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Conceptual Confession: Asymmetrical Emotion in Writer-Reader Relations in Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge*

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*Discussions of American experimental poetry's relation to emotion have been common over the past several years, but few studies have examined the varieties of emotional power in such writing. Moreover, such discussion has viewed conceptually experimental and confessional approaches as incompatible. But Trisha Low's *The Compleat Purge* (2013) balances itself between conceptualism and confessionalism. It examines emotions like boredom, fascination, and shame as it manipulates relations of form and feeling by engaging affective repetition and emotional excess. Developing a relationship to confessional authenticity that foregrounds emotional vulnerability despite a possible critical distance from the latter, Low's writing suggests that the gap between conceptual and confessional approaches is not as wide as many assume.*

**Keywords:** Trisha Low / conceptual poetry / confessional poetry / authenticity

If one imagines an emotion as a small, living creature, when presented with one, one should snap its neck and disfigure the body until it is no longer recognisable as anything that once lived.

—Trisha Low, *The Compleat Purge* vol. III

Perceived conflicts and connections between recent conceptually-inclined poetry, emotions, affect, lyricism and self-expression have been discussed in poetry articles and commentaries over the past few years.<sup>1</sup> More generally, in the past few decades critics and poets have often observed a sharper demarcation between experimental and self-expressive, confessional approaches. Conceptual poetry is “a poetics of copying and appropriation” (Leong 110), a starting point that places it in opposition to self-expression. Nevertheless, what contemporary conceptual writing wants to do with emotion, short of snapping its neck as the young American poet Trisha Low writes above, is a question that deserves to be explored further.

Low's 2013 book *The Compleat Purge* is a prime example of the emotional sensibilities of recent innovative writing. The work consists, first, of potential suicide notes or so-called “last wills and

testaments” in which the writer, named “Trisha Low,” explains to her family and friends what they should be aware of in the event of her death. “Volume II” of the book presents messy, conflicted, sexually explicit online discussions between two characters that are named after rock musicians. “Volume III” introduces a romance novel style featuring, again, “Trisha” and her “lover.” Low, engaging with that which is naïve, sentimental or bizarre, tackles depressive feelings, cybersex fantasies, and romance in an examination of confessional authenticity and emotion. The text operates between conflicting, mixed emotional responses like boredom, fascination, shame, and condescension, but it is also conceptually procedural, repetitive, and formulaic.

In a review published in *HTMLGiant*, Patrick Gaughan describes *The Compleat Purge* with the phrase “[v]ulnerability as ‘elaborate conceptual joke.’” Gaughan aptly asks “Do I relate to Low?” without giving an unambiguous answer, implying that the “relation” is at least a complex one. *The Compleat Purge* uses conceptual experimentation to calibrate a confessional quest for authenticity toward an exploration of mixed, conflicted affective responses like boredom, shame, and condescension. Ultimately, I argue that *The Compleat Purge* highlights how confessionalism and conceptualism are not entirely distinct categories, situated at the opposite ends of a spectrum of poetic expression, where confessionalism would be close to the unmarked condition of poetry that is dominated by self-expression (see e.g. White 18-23; Perloff), and conceptualism its antithesis that avoids self-expression (see Dworkin xliii). In order to show how this works, I begin by discussing conceptualism and confessionalism with reference to authenticity and self-expression, exploring how they manifest themselves in *The Compleat Purge*. Secondly, drawing from theories of emotion and identification in order to consider vulnerability and shame in response to literature, I claim that both confessionalism and conceptualism cater to Low’s approach to emotional relations that are characterized by vulnerability. Her conceptual/confessional writing induces vulnerability even when it is not expected, asking readers to maintain what I call a “difficult relation” to the text.

**Authenticity as a conceptual/confessional project in *The Compleat Purge***

*The Compleat Purge* appears *confessional*, but the confessions are more or less untrustworthy, as the events frequently lose touch with reality. Low's own name as the speaker surfaces frequently in the book, but she is not all that concerned with authenticity. Readers are unlikely to read *The Compleat Purge* as simple, sincere confession because it is explicitly framed as a "conceptual project" in an opening "disclaimer," and most of Low's readers are likely familiar with what that means. Generally, conceptual writing means that a particular concept is applied to the making of the text. This can take various forms. Lately it has often involved the appropriation of pre-existing textual materials, which become a part of the text's content or even constitute the entirety of the text, or the application of predetermined procedures that are used to guide what content finds its way into the text (see Goldsmith 6-9, Dworkin xliii, Siltanen "Lapse", 100-101). Conceptual writing is certainly a part of Low's repertoire: her earlier text "Confessions" appeared in *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (2011, edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith, 352-358), included after she had taken a course taught by conceptual writing's biggest proponent, Kenneth Goldsmith (see Low, "Interview").

*The Compleat Purge* appropriates some pre-existing texts, like material from "a book of voodoo spells," as Low reveals in an interview ("Portrait"). The work is also conceptual in its use of repetitive structures like the several "last wills and testaments" and their recycled phrases. It repeats formulaic, ordinary materials and discourses throughout, like those of cybersex fantasy and romance novel, while at the same time appearing extremely personal and confessional. In her book's metatextual last section, "4 REAL," Low addresses the work as a theorized endeavor, discussing the problems of conceptualism and authenticity. She has also commented on the exploration of authenticity and confession in her other texts and interviews (Low, "Trisha Low"; Low in Riederer).

