CODE$WITCHING
PRICELESS POETRY IN THE BAY

DAN THOMAS-GLASS

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Jasper Bernes's *Desequencer*, out this spring from Suzanne Stein's TAXT press, presents the unknowable as the already-known, exploring the dialectic between the sublime and the mundane. The impossibility of the human genome, both the organizing and disorganizing principle of the poem, is in the chapbook's concise introduction the mid-20th-century's dream of an absolutely administered subjectivity, the final gambit of internalized oppression: class codified as "*species*," class in the genes.

The poem's distrust for these codes is evident in its treatment of the nucleotide letter sequences. The first page takes the letters—themselves already abstractions of molecules, as Bernes points out in the introduction—as an absolute series, with the first accepting the code even down to the syllable:

1. [TGCCGGGGTG] / Target circles. Gone grey, gone "good," that's game

But quickly this paradigm, the words as directly expressive of the genes, decays. By the end of the first page, a letter (gene) goes unexpressed, and "life" opens and closes in the space left by an em dash:

21. [GTGCCACCG—] / Gastrins, glycines crowd a code calqued ~~life~~

From here the poem heaves into less coded terrain. We find a log of days sometimes in the manner of scientific notes, at times tied to the letter sequences (with the As, Ts, Gs and Cs bolded) and other times not, days themselves unsequenced (first 24, then 17, then 59, then 34), days in a lab with paranoia and patients. Beckett's *Endgame* meets Barthelme's *Game*:

Day 89: Lab meat airdropped into the courtyard: Memorial Day for the fifth time this week. "If I have to sit through another aromatherapy session," says Neil, "I swear I might start reading again." They lock him down. Which doesn't stop any of us from having his dreams. Because of the magnets, yep, for the shooting blindness and the red headaches. When I get out of here, I'm a kill the first lepidopterist I can find.

Day 1: No markings on the elevator buttons, smooth and unadorned as flattened pennies. This should serve as sufficient warning, but I'm too busy trying to figure out if we're moving or not, moving as I think we should deep into the safe center of the earth.

If the mark of a successful poem in this post-language era is the ability to set the terms of its own legibility, *Desequencer* is certainly a success. But it refuses to accept even this rubric: the mantra of *Desequencer*, as it were, is the decay of coding itself. Each new code—from the nucleotides to the logs, even to the use of white space and the page as a boundary—gets switched. The moment an analytical movement becomes familiar it is irrelevant, supplanted by some mutation of text (and so, of reading). This mimics as it resists the circulation of capital; apertures of new markets (on the globe, in peoples' brains) dependent both on infinite expansion and planned obsolescence. And the poem crows in this brief aporia:

> Dear System: Your carbons, bugging, five carats per gigabyte—no rule in the code's rule, only a die, a tool looted of use, a stalled knot of command without dimension.

The code, a "tool looted of use," becomes the symbol of its own emptiness—impassable, inexpressible, "a stalled knot." There is "no rule in the code's rule"—the ambiguity between rule as noun and rule as verb pointing up the poem's corrosive affect, its reflexive attack on its own process, rules and rulers a pair equally worthy of distrust.

By the end of the poem, a quote from Alan Badiou's *The Century*, embedded and nearly lost in a mass of Gs Ts As and Cs, wonders about epistemology and ontology in a world in which "science knows how to make a new man." The genome project is of course a large part of that blueprint, and though the Badiou quote ends "profit will tell us what to do," the poem's labor, the crumbling of the coding that precedes the quote, suggests at least the possibility of a different epistemology for the 21st c.: one in which the programming of life by capital is desequenced, leaving a subjectivity "rifted with if, with not," potentiality achieved through the work of the negative.

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Of course, there is another meaning to "looted of use," one which points toward Bernes's familiarity with Karl Marx's *Capital*.

