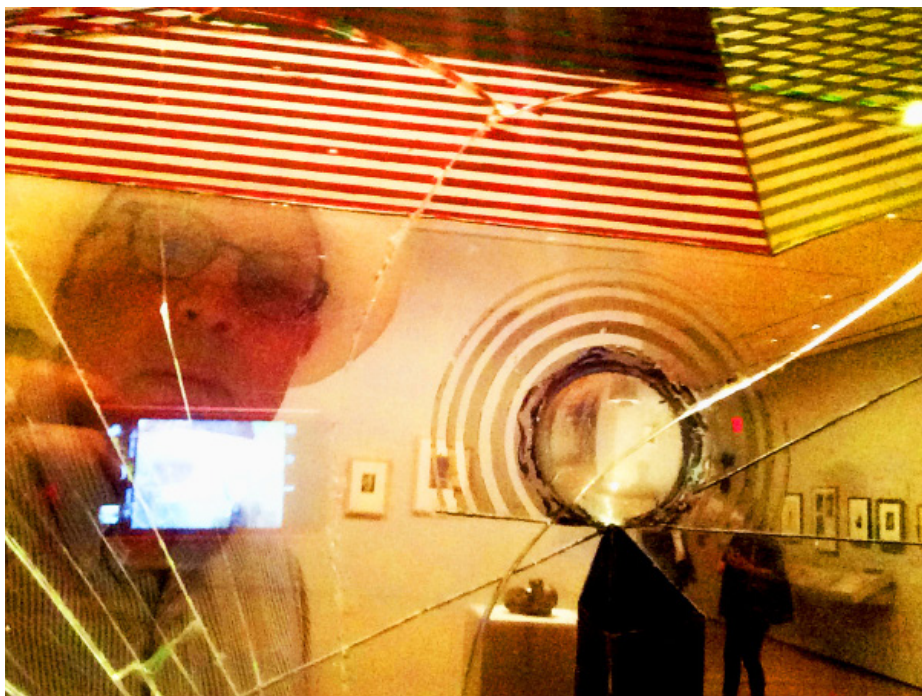


95 THESES



Charles Bernstein

ART + RESEARCH

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Charles Bernstein

The Techne Lab, University of Colorado
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The Techne Lab, University of Colorado, Boulder
Boulder, Colorado
art.colorado.edu

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INTRODUCTION

"95 Theses" commemorates both "Frame Lock," a talk I presented at the 1992 MLA Annual Convention and which was collected in *My Way: Speeches and Poems* (U of Chicago P, 1999), and "The Practice of Poetics," written a decade ago for *Introduction to Scholarship in Modern Languages and Literature* (David Nicholls, editor; MLA, 2007).

In "Frame Lock," using terms adapted from Erving Goffman's Frame Analysis, I made the case for shifts in mood and style in scholarly writing; not only made the case, I performed it. Contrary to what some members feel, I have always found the MLA convention, with its knowledgeable and often enthusiastic listeners, an ideal place to present my work. In 1990 I got my first full-time academic job, at SUNY Buffalo. It was astounding to start at Buffalo having had virtually no prior academic affiliation since I had graduated college two decades earlier. I am sure that unusual experience gives me an odd perspective. In 1992 I had just cofounded the Poetics Program at Buffalo with Susan Howe, Raymond Federman, Robert Creeley, and Dennis Tedlock (who died this past June). The program was a model for literary artists teaching in PhD programs—not creative writing but literary

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history and poetics. Over the years, my briefs for the essay as art have shifted to keep up with the changing environment and also because I don't like to repeat myself, even though I am sure I do.

I am retiring in 2019, so take this as something of a swan song, or, anyway, duck soup. I leave the remainder of the theses to be filled in by you.

95 THESES

1. Professionalism is a means not an end. Less is more. Professors are better off when they professionalize less and risk extinction when professionalization is primary.
2. Professionalized scholarly writing often seems to play off a list of master-theorists who must be cited, even if the subject is overcoming mastery. A modest proposal: In your next essays and books don't make any reference to the ten most cited authors in your field. Apply the death of the author to the ones that authorize that idea.
3. Don't cite authors, become an author. Then undo your own authority.
4. If you write you are a writer. It is as simple as that and no amount of research, findings, conclusions, proposals, projects, and laboratories will change it a whit.
5. Writing is a laboratory for the mind, its experiments are in syntax as much as analysis, arrangement as much as argument.

6. Frame Lock was not built in a day.

Tone jam is not a marmalade.

7. Contradiction is closer to truth than consistency so don't consistently emphasize contradiction.

8. The truth is not the end of the essay but its point of departure.

9. The fragment is more important for criticism today than for poetry.

10. Not fragments: constellations.

11. Positivism is as rhetorical as negativism.

12. Reason abhors a rationalist.

13. Which does not mean anything goes: anything is possible but only a very few things get through that eye of a needle that separates charm from harm. And often what appears as harm has got the charm.

14. We're better with alternatives to STEM

Than when we go on imitating them.

15. A recent Digital Humanities lecture presented both a fount and a font of information about a poem's unusual digital typeface but not a word about the font's meaning or ideology or how the visual display affected the interpretation of the poem. This was New Criticism with close reading not of the words of a text but the technology for generating its letters.

