



## Poetics as Value Thinking: The Example of 'Plan B'

Barrett Watten, Professor, English

**Wednesday, April 4, 2018 12:30PM-1:30PM Rm. 2339 F/A Bldg**

This lecture is a hybrid of two thought experiments—one, a discussion of the poetics of value that sees political economy and poetics as twin forms of historically specific making, linked discourses of the determination of value. The second is a proposal for the transvaluation of poetics, and specifically Language and conceptual writing, as prospective organizations of poetic labor as a form of a “knowledge base” (adopted from information and digital theory). The notion that unites both is that poetry and poetics are forms not only of value making but value thinking—sites for the transvaluation of a general notion of value into particular values. Key forebears of the turn to a materialist poetics in modernism—Louis Zukofsky and William Carlos Williams above all—provide examples of poetry as value making in the widest sense. Zukofsky theorized a poetics of value in the making of his keystone work and parallel text, *The First Half of “A.”* Williams, early and late, shows how the making of the world is what counts as value, nowhere more readable than in the discontinuous unfolding, the uneven development of *Paterson*. In my second part, I propose how the poetics of Language and conceptual writing can be transvalued, from a static compiling of the data of language toward a transvaluation of the labor congealed in past production—language, poetry, and world. Just as experimental writing was a transvaluation of prior modes of poetry, leading to new values for writing, so the transvaluation of experimental writing returns it to the world in its form of knowledge base, redefining the task of poetry and poetics as forms of value thinking. I will conclude with a brief reading of sections of my recent long poem, “Plan B.”



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Barrett Watten is Professor of English at Wayne State University and a member of the Academy of Scholars. He is the author of *The Constructivist Moment: From Material Text to Cultural Poetics* (winner of the 2004 René Wellek Prize, ACLA) and *Questions of Poetics: Language Writing and Consequences* (University of Iowa Press, 2016), as well as numerous volumes of poetry, including *Frame* (1971-1990), *Bad History*, and *Progress/Under Erasure*. With Carrie Noland, he co-edited *Diasporic Avant-Gardes* (Palgrave, 2008); and with Lyn Hejinian, he is coeditor of *A Guide to Poetics Journal: Writing in the Expanded Field, 1982-98* and *Poetics Journal Digital Archive* (Wesleyan University Press, 2013/15). He collaborated on two multi-authored projects: *Leningrad: American Writers in the Soviet Union* and *The Grand Piano: An Experiment in Collective Autobiography*, San Francisco, 1975–80.

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