Playing Games with Kenneth Koch:

Poetry, Collaboration, Pedagogy

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Abstract

Play and games are of great importance to post–Second World War U.S. avant-garde poetry. Yet their key role has so far gone unrecognized and unexplored due to the neglect of play and game-oriented theoretical frameworks within the field of modern and contemporary poetry and poetics. In this thesis, I use the work of poet and educator Kenneth Koch (1925–2002) to develop a play-oriented framework for poetry criticism. I begin my study by examining how Koch manipulates the tension between free textual play and rule-governed play in order to engage both writer and reader in a variety of open ended poetic games. I then demonstrate how these textual games are also significant at a social level: their transformative dynamics enable Koch to playfully negotiate the aesthetic, personal, and political dichotomies of the second half of the twentieth century. By positioning both the textual and social elements of Koch’s work within this play-oriented framework, I show how composition, reading, collaboration, and pedagogic transmission are all parts of an ongoing process of creative gameplay that continues to shape contemporary poetry.
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Contents

Table of Illustrations v

Opening Moves 6
1. Historical Context 8
2. Koch and Play 11
3. Play and Poetry 15
4. Thesis Outline 23

Part I: Play in Texts

Chapter One: Games of Paidia and Ludus:
Freeply, Constraint, and the Space of Textual Play 28
1. Instability and Solidification in “The Brassiere Factory” and When the Sun Tries to Go On 30
2. Authorial and Readerly Play in Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On 42
3. Ludus and Paidia in Ko, or A Season on Earth 54
4. The Red Robins as Play World 66

Chapter Two: Games of Expansion:
Socio-Political Dichotomies and Structural and Thematic Play 78
1. Cold War Polarization and the New York School of Poets 79
2. “Fresh Air” as Self-Subverting Binary Play 89
3. Expansions of Formal and Thematic Play in “The Artist” and Hotel Lambosa 104
4. The Art of the Possible as Decentred Ludic Structure 116

Part II: Texts in Play

Chapter Three: Games of Sociality: Collaborative and Competitive Play 143
1. The End of the Evening as Guided Play 145
2. Individual and Collective Voice in New York School Collaboration 157
3. Making it Up and Collaboration as Event 169

Chapter Four: Games of Pedagogy: Conceptual Play and Antiauthoritarian Didacticism 177
1. Conceptual Play in Koch’s Pedagogic Work 179
2. The Egalitarian Poetry Classroom 191
3. Didactic Self-Subversion in “The Art of Love” and “The Art of Poetry” 200

Endgames 210

Works Cited 219
Table of Illustrations

Fig. 1: “Stopping Off for Death in Life Comics” (*Art of the Possible* 63). 127
Fig. 2: Frame from “Reflection of Death” (*Tales from the Crypt #23* 1). 128
Fig. 3: “Kenya Comics” (*Art of the Possible* 23). 129
Fig. 4: “Puzzle Page” (*Art of the Possible* 102). 130
Fig. 5: “Comics Mystery Game” (*Art of the Possible* 19). 131
Fig. 6: “Omar Bongo Comics” (*Art of the Possible* 32). 132
Fig. 7: “Omar Bongo Free-Style Relax Comics” (*Art of the Possible* 33). 133
Fig. 8: “Paul Klee Comics” (*Art of the Possible* 105). 134
Fig. 9: “Storm Window” (Berg Collection, NY Public Library). 135
Fig. 10: “Cincinnati” (Berg Collection, NY Public Library). 136
Fig. 11: Sketch of *The End of the Evening* (Berg Collection, NY Public Library). 137
Fig. 12: Cover of *Collaboration* by Larry Rivers and Kenneth Koch. 138
Fig. 13: Untitled print by Red Grooms and Kenneth Koch (*Stamped Indelibly* 5). 139
Fig. 14: Untitled artwork by Jim Dine and Kenneth Koch. 140
Fig. 15: Kenneth Koch and Larry Rivers with *New York, New York, 1950–1960*. 141

Figures 9, 10, and 11 (“Storm Window,” “Cincinnati,” and the sketch of *The End of the Evening*) are reproduced with the permission of the Kenneth Koch Literary Estate. Any further copying or republication of these three images is strictly prohibited.
Opening Moves

In this thesis I use the work of Kenneth Koch to explore a significant but largely unrecognised force in post–Second World War U.S. poetry: the poetics of play. The basic elements of this play are present in all writing, irrespective of differences in language and literary tradition. Play is, in fact, an integral part of language itself: language users take on the roles of players within the complex rule systems of grammar, signification, and communication. Poets are especially self-conscious of their engagement in such activity: they frequently prioritise the play of rhyme, rhythm, or typography over communicative or even aesthetic concerns. For post-war U.S. avant-garde poets, these practices become particularly important on a number of levels. Through their characteristic emphasis on experimentation, process, sociality, and collaboration, these poets develop a distinctively play-oriented poetics that connects textual practice to game-like interpersonal interaction.

