complètement battue*<sup>29</sup> provides an interesting counter-example to Bourmeau, not only in terms of techniques, scope, and inquiry but also in terms of strategies to address political issues. Adopting transcription and compilation techniques as creative practice, this book offers a remarkable example of the way repurposing "proposes new forms of receivership and readership" (Goldsmith 15). Trained as an "écoutante," working in a call center for domestic abuse, Mercier, who like Bourmeau did not intend to be a poet, decided after fifteen years of practice to "récupérer les cahiers que nous archivions,"<sup>30</sup> to transcribe systematically verbatim statements she heard from victims of domestic abuse (predominantly female, but in some rare cases male). Given the fact that domestic violence is still not taken seriously and is rarely (if at all) addressed in the political agenda, Mercier's reappropriation of those statements addresses those issues by making public what is unheard and unseen. Mercier is not the only one to transcribe and compile statements linked to sensitive issues. As I have shown elsewhere, much recent poetic work in France draws

directly from the American objectivist tradition—not least Charles Reznikoff’s important contribution—through a repurposing and objectification of discourses.<sup>31</sup>

From the sheer material observation of the lives etched into these archives came the idea of transcribing the inaugural lines of speech, arranging them in the form of a compilation. Mercier’s work clearly echoes some of the preoccupations of ethnomethodology, and namely “Institutional Talks.”<sup>32</sup> The ethnomethodologist Harvey Sacks for instance is known for analyzing conversation practices through either the reappropriation of tape-recorded suicide calls or group therapy sessions. Through the practice of transcription, Mercier compiled 1,653 sentences out of more than 20,000 statements, making literally tangible the most unsayable and intolerable. Without adding a single comment on the traumatic quality of these words, Mercier repurposes powerfully expressive material. Indeed, the reappropriation of those strident words is so literal, so violent, because of their extreme legibility that those first words paradoxically almost sound like *ultima verba*:

Mon mari menace de nous tuer moi et les enfants  
Je suis infirmière, j’appelle pour un cas qui va se terminer en crime sous peu  
Mon mari est violent et armé, j’ai peur pour ma vie  
Je souffre depuis des années  
Je vous appelle parce que mon concubin m’a tapée plus que d’habitude (Mercier 12)

Like Vanessa Place, Mercier’s intention is to make public domestic violence on a grand scale, by letting those statements mirror and speak by, and for, themselves: “J’ai très envie de croire qu’on peut saisir, à la lecture de ce texte, non seulement ce qui se dit mais aussi ce qui s’entend” (Mercier 9). The reading of this text provides a repertoire of the various gestures at play in domestic abuse (situations, places, and contexts) that is also a grammar: statements favor allusions (“J’ai dans mon bureau une femme qui présente des traces affreuses de morsures” [13]); ellipses (“J’arrive au bout du rouleau” [13]); denials (“Ma fille me dit qu’elle tombe dans l’escalier” [14]); denegation (“J’ai un problème de violence pas plus grave qu’une autre” [14]) or the borrowing of words of others and hackneyed sentences (“Depuis le mariage rien ne va plus” [19]), “Je vis une relation sérieuse qui est en train de mal tourner” [67]). If seizing what is told is made possible through the active experience of reading, seizing “ce qui s’entend” is more problematic. Mercier’s project attempts to solve this issue by preserving anonymity to bypass ethically sensitive issues and by transforming *noise* into *speech*. As Jacques Rancière reminds us, social space is divided in two categories:

ceux qu'on voit et ceux qu'on ne voit pas, ceux dont il y a un *logos*—une parole mémoriale, un compte à tenir—, et ceux dont il n'y a pas de *logos*, ceux qui parlent vraiment et ceux dont la voix, pour exprimer plaisir et peine, imite seulement la voix articulée. Il y a de la politique parce que le *logos* n'est jamais simplement la parole, parce qu'il est toujours, indissolublement le *compte* qui est fait de cette parole: le compte par lequel une émission sonore est entendue comme de la parole, apte à énoncer le juste, alors qu'une autre est seulement perçue comme du bruit signalant plaisir ou douleur, consentement ou révolte.<sup>33</sup>