At a first glance, conceptualism and confessionalism seem to be polar opposites: conceptualism is purportedly constructed and inauthentic, confessionalism is considered organic and authentic. Conceptualism clashes with confessionalism in its focus on appropriation and avoidance of subjectivity, which Craig Dworkin emphasizes as central to it (xliii). When Confessional poetry,<sup>2</sup> the intimately personal poetry of poets like Anne Sexton or Robert Lowell, appeared in the late 1950s, it was treated in

an early critical introduction by Robert Phillips as a type of poetry where the “poet places few barriers, if any, between his self and direct expression of that self, however painful that expression may prove” (8). It was, in early critical discussions, labeled a “therapeutic” mode of writing, where confession was felt as a need (see Gill 427-428). Confessionalism, unlike conceptualism, is easily associated with the concept of authenticity, in the sense of “being true” (Trilling 11) to one’s self.

Confessionalism and conceptualism intersect particularly with reference to self-expression. Already early Confessional poetry was concerned with the self not just as an authentic entity but as a construct. Christopher Grobe, for instance, describes “confessional poems ... as performative rituals of identity-formation” (77). Conceptual writing was built on anti-lyricism and expression through appropriation but, as Brian M. Reed discusses, it has later evolved to also embrace lyric features (“Idea Eater” 3, 9). Confession is now as popular as ever online, as well as in social media, and often explored in other arts besides poetry (see Grobe 231-243), even though recent experimental writing has seemingly eschewed it. Confessionalism in poetry at large never did go out of style either, prospering in much of mainstream poetry despite many critical views, like those of recent experimental poets (see e.g. Graham and Sontag 3, 6). The idea of “the lyric as a mode of self-expression” is even, Jennifer Ashton notes, visible in the experimental Language poetry that began with a staunch resistance of lyricism (218). These features should help us begin to understand how conceptualism and confessionalism might be combined.

Low’s writing has also been characterized as “post-conceptual poetry” by Felix Bernstein, who argues in a polemical essay that this style of writing, as practiced by young contemporary poets like Low, Joseph Kaplan, or Steven Zultanski, among others, is “part of a larger trend within post-postmodernism to bridge affect, queerness, ego, lyric, and self-conscious narcissism within the inherited procedural structures of the ‘network’ and the ‘concept’” (22). Bernstein writes that post-conceptualism reacts to “the repression of affect in the dominant strand of postmodern avant-garde poetry in the ‘70s” (59), and *The Compleat Purge*, he claims, is an exemplary post-conceptual work (72). As such, post-conceptual poetry is particularly concerned with affect.<sup>3</sup> However, earlier conceptual poetry already worked with affect, as David Kaufmann argues in his recent book (99-101, 120).<sup>4</sup> For example, Vanessa Place, who is known for

works that rely on full-scale appropriation, also presents affect in works such as *Last Words*, which according to Michael Leong is “[f]illed with remorse, acceptance, anger, understanding, love, faith, and defiance” (111). Here I discuss *The Compleat Purge* as a work that combines confessionalism and conceptualism, displaying an interest in affect and self-expression, leaving aside the label “post-conceptual” for now, given that conceptualism, too, can be understood as affective.<sup>5</sup>

The different sections of *The Compleat Purge* present a variety of intense emotional and confessional bursts that make us question their authenticity and our ability to relate to them. An exploration of how the work engages with these intensities in a conceptual framework is necessary to provide the basis for a fuller discussion of the emotional cadences of confessional and conceptual writing. From the beginning, *The Compleat Purge* is contextualized as a conceptual experiment, one that is well aware of the complexity of authenticity. In a “Disclaimer” in the beginning of the work, Low admits to some degree of conceptual appropriation, but renounces her intent to break copyright laws or to make use of “previously extant material” for any purpose other than “simply a means of problematizing [sic] the promise of an authentic identity—a fantasy of authenticity entirely separate from dominant masculine ideology or outside of melodramatic codification” (“Disclaimer”). Couched in vast categories and terms, Low’s preface combines a self-assurance about her critical novelty with a somewhat apologetic undertone.

Volume I engages depression, suicidal thoughts, and emotional vulnerability. “Trisha’s” “I” is recycled through nine “last wills and testaments,” the first written at the age of 6 and the last at 24, most of the ones in between being from her teenage years. From the beginning, repetition of similar gestures and situations is one of the dominant means *The Compleat Purge* uses to question authenticity and identification. The “last wills and testaments” are self-absorbed and repetitive as they seem to go through the same movements each time: an apology to those left behind, instructions on how to find her keys or how to divide her belongings like DVDs, CDs, clothes, and books of poetry among friends and family. “Trisha” considers her reasons for wanting to die, describes cutting herself, reasoning with herself about why she is doing it, and refers to her problems with eating (*Compleat Purge* vol. 1). The writing is clearly oozing with personal pain, but the heartfelt communication is coupled with more banal notions, such as

instructions on where to find her keys, passwords, and PIN code “in case you need it” (*Compleat Purge* vol. I). At the end of every “testament,” Low includes “general provisions,” where the will is declared legal and authentic: “On this 8th day of February 1994, in the City of New York, State of New York, I hereby sign this document and declare it to be my last will” (vol. I). But no real signature is forthcoming, and this “last will,” ostensibly written when “Trisha Low,” born in 1988, was 6 years old, will later be replaced with others. Although the emotionally charged suicide notes/testaments with their excess of depressive feelings are potentially relatable to readers, repetitions like the legal formulations disrupt the content to which readers could relate. Similarly, the other two volumes of Low’s book present emotional extremes that appear, at times, trite and repetitive in their reliance on formulaic models.