I have chosen Koch as an exemplar of this poetics for three primary reasons. My first reason is Koch’s overt commitment to the pleasures of play, a commitment evident in his distinctive emphasis on comedy and poetic invention. *Playful* is an obvious adjective to apply to his work, an adjective that reflects Koch’s exuberant childlike energies. My second reason relates to the many different ways Koch engages in play. Koch plays games not only within the space of a single poem, but also in the intertextual and social spaces that surround his poems. Studying Koch’s work thus reveals how writing, reading, social interaction, collaboration, and even the dissemination of poetic techniques and values are all components in an ever-expanding network of activity that cannot be reduced to any single location or event. My third reason is the continuing significance of Koch’s work. His influence continues to resonate through the work of a range of poets including Ron Padgett, Jordan Davis, Dean Young, and David Lehman, as well as among novelists,
artists, musicians, and filmmakers. This legacy connects mid-twentieth century poetry with the contemporary moment, perpetuating Koch’s poetics of play into the twenty-first century in ways that continue to change and evolve. Studying the role of play in Koch’s work therefore also enables a richer understanding of contemporary U.S. poetry.

The poetics of play that is so crucial to this understanding has its origins in the cultural climate of the Cold War, yet it continues to be a defining characteristic of the U.S. avant-garde. For Koch and his fellow New York School poets, play was a way to navigate the restrictive and divided cultural landscape of that era. Dominant binaries—individual/group, coterie/inclusiveness, freedom/constraint, and closure/openness—could be exposed as arbitrary and malleable through their incorporation into wider systems of gameplay. In the latter part of the twentieth century and the first decades of the twenty-first, subsequent generations of poets and critics continued this process of creative destabilisation. Critics frequently declare the avant-garde dead, subsumed into a mainstream that, as Alan Golding puts it, “is commonly argued to have become so diverse and democratically inclusive as to be unlocatable, unrecognizable as a mainstream” (“New, Newer, and Newest” 7). Yet, as he goes on to point out, the “self-consciously avant-garde” persists: its presence is asserted through social groupings and across the pages of journals and anthologies (7). Poets, editors, and critics contribute to this process of definition and redefinition, reiterating old divisions and constructing new ones. By understanding the play dynamics integral to this process, the contemporary critic can explore these binaries while simultaneously acknowledging their unstable and malleable nature.

In writing this thesis I myself, of course, contribute to this process of definition and redefinition. Constructing new critical frameworks and positioning Koch within them, I become a player in my own game of recontextualisation and reassessment. Koch’s writings and the critical texts that have sprung up around them cease to be stable textual objects and
are cast actively into engagement with one another. Through my study, I am able to draw attention to the game-like nature of such processes, reframing not only Koch but also creativity, originality, authorship, pedagogy, community, and scholarly criticism in terms of the interactive and transformative nature of play.

1. Historical Context

Play is a force tending towards excess yet, paradoxically, it feeds upon tensions generated by constraint and division. Furthermore, as theorist Jacques Ehrmann has pointed out, play is inevitably tangled up with society and culture to such a degree that it is impossible to separate it from the context in which it occurs (33–34). In the Cold War environment in which Koch began to form his poetics, this context included the relation of avant-garde movements both to other poetic groups and to broader society. Avant-garde movements have traditionally been antagonistic, committed to, as Marjorie Perloff puts it, “the overthrow of the dominant aesthetic values of their culture and to the making of artworks that [are] genuinely new and revolutionary” (“Avant-Garde Community” 119). In the early twentieth century, this antagonism can be observed in the vehement anti-establishment rhetoric of Russian and Italian Futurism, Dadaism, and Surrealism, as well as in the disdain for mass culture expressed by modernists such as Ezra Pound and Wyndham Lewis. In the United States, after the Second World War, similar tendencies manifested in the reaction of groups such as the Black Mountain School and the Beats against the then dominant New Critics. The resultant tensions were intensified in the cultural climate of the Cold War era, a climate in which exclusionist binaries dominated the social and political landscapes. While the New York School of poets was more nuanced in its relationship to the so-called mainstream—self-consciously mocking the very avant-garde rhetoric it modelled itself on—it was nonetheless positioned within such
oppositional binaries.