Such a violent distinction between speech (*logos*) and noise (*phônè*), which is also a distinction between the visible and the invisible, is what differentiates citizens from the rabble, subjects from those limited in rights and status. Such a distribution of speaking bodies still remains very much on the horizon of our current mediarchy. If one deliberately does not want to take someone seriously, one ignores their right to speak, reducing their voice to sheer noise. Mercier's compilation of utterances thus consists in making the balance tilt from what remains enclosed in domestic space (*oikos*), that is, what is private, to the public space as a way to present matters of justice, in order to help us decode noise from speech. This decoding is made possible by a shift of what was once understood as noise into praxis: "l'activité politique est celle qui déplace un corps du lieu qui lui était assigné ou change la destination d'un lieu; elle fait valoir ce qui n'avait pas lieu d'être vu, fait entendre un discours là où seul le bruit avait son lieu, fait entendre comme discours ce qui n'était entendu que comme bruit" (Rancière 53). In Mercier's text, speech is suddenly reduced to an abstract, indiscernible, and impersonal line that disrupts hierarchies and identities in favor of a constant process of redefinition. Commencing with recurrent anaphora like "Je," "J'ai," "Mon," and "Ma," the use of the first person or possessive pronouns does not denote a character or a subject but an assemblage. In this context, enunciation is not subordinated to a cogito but is diluted in the explosion of anonymous and collective voices (a chorus):

J'ai été séquestrée lundi toute la journée  
 Mon mari me bat mais je suis inquiète pour ma fille  
 Une tante est arrivée chez moi en sang dans un état atroce  
 Mon grand-père tape sur sa femme et lui fait avaler des drogues. (Mercier 14)

This approach stands out in regard to a certain contemporary application of identity politics that equates the right to speak with experience and authority: Mercier never speaks or adopts a vantage point, she maintains the emic paradigm over the etic one, by simply replicating the categories of thoughts of the victims. She solely represents utterances in their sheer immanence to preserve only the eruption of the particular. In this respect, Mercier's book offers a remarkable illustra-

tion of what De Kosnik calls, after Derrida's concept of "archontic principle," "archontic texts."<sup>34</sup> By this concept she refers to the "drive within an archive that seeks to always produce more archive, to enlarge itself" (De Kosnik 64), that is to say to make other use of, to serve other purposes:

Archontic texts are not delimited properties with definite borders that can be transgressed. So all texts that build on a previously existing text are not lesser than the source text, and they do not violate the boundaries of the source texts; rather, they only add to that text's archive, becoming a part of the archive and expanding it. An archontic text allows, or even invites, writers to enter it, select specific items they find useful, make new artifacts using those found objects (De Kosnik 64)

The aim for Mercier is not to produce more, but to produce more relevant documents that make those voices resurface and circulate. By stripping language of any professional purpose, leaving the statements unedited, one suddenly sees them in a new light. Interestingly, this book can thus be read as an *archive of an archive*—an archive of a 'We'—of a collective; and one can easily imagine how those statements could lead to other appropriations as catalyst for change, such as protest, chanted slogans or hashtags in support of victims of domestic violence.

### Redescribe/Perform

In the wake of Rosalind Krauss' investigation of indexicality and Derrida's reflection on the nature of archive as both a repository of the public and the personal, artistic criticism has identified an 'archival turn' in the arts. Hal Foster deftly diagnosed an "archival impulse"<sup>35</sup> in the 1990s in contemporary artistic practice where artists took stock of familiar sources drawn from the archives of mass culture to bring into being historical information lost, displaced or invisible. Since then, and in response to the unprecedented amount of documents available online—classified documents, historical archives, legal texts, WikiLeaks, and war manuals produced by ISIS and Al Qaeda—many poets have decided to redescribe them by other means and media to produce new significations. Whether they consist of shifting formats (transforming, for instance, propagandist Nasheed songs found online into music scores so that they can be archived and used or performed in different contexts), such practices, mediated by pragmatic protocols seek to invent new regimes of visibility of the political, both in circulations and praxis.