Triteness and repetitiveness in Low’s work can be viewed as conscious effects in the manner of Sianne Ngai’s concept of “stuplimity,” which Ngai describes as a combination of “shock” and “boredom,” two mutually conflicting and yet complementary affects that bear upon “our capacity for responding” (*Ugly* 261-262). Ngai finds such conflicting effects in Gertrude Stein’s poems and in Goldsmith’s conceptual work *Fidget* (2000) (*Ugly* 256-260). In *Fidget* Goldsmith wrote down every movement of his body during one day in 1997, which clearly makes for tedious reading. Such conflict-laden emotional experiences are thus part and parcel of conceptual writing (see also Kaufmann 59-60). In *The Compleat Purge*, triteness combined with emotional extremes is one of many conflicting effects, which are also exacerbated by the confessionalism of the work, through emotional content with which readers might identify.

Volume II of *The Compleat Purge* makes readers’ emotional identification even more difficult. It consists mainly of dialogue, beginning with a letter addressed to “SIR or DOCTOR,” signed by “ANTHONY ROSSOMANDO as TRISHA LOW &c. &c. &c.” (*Compleat Purge* vol. II). Rossomando is the name of a punk rocker from the band Dirty Pretty Things. Another participant in the dialogue is “Fabrizio Moretti,” who is a drummer from the band The Strokes. Their dialogical encounters can be read as fan fictions or teenage fantasies. Low appropriates both real-world names, but the two men are more placeholders on whom fantasies are projected than recognizable figures or characters.

The dialogical encounters of Volume II are mostly of the sexual variety, and they take place in text form, perhaps on an online discussion forum, which further contributes to the section's emotional complexity. The "Trisha" in this section is a high school girl, writing these stories in 2005 in her school's computer lab. The online textuality of the dialogue is evident in the use of punctuation like parentheses, brackets and asterisks to mark nonverbal activity, as in the phrasing "\*kisses right under your ear\*" (*Compleat Purge* vol. II). The text acknowledges that "Trisha" writes as Rossomando, and that someone else, presumably a 27-year-old woman, writes as Moretti. The encounters happen between the two men, but "Trisha" appears in double brackets, communicating through metacomments with her writing partner, and her name also comes up in occasional prose paragraphs in between the dialogue. Again, readers' emotional responses to this "maze," as the section title names it, are likely to be conflicted. Any authentic confessional moments are buried between the emotional but banal online fantasies. The section covers not only overwhelming sexual and romantic experiences and everyday frustrations, but also a traumatic experience of assault.

In Volume III of the *Compleat Purge*, an obvious naivety again testifies to shameless, unrestrained confessionalism. The final volume recycles the clichés of romance novels, brimming with text like the following: "TRISHA LOW lay in her white bed and rested her pretty pale cheek on her left hand, because there was a diamond ring shining on its third finger and she was so very very very happy in her new love dream" (vol. III). The section begins as follows:

And so, here is a long compete [sic] novel, the kind of up-to-date story many readers enjoy especially if they are not pretty, and are reconciled to their sad fates. This is a love story thrilling with sensation, the kind every girl wants. Its suspense is endlessly fascinating and is merciless in its cruel triumph—some man will lead you, his One Darling, by the hand. (vol. III)

The writing is overblown with uncritically celebratory adjectives, but it is also more or less overtly and ironically aware of the “cruel triumph” of a “girl” needing “some man” to guide her on this love journey. We learn that “Trisha” and her lover, a rich man named Chip E. MacGuffin, are staying in an old manor with “Trisha’s” aunt and have just gotten engaged, starting a “period of courtship” (vol. III). “Trisha’s” love story is eventually revealed to be carefully scripted, written out in court documents, codes, lists, and patterns, and perhaps archived in file cabinets. The setting and timing of the story are unclear, its details intricate but insignificant, which further confounds the emotional character of the section.

Along the way in Volume III, “Trisha” encounters doubts about her “performance”: “She’s not currently delivering the performance this deep faith requires, or that he wanted” (vol. III). The authenticity of the romance story is put into question early on, with sentences such as “Our author, that sweet little raven, has drawn some of the material from personal experience during the course of her own practice. Some arise out of anecdotes kindly supplied by colleagues. Some are taken from instances recorded in newspapers and magazines” (vol. III). Conceptual appropriation, then, has reportedly taken place, and “Trisha’s” task is to perform her role rather than to be her authentic self.

When Chip E. MacGuffin reveals that he is leaving and wishes to end the engagement, “Trisha” is thrust into depression and violent self-doubt, and her narrative conflates instructions for crocheting with an exercise in self-mutilation. Eventually, the narrative turns into a description of strange love-related charms. In one charm “One places to the side a piece of some hot babysitter’s thighbone filled with sea water, sand and mercury, stoppered with wax, so that the charm will always have life ...” (vol. III) and another calls for “[a] life-sized Barbie, one which holds out its hands ...” (vol. III). The instructions might have both the effect of disgusting and amusing readers simultaneously, another example of the ways in which Low’s book engages mixed emotions.