On the surface, the oppositional stances of U.S. avant-garde groups can be seen as a reaction against the restrictions of Cold War authoritarianism. Michael Davidson has described how up until the early 1960s “strictures about literary excess—the dangers of intention and affectivity, the threat of emotion and confession—were often linked to a national consensus about American political and cultural values” (Guys Like Us 5). Literary values of balance and containment were promoted as “rules for normative personal behavior”: influential New Critic Delmore Schwartz, for example, criticised the Beats for their chaotic and confrontational poetics, claiming that it could contribute to the downfall of U.S. society (Davidson, Guys Like Us 5). Stability—both in the social and literary spheres—was to be found in balance, what Perloff terms the “equipoise” aspired to in the metaphysical poetries of “depersonalization, ambiguity, tension, paradox” (“Step Away”). What Davidson describes as “the eruption of new literary bohemias during the mid-1950s” could thus be interpreted as “challenges to the authority of the nuclear gaze” symptomatic of forces that could not be contained by official narratives of unity and conformity (Guys Like Us 74).

The poets and artists behind these challenges used both social and textual means to construct their own group or coterie identities, resulting in what Daniel Kane identifies as a characteristically post-war avant-garde “poetics of sociability” (“Angel Hair Magazine” 333). These individuals created what Davidson terms “imagined communities” (borrowing the term from Benedict Anderson) that flourished in bars, art galleries, private homes, and campuses (Guys Like Us 19). Group identities were also strengthened at a distance, spread across the pages of “little magazines” or dispersed across the radio frequencies (19). Anthologies similarly became a textual space in which group affiliations could be encoded, a move exemplified by the “war of the anthologies” that took place between Donald
Allen’s *The New American Poetry: 1945–1960* (1960) and Donald Hall’s more conservative *New Poets of England and America* (1957) (Shetley, *After the Death of Poetry* 13). The pages of such publications became battle lines along which individual poets were grouped according to categorisations made both by themselves and by editors and critics.

The very exclusive and oppositional nature of such coterie poetics is, however, problematic in the way it feeds into the dominant narratives of the era. Davidson has described how the Cold War “was fought on a discursive plane related to the production and reproduction of identity” (*Guys Like Us* 55). He goes on to point out that the production of antagonistic binaries was central to such a conflict, severing, as he puts it “an ‘inside’ from an ‘outside,’ a ‘self’ from an ‘other,’ a ‘domestic’ from a ‘foreign’” (55). This analysis is highly applicable to the coterie poetics of avant-garde groups, Koch’s own New York School among them. While positioning themselves in the margin of what Golding terms the “center-margin” model of avant-garde movements (“New, Newer, and Newest” 9), these movements simultaneously transform that marginal space into their own centre. As Davidson puts it, the “avant-garde is thus doubly marginalized, calling into question an aesthetic topography based on interiors, margins, limits, and boundaries” (*Guys Like Us* 50). This double marginalisation placed the post-war avant-garde in a paradoxical situation: in the very act of orienting itself against the dominant Cold War culture, it perpetuated that culture.

Just as avant-garde opposition to the centre forms a new centre, the anti-authoritarian impulses of such groups can be transformed into a new kind of authority. Renato Poggioli, the theorist of the avant-garde who lectured Koch’s close friend Frank O’Hara at Harvard University, has pointed out that even “disorder becomes a rule when it is opposed in a deliberate and symmetrical manner to a pre-established order” (56). In Mark Silverberg’s
words, the same gestures that seek to reject custom “easily ossify into a new set of unconventional conventions” and become dogma for the very innovators who created them (56). This threat of “solidification” (Tassoni 125) drives Koch to utilise the dynamics of play in both his writing and in his creative engagement with the wider community. In the next section, I will examine how critics have recognised and begun to examine just how these dynamics function in his work.

2. Koch and Play

Many scholars have recognised the playful nature of Koch’s work. Warren Motte, building on the ideas of Jean Piaget, has pointed out that, “play is mainly a matter of attitude and that behavior is ludic in greater or lesser degree depending on the orientation of that attitude” (19). Koch’s playful attitude, conveyed to the reader by the humour and exuberance of his work, has encouraged this identification. The details of just what games Koch engages in and how he plays them remain, however, largely unexplored.