Started in 2008 before culminating in 2016, Leibovici's *low intensity conflicts—un mini-opéra pour non musiciens* (2019)<sup>36</sup>—offers a case in point to observe how "redescription" of invisible or censored materials can produce

other uses and forms of knowledge. Spanning eight years of inquiry (2008-2016), this mammoth libretto provides a sweeping overview of multiple ways of waging war in the past decades. Colin Powell's PowerPoint presentation at the UN in 2003 to engage in war with Iraq, for instance, is redescribed in a synoptic form; war songs produced by terrorist groups found online are now transformed into sheet music and ready to be performed. By resorting to the genre of the opera, Leibovici maintains the idea of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, that is, a synthesis of all-embracing art forms (this libretto combines poems, sheet music, dance, etc.) but discards the connotations traditionally associated with this lyrical genre *par excellence* (the non-natural, the spectacular, the bourgeois overly expressive vocal art that Barthes famously debunked in *Mythologies*).<sup>37</sup> Leibovici considers opera instead as a public arena, as a space of experimentation, where publics re-enact or perform documents in view of action and deliberation. Significantly, Leibovici identifies his practice in the wake of Cornelius Cardew's *Scratch Orchestra*, an experimental musical ensemble founded in London in 1969 that Cardew defined as "a large number of enthusiasts pooling their resources (not primarily material resources) and assembling for action (music-making, performance, edification)."<sup>38</sup> Cardew's Marxist materialism was very much anchored in the avant-garde ethos of democracy of experience and the idea of artistic practice grasped and reproduced by all as it was based on improvisation, scratch music, research projects, and graphic scores that ultimately sought to bring "a lot of young people who weren't trained musicians to get together to make what we called experimental music" (Cardew 617).

Fusing Cardew's project with what performer Bernard Heidsieck termed in 1960's France "poésie action,"<sup>39</sup> Leibovici's work essentially focuses on what it means to "perform a document" (Leibovici 91)<sup>40</sup> and how it can stimulate debate amongst members involved in the experience and lead to the emergence of a new community and cooperative social actions. Redescription enables making salient the affordance of a document, that is, the possibilities of action and implementation. The fourth section of the volume entitled "*messages to bricklane (parade ground)*" is a redescription of an online video produced by ISIS showing fighters practicing gym exercises (lunges, squats, reverse planks, etc.) in a makeshift camp. By shifting code and formats, Leibovici redescribes it in Labanotation—a notation system invented by the choreographer Rudolf Laban in 1928—that records human movements through the use of abstract symbols to set the duration, direction, dynamic, and part of the body involved in movement. Attention, in dance, to ordinary gestures that are not conventionally deemed artistic such as gym exercises is hardly new.

Cutting a carrot, smoking a cigarette, getting dressed and undressed or brushing one's teeth has been at the center of a range of iconoclastic practices from Pina Bausch, Anna Halprin, Allan Kaprow, and Yvonne Rainer as a way of both abolishing the separation between art and life and uncovering the inherent artificial, constructed dimension of those gestures.