In the final section, “4 REAL,” Low addresses her project “for real,” framing it as a theoretical consideration and discussing authenticity in the light of “contemporary conceptual writing’s ethos of ‘high appropriation.’” According to Low, “what contemporary works seem to work toward is a series of gestures in manic appropriation, performative gags that exist on the edge of articulation but therefore also

in a cesspit of stupidity, failure and falsity” (“4 REAL”). While Low separates herself from “high appropriation” here, she does engage with “failure and falsity” in her examination of authenticity. In their *Notes on Conceptualism*, Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place indeed suggest that “[f]ailure is the goal of conceptual writing” (24). Conceptual writing, for Low, is both a starting point and something to be contested, an imminent failure that can be addressed by combining conceptualism and confessionalism and by examining authenticity.

### **Confessional writing and transgressing borders**

Low’s work departs from as well as shares similarities with earlier models of confessionalism, particularly regarding the centrality of the expressive self and performativity. “Trisha’s” “I” is present in *The Compleat Purge* throughout, and her emotions ask for readers’ attention. As the work insistently repeats similar material, it also attempts to exhaust our capacity to feel pity, empathy, excitement, or pleasure. In the same way, it resists, while simultaneously inviting, identification with its overflowing emotional overtones, such as depression, anxiety, emotional vulnerability, romantic feelings, and emotions linked to sexual relations. Readers are also central in Confessional poetry, which as Jo Gill asserts in a discussion of a poem by Sexton, “renders explicit the presence of the auditor/confessor ... whose acceptance of the confession is necessary for its success” (433). Confessional poetry highlights the reader, because it cannot succeed without a reader’s acceptance (Gill 435). Directness of expression and the lack of “barriers”—which contribute to a sense of “authenticity” or of “aesthetic wholeness”—have been viewed as warranties that make the confession acceptable.<sup>6</sup> Phillips, who wrote about confessional poetry in 1973, concluded that “[i]f totally successful, the personal is expressed so intimately we can all identify and empathize” (17). In essence Confessional poetry thrives on its association with readers’ capacity for identification and empathy, and authenticity can be viewed as one of the cornerstones of such identification. Authentic confession purportedly holds little space for repetition and recycling, because repetition veers texts away from the kind of singular “human experience” and “craftsmanship” of which Jonathan Holden claims authentic poetry is made (184-185).

Confessional writing and its focus on authenticity have a continued and conflict-laden legacy in present-day poetics. “[T]he expression of one’s most private and often painful feelings” and “authenticity” are nowadays often viewed as default features of poetry in general, as Marjorie Perloff has noted with reference to a poetry reading by students (n.p.). Confessional poetry is sometimes viewed as a “pejorative” term (Aleshire 14), frowned upon by either poets labeled as Confessional themselves (DiStefano) or by other poets looking to separate themselves from that classification (see e.g. White 17-20). “Shame” and other uncomfortable feelings are often associated with confession. Dante DiStefano writes à propos of Lowell that the readers of “Skunk Hour” might feel “complicit” in his “confession of voyeurism” but also skeptical, perhaps unwilling to give in to the shameful desire to be voyeuristic (n.p.). White discusses “lyric shame” in her book with the same title, connecting “shame” to a desire to read or write in traditionally lyric ways, particularly in the sense that New Criticism understood lyricism (2). Shaming, “negative stereotypes” about first-person, and “expressive lyric” include features such as “solipsistic, rapacious ego, driven to mastery, narcissistic, confessionalist, conservative both aesthetically and politically” (White 7). An “antilyricism” that opposes features such as these has been intrinsic to many recent avant-gardist modes of writing, like Language poetry (White 4-5). “Trisha” is not antilyric in this sense; her voice is solipsistic because she is concerned with her own vulnerabilities and fantasies.

Generally, literary critics often view identification as passive or implicitly “bad,” which is evident in Suzanne Keen’s remark about how “middlebrow readers” often prefer literature that has characters they can identify with (ix). Such a view, like the “lyric shame” discussed by White (2), seems to imply that the writer’s confession and readers’ identification with it are easy ways out, as if to confess and to identify were to steer clear of critical distance and thinking. Nevertheless, contrary to critiques of identification, Isobel Armstrong, in her discussion of revising the category of the aesthetic, suggests that “a ‘narcissistic’ moment of identification may be an essential response to texts and a prerequisite of critical reading” in the context of poetry (101-102). According to Armstrong, thinking begins with identification because affective and emotional responses are an intrinsic part of thought. Responding with recognition and validation of the other’s experience as similar to one’s own is thus a way of understanding as well as

interpreting. Indeed, interpretation engenders a reader's emotional reactions to the text (see e.g. Robinson 125). When Low explores authenticity, identification, and confession through her lack of emotional control, inviting as well as resisting identification, her work engages with these kinds of contradictions. At the same time, her text reflects an awareness that the last few decades of poetry-reading have taught us that identification responses are "shameful" (White 2-7).