Theories of play and games provide the beginnings of a conceptual framework in which these works can be positioned. Johan Huizinga and Roger Caillois—two seminal early theorists of play—both in fact conceptualise poetry as a form of play. While scholars working in the field of game studies have developed other aspects of Huizinga’s and Caillois’s theories, their ideas on poetry have been left relatively undeveloped. Because of the absence of such a suitable critical framework critics have tended to focus

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1 The term ludic is here used in the sense of playful: elsewhere throughout this thesis I use it to refer specifically to formal, rule-governed play (see the “Play and Poetry” below section on Caillois’s use of the term).

2 I examine Huizinga’s and Caillois’s theories in more detail in the “Play and Poetry” section below.
on the surface features of Koch’s texts—that is, their energy and inventiveness—while overlooking their game-like mechanics and their social aspects.

Some critics have, in fact, cast Koch’s playfulness in a negative light, claiming that his most valuable work lies in the more restrained and meditative poems he wrote towards the end of his career. Mark Halliday, for example, initially describes Koch and fellow poet O’Hara as “the two most important poets born after Bishop, Jarrell, and Lowell,” but then goes on to point out that in his more exuberant modes Koch, the “poet of Wow! and Yes!,” is “a very narrow poet” incapable of provoking significant emotional or intellectual response (“After Excitement” 141; italics in original). Geoff Ward, writing of Koch’s early and popular poem “Fresh Air” (1956), points out that “it’s good; the problem is that it will never be as good the second time” it is read (Statutes of Liberty 8). Like Halliday, Ward characterises Koch’s poetics as one of “breathless bravura” and “facetiousness,” claiming that the poems provide the reader with short-term pleasure but little that can be engaged with on a deeper emotional or critical level (8).

Both Halliday and Ward consider Koch’s most significant work to be his later poems, where energy and enthusiasm appear to slacken and his subject matter becomes more overtly autobiographical. These texts begin, as Halliday puts it, “to evoke the aftermath of exhilaration” and explore issues of “fatigue, regret, self-doubt, loss, mortality” and “emptiness” (“After Excitement” 141). These themes certainly fit more easily into established critical frameworks than his characteristic humour and exuberance. Prioritising them risks, however, obscuring the more radical elements of Koch’s writing—elements that are especially explicit in his early work, but that are also crucial to his later, more reflective texts.

This is not to say that Halliday and Ward are mistaken in their analysis of the tension between “exhilaration” and “fatigue” in Koch’s work. What they do not recognise,
however, is that this tension is a strength, not a weakness, in the work. This tension is indicative of a concern fundamental to Koch’s poetics: the problematic relationship between movement and stagnation, or between freeplay and constraint. Theodore Pelton, for example, has described the typical Koch text as “an object resulting from and giving rise to pleasure” through the exhilaration of the creative act (328). David Lehman, an ex-student of Koch and a historian of the New York School, has echoed this sentiment, describing Koch as “a poet of pleasure” dedicated to the hedonistic joys of the text (“Season on Earth” 187). Yet this pursuit of pleasure—the product of what Richard Howard characterises as “an imagination that demands to be thrilled at every instant” (281)—requires an ongoing search for new sources of excitement.

One of the most obvious symptoms of this search is Koch’s innovative approach to both subject matter and style. Paul Carroll, for example, has praised Koch’s ability to “make poetry out of anything and everything, even the most unpromising material” (105). John Boening makes a similar estimation in a 1984 review of the collection *Days and Nights*, claiming that “every book of poems by Kenneth Koch seems to be a new beginning, a starting over, a trying-out of new voices, styles and idioms” (105). Boening also observes that Koch appears to be engaged in “a frenetic search for a way of saying things” (105). Indeed, this inventiveness frequently seems more focused on form than content: what is said is less important than the ways in which it is said. Koch builds entire poems around rhetorical devices or formal constraints. Yet underneath such activity is always the danger that the creative energies will exhaust themselves, that the forward momentum of the poem will falter, and that the pleasures of both writing and reading will collapse into stasis.

One scholar, John Paul Tassoni, has used play theory to describe this tension within Koch’s 1960 long poem *Ko, or A Season on Earth*. Identifying the poem as “an act of
play,” Tassoni claims that it constitutes “an attempt to generate excitement in response to an activity that has become taskwork,” a reference to Koch’s own description of having written Ko as an extended act of procrastination during the writing of his postgraduate dissertation on influence in American and French poetry (Tassoni 123; Koch, “Inspiration” 218). Tassoni goes on to describe how the poem engages with play on both stylistic and thematic levels. On the thematic level, Ko revolves around stories of baseball, motorsports, and competitive dog and pig breeding. Yet on a stylistic level, the poem’s strict ottava rima verse form provides a simple rule system around and within which Koch is able to play a protracted game of composition. In this game, Koch the poet/player attempts to balance the demands of narrative coherence against the requirements of rhyme and meter. The results of this game—the finished text of Ko—are then available to be picked up by a reader and transformed into a game of interpretation. In this game, the reader/player sets her or his own wits against the absurdities and digressions of the text in order to follow the many narratives that play out therein.