Although lunges, squats, and sit-ups are indeed ordinary gestures, the fact that they are tied to a terrorist organization is certainly not ordinary. As David Zerbib observes, such practice “ne vise aucune transfiguration de la substance du discours premier, il [Leibovici] le traduit pour le mettre à la disposition d'un public, d'une manière qui rend possible d'autres lectures et d'autres usages.”<sup>41</sup> Importantly, the function of the score is twofold: on the one hand, it is prescriptive and guided by protocols and rules. Those scores capture movements and therefore function as an archive of an archive, that is, a document that can be stored, analyzed, and examined for different ends. But, on the other, they can give rise to other use. Leibovici's approach is driven by spontaneity and self-awareness. Close to dance theorist Halprin who put forward the concept of “task performance,”<sup>42</sup> an approach to dance that dictates motions but never the way gestures are implemented, Leibovici attributes to re-enactment the task to give rise to a reflective process and transformative experience. The fact of asking amateurs rather than professional singers or dancers lies in intention. Unlike professionals who are trained in a certain way to complete actions, amateurs do not master techniques; they have not inherited privileges and skills from their former education; and they have not assimilated the expected habitus or social dispositions linked to their professional environments. Of course, this is not to say that professionals are not capable of reflective practices or divergence, but rather that they have a different way of responding to patterns of action. Amateurs can be seen as ‘bricoleurs’ for whom specific actions and interactions are bound to particular situations and interpersonal relations. As French sociologist Antoine Hennion explains:

l'amateur est un virtuose de l'expérimentation, esthétique, technique, sociale, mentale, corporelle. [...] [II] est le modèle d'un acteur inventif, réflexif, étroitement lié à un collectif, obligé de mettre sans cesse à l'épreuve les déterminants des effets qu'il recherche, que ce soit du côté des œuvres ou des produits, du déterminisme social et mimétique des goûts, de la mise en condition du corps et de l'esprit, de l'appui sur un collectif, un vocabulaire et des pratiques sociales, et enfin des dispositifs matériels et des pratiques d'accès et d'usage inventés pour intensifier ses sensations. Redonner la parole à cette expression de l'amateurisme, c'est aussi montrer l'importance sociale et politique de cette technique de rapport à soi, aux autres et au monde, et à ce titre contribuer plus généralement à une meilleure compréhension des modalités hétérogènes de nos attachements.<sup>43</sup>

Clearly, such an approach does not mean that the amateur is not also conditioned. Rather, it suggests that amateurs are suitable agents to understand how our social interactions operate. Following the initial shock linked to the nature of these documents, different conclusions can be drawn. First, the exposition provides a direct access to the ISIS cosmogony, making tangible their myths, practices, and beliefs. Facing those materials, historians will probably see them as valuable documents to understand ways of waging war in our current era; anthropologists will probably see in them meaningful materials to understand cultural representations of bodies and issues of masculinity in the non-western world. Second, however, it sets off a critical distance since these gym exercises and pseudo-cutting-edge workout plans and training techniques (not to mention the nutrition advice joined to them) can be read as parody of men's fitness magazines from the West. Third, while in mass media, ISIS fighters are often portrayed as impressive physical specimens and subject to intense training routines, the repetition and the exhibition of these gestures demystify those beliefs. Of course, such a process does not seek to lessen the threat or danger of those terrorists' organizations, but provides the means to spark debates, thus creating the conditions for the emergence of a public. By generating situations and encounters outside of the usual political agora, such practice aims at bringing different social actors together in order to give rise to unexpected encounters and deliberation. Aesthetic experience lies in the eliciting of social gathering. Effectively, the re-enactment of those gestures invites people to become sensitive to the very meaning of interacting, but also to learn how to listen and respond to each other, and importantly to bind together participants from different horizons or backgrounds around public issues in a context where the public is increasingly polarized and fragmented.