16. Distant reading without reading is not reading. Close reading without toggling frames is myopia.

17. Information everywhere but not a drop to drink.
18. The question for macro and distant sociological approaches in the humanities, digital or otherwise, is not just *what happens* but also *so what?* and *what for?*
19. "The fact you tell is of no value, but only the impression."
–Emerson on Thoreau (1862)
20. Criticism, scholarship, and poetry are all fonts of rhetoric. The aversion of rhetoric is an unkind kind of rhetoric.
21. There is no formula for avoiding formulas.
22. Sometimes what appears as unformulated is just new jeans with fashionable rips.
23. Not that there is anything wrong with that.
24. One size doesn't fit all. (*Each to his own goo, be true.*)
25. Not interdisciplinarity: non-disciplinarity. (Call it pragmatism.)
26. If we want to emulate the natural sciences let us do so by stressing speculation and collaboration (through multiple author essays).
27. Expository writing needs to be balanced by non-expository writing.
28. I don't want trans-national studies I want non-national studies. Non-national studies would look at language-speaking groups and conversations among languages and across languages not based only on nation states but affinities, immigration, refugees, the displaced and

diasporic, the nomadic, the national-non-conforming. Examples would be born-digital arts, poets writing in English irrespective of their national or first language, Yiddish, or to give a more historical example, the Medieval and European cultures approach of David Wallace here at Penn that looks not at discrete national literatures but rather “sequences of interconnected places.”

29. Nothing suits us like our union suits, as the old ILGWU (International Ladies Garment Workers Union) ad put it.

30. Don't mourn: unionize.

31. There are no themes, histories, ideologies, ideas, terms, or categories uninflected (uninfected) by the often fractal, fractured, and fraught signifying practices that make them so. Ideas bleed re(a)d blood; the imaginary weeps wet tears. The real is no less so minding the body than embodying mind.

32. Language is never more than an extension of reality.

33. Form and style are not ornamental to meaning.

34. No flapjacks without eggs.

35. Impersonality is the hobgoblin of frightened prose.

36. Autobiography and personal narrative is not a prophylactic against formulaic expression of received ideas.

37. Contentious rhetoric opens dialog more than professionalized prose. But contentiousness as a mode of dominance is tyranny. Denunciation and defamation, even in the name of a good cause, destroys dialog.

38. All professional rhetoric is pre-professional.
39. The real cannot disappear. Even the appearance of disappearance is real.
40. The absence of expressed identity is a form of identity.
41. The expression of identity is, also, a mask.
42. The poetry and poetics I read and write are not a product of the world financial system but of the world semantic system.
43. Whenever you walk on a new road, you can be sure no one has spoiled it yet. –Menachim Mendel (Kotsker Rebbe)
44. Whenever you think you have walked down a new road, you can be sure others have been there first. Try to find and acknowledge them.
45. Feeling superior to the self-righteous makes you that.
46. Taking pleasure in piety is piteous.
47. The good longs for us but we are unworthy.
48. Recently, a dean at my college declined to allow a class for a “diversity” requirement even though the syllabus included poetry in a dozen languages from the Americas, Asia, Europe, Africa. The dean said *diversity* needed to focus on only one group, one language. *Diversity without uniformity is poetry and don’t count.*
49. For the colonial mind, decolonization is a new frontier to settle.
50. It never hurts to add a joke.

51. You know the one: three Jews four opinions? What you don't hear is that two of them, the schmucks, have the same opinion, while the third ...
52. To write prose after Auschwitz is barbaric.
53. "Away then with all those prophets who say to the community of Christ, 'Peace, peace,' and there is no peace."
54. My concern is more *What is false?* than *What is truth?*
55. "This is our task: to imagine no whole from all that has been smashed."
56. A bird at heel is better than a heel with a bird.
57. Redefine English in "English department" as the host language not the disciplinary boundary, where English is understood neither as origin nor destination.
58. The aversion of disciplinarity requires discipline.
59. The arts, including the literary arts, are as foundational for literary studies as criticism. Literary studies without aesthetics is like science without nature.
60. There are nowadays many professors of culture but few originators, since origination has been mostly assigned to the realm of fantasy, of unicorns and fairies. "The success of great scholars and thinkers is commonly a courtier-like success," Thoreau writes in *Walden*. "They make shift to live merely by conformity, practically as their fathers did, and are in no sense the progenitors of a noble race of men." Nor is Thoreau ironic when he insists, "Yet it is admirable to profess because it was once admirable to live."

61. Lyric Theory: The spouting of a whale is freer than the lyric of most poets.

62. Coming before any public in this month requires a loud denunciation of Donald Trump, who poses a grave danger to this republic, a requirement made all the more urgent when so many young people, perhaps even some here at the University of Pennsylvania, seem reluctant to support Hillary Clinton. *I'm with her.*

63. Pataquerics cannot be schooled. It cannot be, which is to say rest as, itself. Pataquerics questions its own questioning.

64. Telling truth is a kind of lying since
Every truth conceals both other truths and
Plenty of falsehoods. But lying is as
Far from truth as the dead from the living.
It was never my intention to do
Either—Just to keep bailing this open
Boat drifting out toward an infinite sea.

65. The rest of these 95 theses intentionally left blank.

Note

I presented this work on the panel Aversive Prose, convened by Eric Keenaghan and Josephine Park at Kelly Writers House, University of Pennsylvania, 16 September 2016. The panel title comes from a graduate seminar I led in 2015, which presented an abbreviated history of exceptional and aversive approaches to essays and discursive prose (upper-limit poetry / lower-limit manifestos).

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Charles Bernstein is the Donald T. Regan Professor of English and Comparative Literature at the University of Pennsylvania.

A R T + R E S E A R C H

Mark Amerika, *What Is Techne?*

Lelah Mehran and Christopher Coleman, *W3FI*

Charles Bernstein, *95 Theses*