Tassoni also recognises a subtler mode of play at work within the poem. In Ko, Koch does more than just play within the conventions of his chosen form. He also engages in meta-play, subverting the traditions of the epic poem and playing “the game of literature in reverse” through his manipulation of the tropes of narrative and form (123). Ultimately, Tassoni points out, Koch plays the game of Ko not to win, but to lose. By failing to produce what most critics would consider a successful example of an epic narrative poem, he deliberately loses at the particular poetic game he sets himself. Yet through the activities that result in this loss—the forced rhymes, the meandering and multiplying plots, the twisting of syntax in order to conform to the metrical scheme—he creates a new kind of game and new possibilities for poetic play.

Tassoni’s analysis is a penetrating one. It is, however, necessarily limited by his
focus on a single text. The question of how a reader might engage with a text like *Ko*, and of how the kind of authorial play he describes might function in less rigidly structured poems, is thus outside the scope of his study. The social ramifications of Koch’s play poetics are similarly beyond his purview. Addressing such issues requires a fuller understanding of play theory—including new work being done in the fields of games studies and digital literature—and its existing connections to poetry and poetics. As I will demonstrate, play theory provides the foundation for understanding how Koch’s use of game-like methods of composition and interpretation shifts the focus of poetry away from the page and into intertextual and intersocial spaces.

3. Play and Poetry

Many commentators have applied the terminology of play and games outside what is commonly thought of as play. This has resulted in what Motte has described as “broad essentialist claims for play,” where everything from politics to metaphysics is analysed in terms of (frequently loosely defined) play dynamics (3). Such claims have led to a somewhat nebulous conception of play itself, which is heightened by the many meanings ascribed to the word *play* in the English language. There is the play of young children, riotous and frequently undisciplined. Then there is the work-like play of professional athletes, an activity that follows strict rules and is directed towards clearly defined goals. The word is also used to refer to movement—the play, for example, of light reflecting from moving water or of the gears of a machine in operation. We also use the word to describe an actor playing a part in (yet another meaning) a theatrical play. While united under the rubric *play*, all of these instances of play involve different kinds of activity and agency. Furthermore, as Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman argue, individual moments of play differ conceptually depending on the interpretive frameworks in which they are positioned. “As
RULES,” they point out, “games are closed systems, as CULTURE, games are open systems, but as PLAY” they can be framed “as either closed or open systems,” depending upon the elements the critic chooses to focus upon (96; capitalisation in original).

To understand how play functions in poetry, it is necessary to divide this multiplicity of meaning into more precise critical concepts. Ludwig Wittgenstein, in his seminal work on the philosophy of language, provides examples of how specific language acts constitute “language-games” (15). Actions such as “giving orders, and acting on them,” “describing an object by its appearance,” “making up a story; and reading one,” “singing rounds,” and “requesting, thanking, cursing, greeting, praying” all constitute different forms of games (15). In line with Salen and Zimmerman’s observation, the nature of these games differs depending on how they are conceptualised. On one level, they constitute games played out between individuals. “Giving orders, and acting on them,” for example, is a game of communication that requires at least two players: one to give orders, the other to follow them. Similar dynamics drive “describing an object” or “making up a story.” “Singing rounds” constitutes another form of interpersonal play, one that prioritises cooperation over communication in the act of group singing. Yet on another level these actions are also games played out between the individual and the rule systems of language. To give an order, describe an object, or tell a story, one must understand the conventions attached to the relevant language act. Perloff has identified both these modes of play as central to much twentieth-century avant-garde poetry, connecting play both to an appreciation of the “strangeness” of everyday language and to the ways poets engage with the socially constructed “language cage” within which they find themselves positioned (Wittgenstein’s Ladder 20).

In order to understand how just how such play functions in poetry it is necessary to consider exactly who, in each particular instance, is playing the game and just what kind of
game—what set of rules and conventions—is being played. Robert Rawdon Wilson acknowledges this when he points out that, if poetry is to be thought of as play, a number of questions must be answered “on the empirical level of particular texts.” He goes on to ask: “who is playing? with what? by what (or whose) rules? to what ends? with what degree of skill?” And more:

what game is this? where did the author find it? did he invent it? who else plays this game? what is its goal? what are its constitutive rules? what patterns, modes of order and disorder, does it manifest? in what does winning consist? must someone always win? (181)

In order to answer these questions in Koch’s case, I use ideas from the work of the two seminal twentieth-century play theorists Huizinga and Caillois.