While it is often assumed, in the modern world, that we live a true democracy based on nations, citizens, will of people, autonomy, and participation, Yves Citton reminds us that we, in fact, live in mediarchies. With the advent of mass media and the revolution of the digital, not only are publics now "structurés par des appareils de communications qui régissent leurs interactions" (Citton, *Médiarchie* 12), but our perceptions, thoughts, and actions are increasingly conditioned and synchronized. If, as he observes, "depuis plusieurs décennies, ce ne sont pas les peuples mais les publics qui sont le substrat du politique" (Citton, *Médiarchie* 12), the formation of publics and the conditions of cooperative social actions are more urgent than ever. But such implementation is not an easy task. In the wake of Dewey and Jürgen Habermas, Michael Warner also notes that in the modern day the public is fractured by rivalling interests. Warner disentangles that issue by

drawing a distinction between “dominant publics” that depend on prevailing ideology and whose understanding is based, broadly speaking, on rhetoric—be it persuasion, rationality or conventional channels that condition public opinion (newspapers, online news, digital media, etc.)—from what he calls, after Nancy Fraser, “counterpublics.”<sup>44</sup> The singularity of counterpublics is that, against the former model that is oriented through “the pragmatics of its speech, genres, idioms, stylistic markers, temporality, mise-en-scène, citation field, interlocutory protocols, lexicon” and which responds to the injunction “speak this way, see the world this way” (Warner 114), counterpublics favor a radical social imagery based on poesis. Counterpublics advocate poesis and alternative narrative forms as well as channels of communications to bring people together in the view of deliberation and action. By virtue of retelling, contemporary French poetic practice aims to provide the condition of emergence of such publics. “Everything is allowed and anything goes.”<sup>45</sup> Whether it consists in bâtonnage, compilation/transcription or redescription of sensitive materials, these practices seek not only to invent new regimes of visibility of the political but also to provide people with the tools, methods, and materials to carry out their own investigations. In *Voyous*, Derrida attributed to rogues the power to overturn the status quo and construed them as portents of a new democracy “à venir” (Derrida, *Voyous* 10). Whether or not rogues can further the promise of a new democratic model characterized by genuine political debate and exchanges, such poetic practices are likely to become increasingly necessary to help anyone navigate in the sea of data available in the modern age.

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### Notes

1. As Abigail de Kosnik observes in *Rogue Archive: Digital Memory and Media Fandom*, the development of digital media has triggered new forms of appropriation which have consequently given rise to new forms of visibility of subcultures. Cultural memory has now fallen into the hands of nonprofessional archivists (fans, pirates, hackers) who seek to “democratize cultural memory” against hegemonic narratives via alternative channels and practices (Cambridge: MIT, 2016), 1–3.
2. Mathilde Villeneuve and Virginie Bobin, eds., *Republications* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2016), 13.
3. Yves Citton, *Médiarchie* (Paris: Seuil, 2017).
4. Lev Manovich, “Database as Symbolic Form,” *Convergence*, 5:2 (1995): 80–99.
5. Tiphaine Samoyault, “Du goût de l’archive au souci du document,” *Littérature*, 166 (2012/2): 5–6.
6. See François Cusset, *La décennie: Le grand cauchemar des années 1980* (Paris: La Découverte, 2006) and François Cusset, ed., *Une histoire (critique) des années 1990: de la fin au tout début de quelque chose* (Paris: La Découverte, 2014).