Empathy and other emotional identifications while reading literature occur in difficult relationships that can be characterized by inequality or asymmetry. Empathy is "a vicarious, spontaneous sharing of affect" (Keen 4) or a consideration of the other's "state of mind," not a "miraculous fusion[] of self and other" (Mellmann 431). Susan L. Feagin argues that empathy is ultimately "asymmetrical," as it requires those who empathize to foster emotion for someone else (95). In confessional poetry, readers are particularly predisposed to "desire" to engage with the author's emotional state, while no intersubjective demands are made of the author, apart from the act of writing that the author has already committed.<sup>7</sup> *The Compleat Purge*, for its part, displays awareness of such asymmetrical, difficult relations as it moves through a variety of emotional situations, attempting to make readers vulnerable while explicitly catering to readers who might know what is meant in the admission that the book is a "conceptual project."

Given all the contradictions surrounding identification, it is not surprising that White attempts to prove wrong criticisms of Sexton's poetry as "sloppy, and thus failed, traditional lyric" (98) and discusses Elizabeth Bishop's "destabilization of the poem as a common ground of sympathetic identification" (93), defending her from "the shaming of the expressive" (94). White wants to show that what poets like Sexton and Bishop are doing is more complex than providing models for simple identification, and that self-expression is not as "shameful" as has commonly been assumed. There are many ways to view shame, though, and Low, I argue, exploits this relation to shame in her "conceptual project" ("Disclaimer"), embracing shame in order to engage especially with vulnerability.

Like confession, shame is commonly related to vulnerability and difficult power relations. As we know from Silvan Tomkins, it is about "indignity, of defeat, of transgression, and of alienation" (Tomkins qtd. in Kosofsky Sedgwick and Frank 133). It entails that "some aspect of the world or the self that one

was not entirely aware of has been exposed not just to the world but also to oneself” (White 15).<sup>8</sup> Shame, for both writers and readers, is about feeling that one has been placed in a vulnerable, uncertain situation in relation to others. A confessional poet transgresses borders in uneasy ways, engaging in unwelcome advances. Confessional poetry, in this sense, violates a reader’s independence, because it asks its readers to feel for and to identify with the poet, to surrender to the poet’s experience. Shame can thus relate simply to the sense of transgression, which does not yet say much of content.

Of course, radically intimate, violent, or otherwise shame-inducing content can also violate readerly independence. Discussing Kathy Acker’s *Blood and Guts in High School*, Anna Ioanes argues that the book’s scenes of sexually explicit violence bring about “a violation of consent in the reader-text relationship” (184). In addition to Confessional poetry à la Sexton, Acker, a more or less conceptually experimental writer, is an obvious point of comparison for Low’s emotional cadences. Low has also mentioned Acker in interviews (e.g. Low, “Interview”). Low thus aligns herself with a longer history of confessional, conceptual, experimental, and transgressive writing. “Trisha” perhaps discusses less violence than Acker’s Janey, but does introduce content like the grotesque charms, sexual encounters, and suicidal thoughts that we saw above. For readers, these may trigger unwanted responses.

Low does not shy away from shameful confessions, but she also experiments with them, recycling and reframing materials in order to generate suspicion toward the authenticity of a confession. Her writing borders on the overly dramatic, unconvincing, or exaggerated. The book is shot through with raw emotion, sentimentality, and difficult encounters. “Trisha” goes from a suicidal teenager in Volume I to a young person interested in writing sexually explicit fan fiction in Volume II to a frail, love-struck heroine, described in the third person, in Volume III. She is in many respects inconsistent, yet consistently emotionally vulnerable. She is difficult to pin down, as her position keeps changing: Volume I uses the first person, in Volume II “Trisha’s” “I” surfaces in intermittent comments in square brackets, and in Volume III, “Trisha” is described in the third person. Empathetic responses can, Keen notes, be barred by “[n]egative factors such as prejudice, bias, impatience with a particular literary style, or feeling rushed or pressured ...” (72). In Low’s case, for instance in Volume I, the writing is likely to lead readers to a

difficult relation with the work, fraught not just with empathy or sympathy for “Trisha’s” depressive feelings but also with impatience, as potential empathetic responses are disrupted by repetitions of banal legal provisions, the inconsistency of her character, and her experimentation with authenticity.

Authenticity, understood as control of the self and its outside projections, is often emphasized today in the profusion of self-help books and inspirational quotes attempting to encourage people to discover their “authentic selves.” For instance, Brené Brown’s best-selling book *The Gifts of Imperfection* (2010) features authenticity as a central concept, defining it as “a practice” and as “the choice to show up and be real. The choice to be honest. The choice to let our true selves be seen” (n.p.). In her study of self-help culture, Micki McGee explains that the discovery of “authenticity,” “understood as the development of authority over oneself” or “as the quest for some kind of original ur-self unsullied by the impact of socialization,” is common in self-help books (171). Authenticity in such a view is about self-control as well as about being self-sustained, remaining independent of others’ expectations or their “impact” and “labors” (McGee 172).

“Trisha” fails to remain independent of commonly repeated emotions as well as others’ expectations. In one of the last wills, she reveals that her failure to be her authentic self is one reason for her distress, writing that “I have to stop pretending I’m someone I’m not, stop doing things to make people happy even though I’m slowly fading inside, into someone I don’t even know at all” (vol. I). She is shamelessly *emotional*, emotionality being commonly viewed, in Sara Ahmed’s words, as the equivalent to being “reactive rather than active, dependent rather than autonomous” (3). “Trisha” is not in control of herself. Her yearning for authenticity, too, starts to look like an unoriginal pursuit in this context.