Both Huizinga and Caillois consider play as integral to poetry—so integral in fact that, for them, play is what distinguishes poetry from other literary forms. For Caillois in particular, play is just as instrumental in the reading of poetry as it is in the writing of it. The game-like nature of reading poetry, he goes on to explain, is especially explicit in the case of “obscure poetry” (30), which presents the reader with a challenge akin to word games, mathematical puzzles, and other forms that appeal to “a spirit of calculation and contrivance” (30). Motte, another more recent theorist, reiterates that play is an “essential, if variable, dimension of both writing and reading, and that both these activities may be characterized . . . as games” (4). Writer and reader, he goes on to argue, quite literally “play each other” through the medium of the text (26; italics in original). The poet creates a text—which in itself may be a minefield of obfuscation and false starts—which is then transformed by the reader through the act of interpretation. Both poet and reader thus fix their definitions of the text through their acts of composition and interpretation. At the same time, however, they subvert fixed textual identity through the destabilising dynamics
of that interaction. As Ehrmann puts it, the game “is neither completely free nor completely 
gratuitous, because we [as readers] are implicated in it: we are that very matter and the 
subject who stir it up” (36). Just as play cannot be contained within any one moment of 
reading or writing, so poet and reader are drawn into a system of play that transcends any 
single communicative act.

Literary theorists, while not using a vocabulary of play and games, have long 
established this idea of reading as an active rather than a passive activity. Umberto Eco has 
onlined, for example, the importance of the reader in constructing meaning in all texts, 
pointing out that in certain postmodernist or avant-garde texts meaning is “cooperatively 
generated by the addressee” and the writer (3). In such instances, the text loses a great deal 
of its semantic stability, becoming part of what Eco terms a “flexible system of 
signification” in which “sender, addressee, and context” combine to generate shifting 
networks of communication (3, 4). By understanding these networks in terms of the 
interpersonal dynamics of play, I am able to demonstrate how these systems of interaction 
expand beyond the text—beyond even the relationship between writer and reader—and 
into broader systems of interpersonal activity.

In these systems, new models of authorial agency replace the mythology of the poet 
as individual creator. N. Katherine Hayles has described such interpersonal interaction as 
constituting, in a literary context, “distributed cognitive systems” (“Desiring Agency”158). 
Building on Andy Clark and David Chalmers’s theory of “extended mind” and Edwin 
Hutchins’s concept of environmentally situated cognition, Hayles describes how in such 
systems individuals function as components in the larger structures they collectively 
generate. As she puts it, they act “with partial agency amid local specificities that help to 
determine [their] behaviour, even as [their] behaviour also helps to configure the system” 
(158). Such a system thus constitutes a “self-organizing process” (“Artificial Life” 209), a
structure emerging out of the interplay of text, convention, and individual action. Subject positions within such a process—be they authorial, interpretive, didactic, or otherwise situated—are only ever provisional. Players constantly seek new possibilities for action within the boundaries of the game system they are engaged in, on occasions bending and even breaking those boundaries in order to perpetuate their play.

These possibilities for action are by no means fixed, but change according to the nature of the play. In some of his work, for example, Koch becomes a player of the textual game of poetry, playing with and against the rules and conventions of the form. His early works *Sun Out* and *When the Sun Tries to Go On* are examples of such authorial gameplay. Yet such play is not just play in itself, but also an activity that creates new games—that is, written texts—the unstable and open-ended nature of which invites further engagement by reader/players. In some instances, in fact, Koch becomes less a player and more a provider of frameworks for others to play within. He moves beyond the borders of the text to engage in collaborative projects with artists, painters, and other poets. His 1979 improvised reading with Allen Ginsberg at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project and his influential work teaching creative writing at high school and college level also exemplify this form of interpersonal gameplay.