Marx explains what he calls the "Fetishism which attaches itself to products of labour," or what has come to be more commonly known as the commodity fetish, as a process whereby the use-value of an object is lost:

> …the labour of the individual asserts itself as a part of the labour of society, only by means of the relations which the act of exchange establishes between the products, and indirectly, through them, between the producers. To the latter, therefore, the relations connecting the labour of one individual with that of the rest appear, not as direct social relations between individuals at work, but as what they really are, material relations between persons and social relations between things. It is only by being exchanged that the products of labour acquire, as values, one uniform social status, distinct from their various forms of existence as objects of utility.

The transformation from the concrete object and its function to the abstract value through exchange is what creates the commodity-as-fetish—a thing that seems to have a social relationship to other things (it is easy enough after all to compute the relative values of iPods and lattes, for example—or in Marx's terms, boots and linen).

Marx's essential point is that we relate as people through these objects—our interactions become material (or monetary), while the commodities appear to exist in society with one another, all reducible to the same "uniform social status" through value.

So Bernes's code "looted of use" could be understood to be any commodity out there, or just the form of the commodity itself, all things related to one another on the scales of dollars or yuan rather than function. In *Desequencer*'s introduction, Bernes reads the desire for the codification of class as symptomatic of capitalist society's "knowledge that the difference between those who do and those who do not own things is nothing but the history of theft, violence, lies." Put another way, capitalist society is aware that there is a uniform social status for *people*, not just for things—this connection of everything with genes. To make class into species is equally to code the commodity into the molecules of the human bloodstream: in either case, the desired product is the suppression of this "bad conscience," the erasure of human connection in favor of relations between things.

Desequencer, as previously stated, is a product of Suzanne Stein's TAXT press. TAXT is one of several Bay Area presses and publications (including David Brazil and Sara Larsen's *Try!*, the Nonsite Collective, and *WITH + STAND*, among many others) currently sketching the outlines of a local DIY aesthetic, one with an emphasis on free exchange. As Stein put it in a recent email:

> TAXT was […] born to publish the underpublished, the local, and I gave them away free (as I'd been already doing with other, less formalized iterations of my work and others), as a way of pointing up the fact of the gift economy that poetry is.

This gift economy (which, as Stein points out, is the actual state of most poetry, since poetry books and journals rarely make back their production costs) resists commodification by disrupting presumptions about value. Marx explains that "the character of having value, when once impressed upon products, obtains fixity only by reason of their acting and re-acting upon each other as quantities of value." For Marx, acting as a quantity of value is "a necessary preliminary to the circulation of commodities," in order that "they acquire[…] the stability of natural, self-understood forms of social life." To paraphrase: commodities must consistently be exchanged as values for value (and the commodity) to become a basic patterning of social life. The move away from value in the exchange of objects calls into question the role of value in exchange, a questioning that can be unsettling to capitalist subjectivity. Again, Stein's email:

> Something that's been infinitely interesting about TAXT being free has been watching the way people negotiate that fact. Some feel deeply uncomfortable about accepting them for free. Money is a way of finalizing relation in this exchange of course, and what the press resists.[1]

This disruption of assumptions around value is echoed in the insistence by many of these presses and publications on the visibility of the labor process—often using production practices (home printers, staples, duct tape, etc.) that highlight the physical work of creating the objects. Unlike what Marx calls the "money-form" of value, which "conceals, instead of disclosing, the social character of private labor," these poetry objects assert over and over again the centrality of the labor of their production and the social nature of that labor.[2]

At this moment in the Bay Area there are a myriad of poetry and art objects (and the labor that went into these objects) being distributed to the community for free. In

this, perhaps, the DIY scene enacts what Marx envisioned for communist exchange, in which "the labour-power of all the different individuals is consciously applied as the combined labour-power of the community." Both for Jasper Bernes's *Desequencer* and for the press and community that produced it, this communal approach enacts a refusal of value (or profit, or capital) as the only code through which to pattern existence.

Notes

[1] My own experience in giving *WITH +STAND* away for free parallels this account. Both Suzanne and I have noted a particular desire to "at least pay for postage," as though production can be free but circulation cannot possibly be.

[2] As Stan Apps wrote of *Try!* on his blog last year, "I don't know how you get this zine other than being there when it's being handed out." Social to the last: *Try!*'s only web presence is an email address.