Low’s experimentation with authenticity means that we readers are not self-evidently invited to identify with this emotional excess. This is where Low’s writing seems to differ from earlier confessional writing. We do not know what, if anything, is true for the real Trisha Low; the fictional self she presents is shrouded in banalities, repetitions, and an excess of emotion. That a writer like Low would present a fragmented identity, particularly in the online context of Volume II, is of course not really surprising in contemporary times when people are compelled to present different sides of their lives on various social

media. Yet, her writing does not avoid subjectivity as adamantly as the Language Writing of the 1970s and 1980s or hard-core conceptualism might have appeared to have done, even though she is certainly aware of their legacy.

By now it seems clear that early Confessional poetry was not always about an uncomplicated, singular self either. Gill, referring to an early magazine article on Confessional poetry by A. Alvarez, notes that this kind of poetry poses the problem of how to “distinguish between the text and the ‘identity’ which allegedly lies behind it” (431). We are certainly used to expecting that Confessional poetry will help uncover the author’s true self and real emotion to which we can then relate, but this assumption has been challenged in recent treatises about confessional poets like Sexton. Gill discusses “Sexton’s own sense of her writing self as constructed or artificial” (441); her “personae or masks,” in despite of which she manages to give “an impression of authenticity” (444), thus challenging the position of authenticity as the ideal of confessional poetry. Written identities generally tend to be partial and constructed representations rather than unified and singular entities, so Sexton’s “manipulation of the persona ‘I’” (Gill 444) as a performance of the self is not all that surprising, although the ways in which she achieves this are singular.

Much like a singular confessional self and its authenticity, emotion is often expected to be controlled in poetry. Sexton, for example, was criticized by Joyce Carol Oates for not “laboring” enough to exercise “aesthetic control” of her self-expressiveness, a notion that gestures to unspoken default assumptions about how poets are often expected to restrict emotional expression in order to come across as skilled (White 126). White argues that Sexton might have chosen not to exercise such control in order to avoid writing that would be “cathartic,” and notes that she was thus more “anti-lyric” than she has been given credit for (126-130). In a similar vein, Sexton often seemed to reject “craft,” a sense of care and completion often expected of poetry (White 103). Similar comments can be made of conceptual writing, for example when it uses found materials that are not the product of the writer’s own labors and that may be written in unpolished instead of literary language. In poetry, such control is often expected to extend to both emotion and language. Yet, for both Sexton and Low, the sense that craft and control are lacking can

also be read as a conscious strategy, one that works to make the expression appear unmediated and emotionally engaging.

Lack of control is central to Low's treatment of emotion and of its invitation to as well as resistance against identification. That centrality testifies to Low's investment in performing authenticity and emotion, much like confessional performance of the self (see Grobe 45-46). For both Sexton and Low lack of control extends to the type of content and imagery they present. Analyzing Sexton's poem "Live," White points to its "[m]elodramatic images from tabloid horrors [that] are surreally natural" and that resist traditional lyricism (129-130), a description that should remind us of Low's grotesque charms in Volume III. For Low, her naively expressive writing presents an abundance of uncontrolled emotion, as if its own naivety and sentimentality might cause it to self-destruct. Low and Sexton both, then, perform the self as a failed lyric figure who revels in emotional excess.

"Trisha's" emotional excess might offer relatable moments for some readers, but the overall inconsistency of her character might also elicit impatience. As readers, we are placed in the difficult position of not knowing whether we should feel sympathetic or empathetic, ridicule this immaturity, or simply remain uninterested. If we did choose to be empathetic or sympathetic, the lack of authenticity that Low experiments with might also evoke feelings of shame, as if we readers were being tricked into feeling for someone who is not being authentic. We might be likely to take a condescending stance, assured of our own position in relation to the more or less immature self that is evident in "Trisha's" musings.

Along with shame *The Compleat Purge* tackles condescension, which Kaufmann argues is a common reader reaction to conceptual poetry, particularly when it makes use of poor grammar or emotional "pathos," for instance (59). He notes that avant-garde writing, like conceptual poetry, relies on "two audiences": "[i]t speaks to a friendly minority that somehow 'gets it' and provokes a hostile majority that doesn't" (41), and "our enjoyment of our cultural capital" comes into play for those of us who identify with the former audience (59). Low's readers are likely to be well-versed in experimental and conceptual poetry and are probably not likely to expect a simple identification. In Volume III references to

contemporary poets and to discussions about poetry gesture to the sense that readers might be experts in all this. Low's project seems to be targeted at examining this situation.

Condescension does not fully cover the power imbalances that Low's book strikes between the naivety and emotionality of "Trisha" and her readers. Ngai, again, writes about the "aesthetic category" of "cute," which "depends entirely on the subject's affective response to an imbalance of power between herself and the object" (*Our Aesthetic* 54). "Cute" is one of "a set of aesthetic categories based on complicated intersections of ordinary affects," a muddled affective response (23). "Cuteness," according to Ngai, is easily associated with "minor negative affects: helplessness, pitifulness, and even despondency" (65). It can be associated with "aggression" or "manipulation" (23-24). Ngai finds cuteness for instance in "poets working in [Gertrude] Stein's modernist avant-garde tradition" and in "lyric poetry" (*Our Aesthetic* 53, 70). Although Ngai does not mention confessional writing specifically, it can also easily be viewed as "cute" in Ngai's sense, because confessionalism engenders vulnerability to feelings of pity and shame.