The interaction between freeplay and constraint is central to the construction of the open ended and malleable rule systems necessary for such play. The importance of rule systems in play has long been acknowledged. Huizinga, for example, claims that, “in nearly all the higher forms of play the elements of repetition and alternation are like the warp and woof of a fabric” (10). The repetitious nature of a board game, for example, is thus analogous to poetry’s reoccurring patterns of rhyme and meter. As Huizinga puts it, “play creates order, is order” (10; italics in original). Rule-governed game systems impose patterns upon the flux of everyday language.
Caillois, however, makes a crucial refinement to Huizinga’s model. He identifies the existence of non-rule-governed play, pointing out that play takes place “on a continuum between two opposite poles” (13). At one extreme of that continuum we find “diversion, turbulence, [and] free improvisation,” and at the other, “a growing tendency to bind [play] with arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” (13). Caillois terms free play “paidia,” after the Greek for “child,” a reference to what he saw as the undisciplined and chaotic play of young children. The “arbitrary, imperative” and tedious conventions, on the other hand, he terms “ludus,” from the Latin for school or game (27). As he describes it, play involving paidia—for example, spinning, leaping, or play-acting in the sense of make-believe—“presume[s] a world without rules in which the player constantly improvises, trusting in a guiding fantasy or a supreme inspiration, neither of which is subject to regulation” (75). Ludic play, by contrast, charges the player with “the need to find or continue at once a response” to the overall game structure, “which is free within the limits set by the rules” (8).

Ludic is, of course, a term that predates Caillois in common usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary*, for example, defines the term as “of or pertaining to undirected and spontaneously playful behaviour,” and it is often used as a synonym of play, playful, or game. For the purposes of this thesis, however, I will stay close to Caillois’s definition, for it is the tension that he sets up between the open endedness of paidia and the constraints of ludus that are vital to an understanding of Koch’s poetics. At the same time, I have also fine-tuned Caillois’s taxonomy. For Caillois, paidia and ludus are antithetical: while they can exist in tandem, an increase in the one can only result in a decrease in the other. To his way of understanding, the exact nature of the relationship between the two modes of play is one of evolutionary progress. He depicts paidia as being low on the evolutionary scale—it is, after all, characterised as being the kind of play engaged in by small children. Its
intensity decreases the more sophisticated play becomes, to be replaced eventually by the formal structures of ludus. Koch, however, highlights the problematic nature of this dichotomy, revealing through his own intense engagement with both paidia and ludus the interconnectivity of these two modes of activity.

The most explicit example of ludic-oriented game play in the twentieth-century can be found in the work of the French Oulipo (the *Ouvrouer de Littérature Potentielle* or “Workshop of Potential Literature”). This group, formally founded by Raymond Queneau and Francois Le Lionnais in 1960 (*Oulipo Compendium* 205), dedicated itself from the outset to the invention of game-like procedural techniques of literary composition. There are some connections and parallels between the Oulipo and Koch’s work. Not only was one of Koch’s close associates, fellow New York School poet Harry Mathews, elected to the Oulipo in 1973, but there has been “a general tendency,” as Oulipian Jean-Jacques Poucel points out, “to classify the members of the Oulipo as trickster[s],” and their work as not “serious literature” in ways that are analogous to criticisms of Koch’s work.

The key difference between Oulipian play and Koch’s play, however, lies in their different approaches to paidia. In the Oulipo emphasis is placed on ludic constraint, writers such as Queneau, Mathews, and Georges Perec devoting themselves to the creation of clearly-defined ludic formula for poetic composition. The location of creative activity thus shifts from the performance of a constraint to the invention of new constraints—what Jacques Roubaud terms “the research, the discovery, and the invention of constraints for the composition of literary texts” (100; emphasis in original). The Oulipo has thus produced vast number of innovative methods of literary composition. In “N+7,” for example, the writer replaces all nouns in a given text “by counting seven nouns beyond [each noun] in a dictionary” (*Oulipo Compendium* 202). Oulipian writers have also produced extensive variations on the lipogram (a form which involves the exclusion of “one or more letters” from a text), the most famous being Perec’s *La Disparition* (1969), which contains no instance of the letter *e* (178, 210). Freeply, for Oulipians, exists less in
the completion of such constraints than it does on the conceptual level—that is, in the adjustment and complication of ludic conventions in order to create yet more generative forms. Those texts that do result should ideally, as Roubaud puts it, “describe the constraint” that generated them: that is, they should be permeated on both formal and thematic levels by their ludic elements (42).

While Koch is continually experimenting with new ways to play the game of poetry, the ludic elements of his games are seldom as clear-cut and rigid as the rules to Oulipian word games. As a result they are considerably more open to alternation, subversion, and the transformative effects of improvisation. Furthermore—and most significantly—these transformations take place not at the conceptual level but during the performance or playing of the games themselves. While Roubaud goes as far as to suggest that a constraint need not ever be actually applied—that is, can exist solely as a concept rather than as a means of producing actual texts (41)—for Koch the conceptual foundation of his work is always secondary to the performance of that concept. Even when he takes upon himself the role of pedagogue or game-designer it is in the playing of his games—those moments in which poet, collaborator, and reader come together in spontaneous and unstable interaction—that the importance of paidia to his work becomes most clearly manifest.