7. Bernard Noël, *La castration mentale* (Paris: P.O.L., 1997).
8. Michel Deguy, *Choses de la poésie et affaire culturelle* (Paris: Hachette, 1986).
9. Eric Sadin, *La société de l'anticipation* (Paris: Inculte édition, 2011).
10. Jean-Marie Gleize, "Opacité critique," in Jean-Christophe Bailly et al. *Toi aussi tu as des armes* (Paris: La Fabrique, 2011), 39–40.
11. Jean-Marie Gleize, "Poésie poor; réponses (1)," *Sorties* (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2007), 369.
12. Franck Leibovici, *des opérations d'écriture qui ne disent pas leur nom* (Paris: Questions Théoriques, 2020), 83.
13. See Jeff Barda, "Forensic Poetics: Legal Documents Transformed into Strange Poems," *L'Esprit Créateur*, 58:3 (2018): 86–102.
14. Franck Leibovici, *des documents poétiques* (Marseille: Al Dante, 2007), 25–26.
15. Guy Debord, *La société du spectacle* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
16. Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacres et simulations* (Paris: Galilée, 1981).
17. Philosophers such as Joëlle Zask and Jean-Pierre Cometti, who both translated and wrote important essays on his work, played a major role in the introduction and dissemination of his work in France. See also the special issue of *Critique*, "Retour à Dewey" (2012): 787.
18. John Dewey, *The Public and Its Problems: An Essay in Political Inquiry*, Melvin L. Rogers, ed. (Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania U P, 2002), 139.
19. Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville, *Undoing Art* (Quodilbet: Macerata, 2017).
20. Sylvain Bourmeau, *Bâtonnage* (Paris: Stock, 2017), 1.
21. Yves Citton, Frédéric Neyrat, and Dominique Quessada, "Envoûtements médiatiques" *Multitudes*, 51:4 (2012): 56–64.
22. See Jeff Barda, "'Prose in Prose' in Contemporary French Poetic Practice: Appropriation, Repurposing and Pornography" in *The Edinburgh Companion to the Prose Poem*, Mary Ann Caws and Michel Delville, eds. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh U P, 2021), 310–27.
23. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity As a Creative Practice," undated, <http://writing.upenn.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>.
24. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *La prose du monde* (Paris: Gallimard, 1969).
25. See Daniel J. Boorstin, *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* (1962) (New York: Vintage Books, 1992).
26. Jay David Bolter, "Preface" in Geoff King, *The Spectacle of the Real: From Hollywood to Reality TV and Beyond* (Bristol: Intellect Book, 2005), 9–10.
27. Jacques Derrida, *Heidegger et la question* (Paris: Galilée, 1987).
28. Harold Garfinkel, *Studies in Ethnomethodology* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1967), vii.
29. Éléonore Mercier, *Je suis complètement battue* (Paris: P.O.L., 2010).
30. Éléonore Mercier, "C'est important que les gens prennent conscience que la violence conjugale est une réalité," <https://z.umn.edu/6uqo>.
31. See Jeff Barda, *Experimentation and the Lyric in Contemporary French Poetry* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2019).
32. Harvey Sacks, *Lectures on Conversation* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1992), xvii.
33. Jacques Rancière, *La méfiance: Politique et philosophie* (Paris: Éditions Galilée, 1995), 44–45.
34. Abigail Derecho (De Kosnik), "Archontic Literature," in *Fan Fiction and Fan Communities in the Age of the Internet*, Karen Hellekson and Kristina Busse, eds. (North Carolina: McFarland & Company, 2006), 64.
35. Hal Foster, "An Archival Impulse," *October*, 110 (2004): 3–22.
36. Franck Leibovici, *low intensity conflicts—un mini-opéra pour non musiciens* (Paris: MF éditions, 2019).
37. Roland Barthes, "L'art vocal bourgeois," *Mythologies* (Paris: Seuil, 1955), 189–91.
38. Cornelius Cardew, "A Scratch Orchestra: Draft Constitution," *Musical Times*, 110:1516 (1969): 617.
39. See Jean-Pierre Bobillot, *Bernard Heidsieck, poésie action* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place 1997).
40. Franck Leibovici, *des opérations*, 91.

41. David Zerbib, “Comment trans-formater la réalité?” in *Une poétique pragmatique: Considérations sur l’œuvre de Franck Leibovici*, Rahma Khazam, ed. (Dijon: Presses du réel, 2018), 50–51.
42. Anna Halprin, *Moving Towards Life: Five Decades of Transformational Dance* (Middletown: Wesleyan U P, 1995), 258.
43. Antoine Hennion, “Pour une pragmatique du goût” (2005), <https://halshs.archives-ouvertes.fr/halshs-00087895/document>, 5.
44. Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books, 2002), 114.
45. Jacques Derrida, *Voyous: Deux essais sur la raison* (Paris: Galilée, 2003), 43.