In the epigraph to the present article, "Trisha" envisions "an emotion as a small living creature," a cute object which, by virtue of its endearingly small, living form, deserves aggression to the point of being "no longer recognisable as anything that once lived" (*Compleat Purge* vol. III). We might view "Trisha" herself in these terms: as a cute, naïve girl engaging in various emotional encounters. Yet her youthful naivety and emotional vulnerability, as well as her lack of consistency and control, might give way to the sense, on the readers' part, that they are being manipulated, while these features also make her difficult to simply react to in a condescending manner. The book is, moreover, so obviously aware of its own naiveties, framed as they are in Low's "conceptual project," that we can hardly feel only condescension towards "Trisha." Low harnesses conceptual condescension, a sense of manipulation and "lyric shame," in White's sense (2, 7), in the service of her project, manipulating the relationship between the text and its readers.

Volume II of *The Compleat Purge* opens with two quotations, one of which is from D.W. Winnicott's *Playing and Reality* (1971), wherein he discusses children's development in relation to their transitional

objects. Low's quotation from Winnicott begins as follows: "The subject says to the object: 'I destroyed you,' and the object is there to receive the communication. From now on the subject says: 'Hullo, object!' 'I destroyed you.' 'I love you.'" (Winnicott 90). Like Low, Ngai also mentions Winnicott's "transitional object" which, for her, is "informed by the same dynamic of tenderness and aggression, of survival and use" as a "cute object" (*Our Aesthetic* 89-90). For Low, the Winnicott quotation is isolated from its context, made to represent the difficulty of emotional relations like love and empathy, which the two characters and fan fiction writers perform in the section. The quotation draws attention to giving and receiving and to the distinction between subject and object that is not at all clear in Volume II of Low's book. It does not ultimately matter who is doing what to whom. Similar, repetitive events continue to take place: kissing, licking lips, biting various body parts, slow and fast movements, and so on. The sexually explicit material is not organized so as to create a sensible narrative or a suspense designed to keep the reader interested. Perhaps we readers are "destroyed" by confusion, uncertainty and other emotional responses, such as the uncomfortable sensation of observing something shameless and unrestrained in the following example:

\*licks lips when you cry out\*

\*might be enjoying torturing you like this a little too much\*

\*kisses back\*

\*bites your bottom lip\*

(*Compleat Purge* vol. II)

Graphic and unrestrained material is abundant in the second section, but it lacks individuality and particularity. The participants are named yet anonymous to an extent, revealing little of themselves apart from their unyielding passion. The conversation and the turn-taking goes on, but its climaxes and turning points are subdued, if not nonexistent. Insofar as these interactions are fan fictions, the implication is that they are written to be read by others and as a way of connecting with other fans; the two fictional "girls"

who write them also use them to communicate with each other. “Trisha’s” own bracketed comments are few and far between, though these are supposedly the places where “Trisha” communicates as her authentic self. In these bracketed comments, she does manage to tell her friend about her experience of sexual assault, thus redeeming the section title’s promise to discuss “the Sexual Assault of Trisha Low as Circulated by Love in a Maze, or Virtue Rewarded” (*Compleat Purge* vol. II). The difficult-to-grasp set-up of communicational relations here means that authentic communication and a simple confessional situation is not what is taking place. We readers are “there to receive the communication” (*Compleat Purge* vol. II; Winnicott 90), but we are not addressed. The online dialogue format, where the two characters and writers address each other, obscures other readers’ positions.

For both Low’s conceptually inclined writing and for confessional writing more generally, address can be viewed as a transitional object that allows for the performance of emotion and of asymmetrical, difficult power relations. Generally, apostrophe as a form of address has been discussed by Barbara Johnson as “a trope which, by means of the silvery voice of rhetoric, calls up and animates the absent, the lost, and the dead” (31). This definition is clearly relevant for Confessional poetry. Sexton, for instance, often addresses others, from her therapist to unconceived children, creating what the apostrophe names (see Johnson 35-36).

Such poems appear to be written to animate absent others, whereas the statuses of “Trisha’s” addressees are more ambiguous. In Volume I “Trisha” addresses several potential readers, particularly her parents, her sister, and a number of friends, in her quest to make her would-be final words heard, but the “wills,” which are expressly called “suicide notes” early on, remain unsent or unperformed. This might be read as “Trisha’s” way of animating specific people to whom she cannot talk in person about her depressive feelings, but it can also suggest that address is less a way of animating the absent than an indirect way for the writer to perform emotion through the speaker for readers. In Volume II, as seen above, the latter is even more clearly the case. Moreover, Low’s combination of naïve, clichéd writing and her explicit acknowledgement that this is a “conceptual project” can be read as a recognition of readers’ convoluted position. Confessional writing in general has been less interested in such explicit

acknowledgements, but there, too, address has sometimes been understood as an indirect “construction” that is used while poets are certainly aware that there will be other readers (see Schetrumpf 119).

As readers of confessionally-oriented poetry, we may not be willing to give in to our own vulnerability, to identify with the confession or with the writer. Nevertheless, in reading Low’s text, we are invited to consider the various imbalances it presents. We may not be addressed by it directly, or given “authentic” material that we could readily identify with, but we are given this “pitifulness” to observe and this cuteness to relate to. Low’s “vulnerability as elaborate conceptual joke” (Gaughan) thus becomes a way of offering an emotional reference point for readers, one that invites a consideration of authorial intentions and motivations, such as the reasoning behind the quest for authenticity and confession.

### **Confessionalism, conceptualism and having your vulnerability**

Low uses failure at authenticity and the imbalance of power to problematize “Trisha’s” authenticity and identity, presenting readers with a difficult relation to the text. “Trisha” fails at authenticity and possibly keeps readers at a distance. Nevertheless, she invites something like pity and even aggression toward her cuteness, in Ngai’s sense (*Our Aesthetic* 65). In this situation, “a moment of identification” on readers’ part might be a gate to “critical reading” (Armstrong 101-102), to considering our emotional identifications or the lack thereof, and seeing writing that problematizes authenticity and identification through conceptualism a route to our emotional engagements with the text. In order to achieve these effects, Low’s writing turns to the “shameful” aspects of confessionalism, to all that naïve, sentimental excess of emotion from which White would like to rescue Sexton and others (126-130, 137-147), while also being aware that confession was always, in a sense, about performing the self (see Grobe 35-36). *The Compleat Purge*’s particular combination of confessionalism and conceptualism points to their similarities rather than to their differences, highlighting excess of emotion as a conscious strategy rather than as something shameful.

*The Compleat Purge* is an emotionally harrowing read, but at the same time it is comic and banal in its seeming emotional honesty and its recycling of repetitive formulas. As the work insistently repeats similar materials, it attempts to manipulate our capacity to feel pity, empathy, excitement, or pleasure, as well as to identify with its emotional overtones, such as depression, anxiety, shame, or romantic desire. The kinds of well-versed readers that Low wants, then, are placed into vexed positions, where they are asked to be less than authentic, to not be true to themselves. As I mentioned above, writing like Low's attracts readers who are thoroughly familiar with experimental poetry and who are unlikely to expect a confessional identification. Yet her readers cannot remain their authentic selves if they are to do anything but nod knowingly at "Trisha's" naivety (cf. Kaufmann 59). Low's book, then, strives to gnaw away at readers' authenticity. She wants to make readers vulnerable. In Volume I Low writes: "it's like this irrational fear of giving someone your vulnerability, which is silly because if you're thinking it, you've already lost it" (*Compleat Purge* vol. I). In other words, you cannot have your vulnerability and eat it too. Despite this admission, Low seems to have taken it upon herself to examine what might happen if, as a confessional "I" or as readers who are predisposed to reading experimental poetry, we attempted to do both and maintained a difficult relation to the text.

*The Compleat Purge* figures a relation to authenticity that is characterized by vulnerability in a situation where we, as readers of experimental poetry, are immersed in a critical distance from identification and confession that the last few decades of poetry have taught us. Instead of emphasizing the poet's authenticity or the reader's emotional identification, *The Compleat Purge* examines the distinctions between boredom and interest, affection and violence, or love and destruction (see Winnicott 90). It combines a confessional lack of emotional control with conceptual experimentation in order to transgress boundaries between identification and critical distance, or between uncontrollable vulnerability and self-contained, controlled authenticity, as well as between confessionalism and conceptualism.

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<sup>1</sup> See Kaufmann 3, 9, 99-124; Reed, "Idea Eater" and "In Other Words" 759; Perloff; Bedient; King; Galvin; Gardner; Myles; Bernstein 22, 58-59; Siltanen, "Lapse" 101, 107; White; Yankelevich.

<sup>2</sup> I will use a capital initial to refer to the Confessional poetry of the 1950s and 1960s, and a lower case initial when I refer to confessional writing more generally.

<sup>3</sup> Arguably post-conceptual writing might be viewed as an attempt to improve conceptual writing, brushing off some of the problematic issues hard-core conceptual writing has been accused of, particularly that it views "identity" as irrelevant (cf. Goldsmith 85) and therefore, as for instance Kathy Park Hong has claimed in an article titled "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," shies away from dealing with identity questions. David Kaufmann provides a detailed overview of this discussion and of the accusations of racism that conceptual writing has received (5, 71-94). Low also hints at identity concerns in her metatextual afterword, "4 Real." While this debate is outside my scope, I maintain that *The Compleat Purge*, in its focus on emotion and expression, touches on many of these issues.

<sup>4</sup> See also Siltanen 101.

<sup>5</sup> Hazel Smith has recently suggested in a short essay, published in the online magazine *Cordite*, that post-conceptual poetry, as practiced by Felix Bernstein and Low in her earlier work "Confessions", has certain affinities with confessionalism. The essay does important work in mapping the importance of confessionalism as a contemporary phenomenon, but it stems from largely different premises and comes to different conclusions than my inquiry.

<sup>6</sup> See Phillips 8; Holden 184-185; Siltanen, *Experimentalism* 42-43.

<sup>7</sup> See Siltanen, *Experimentalism* 40.

<sup>8</sup> White is drawing on Helen Merrell Lynd's essay "The Nature of Shame", 1958 (in *Guilt and Shame*, edited by Herbert Morris, 1971).

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