Tassoni identifies this importance—though without referencing the Oulipo or Caillois—in his examination of Ko. He points out that Koch’s choice of a difficult formal meter in the poem makes a general statement about the tendency of poetry to “find itself restricted by its own internal laws” (125). In this sense, the poem can be considered a parody of formal verse: Ko mocks the conventions of meter and rhythm by drawing attention to their arbitrary nature and the domineering effect they have upon the narrative, imagery, and vocabulary of the poem. Yet Ko also demonstrates how free play and ludic play can coexist and mutually energise one another: ludus propels paidia onwards, while paidia destabilises and, ultimately, transforms ludus. By reading Koch through these two modes of play, I draw attention not only to the rule systems that underlie his poetry but also to how those rules provide the scaffolding within which the energies of paidia run wild. The result is a
mode of play—and a type of poetry—that is neither entirely free nor completely rule
bound, neither open nor closed. Koch’s writing, as Foucault writes in a different context,
“unfolds like a game that inevitably moves beyond its own rules and finally leaves them
behind” (116), perpetually oscillating between apparently contradictory states of being.
Engagement with Koch’s work thus requires that the text be understood as part of an
ongoing process of poetic creation that originates in the moment of writing and/or social
engagement, shifts modes in the process of reading/reception, and continues outward into
the field of poetic discourse to be perpetuated in further poetic gameplay.

4. Thesis Outline
I have divided this thesis into two parts. In part 1 I examine how Koch’s poetics of play
functions in his texts at the level of composition and reception. In these readings, I focus
on the tensions generated by Koch’s manipulations of paidia, ludus, genre, and form, and
how these tensions work to complicate and perpetuate both authorial and readerly play. I
also consider how Koch utilises these tensions to navigate the social and political binaries
of the Cold War era and the latter half of the twentieth century. In part 2, I expand my
scope to consider how the centrifugal energies of this play function in the broader social
contexts of community, competition, collaboration, and pedagogy that are so vital to
Koch’s career. These textual and social elements are relevant, in differing degrees, to all of
Koch’s vast oeuvre. For the purposes of this study, however, I have focused upon the texts
in which these issues are at their most explicit. By focusing on these exemplary texts I am
able to demonstrate not only the nature of Koch’s game-like textual practice, but also how
this practice is inextricably bound up with his social and pedagogic activity.

In chapter 1, “Games of Paidia and Ludus,” I examine the ways in which Koch uses
the disruptive potentiality of play to navigate textual binaries. I begin by examining the
tension between paidia (freeplay) and ludus (rule-governed play) in his early works: the heavily paidia-oriented texts collected in Sun Out: Selected Poems 1952–1954 (2002), the book-length poem When the Sun Tries to Go On (1969), and the explicitly ludic Ko, or A Season on Earth (1960). I examine how these markedly different poems, written during the height of the Cold War, engage subversively with both New Critical conventions and avant-garde iconoclasm. Koch’s manipulations of poetic and narrative conventions also generate play for both poet and reader through textual fragmentation, nonsense, and open endedness, counterbalanced by more rigid patterns of rhyme, word play, and narrative. I then go on to consider how the later prose text The Red Robins (1975) continues Ko’s orientation towards fantasy by creating a play world that both engages with and retreats from the political realities of the Vietnam War era.

In chapter 2, “Games of Expansion,” I consider how Koch uses play to navigate not just textual binaries, but also the aesthetic and cultural binaries of the Cold War era and the final decades of the twentieth century. I begin with a study of Koch’s much-cited poem “Fresh Air” (Thank You and Other Poems, 1962). I use this text to analyse how Koch was able to exploit and subvert dominant Cold War binaries through social gameplay and playful antagonism. The poem “The Artist” (from Thank You and Other Poems) and the collection of prose texts Hotel Lambosa (1993) complicate this game further by juxtaposing diverse narrative tropes with formal experimentation, resulting in texts that resist stability even while generating their own semi-stable open-ended structures. The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly without Pictures (2004) represents the most extreme form of this play. Here Koch manipulates formal and thematic conventions to create hybrid texts that test the boundaries of poetry itself.

In part 2 of my thesis, I explore how the play dynamics that drive these textual activities are also integral to Koch’s social engagements with poetry. In chapter 3, “Games
of Sociality,” I consider how Koch engages in play with other individuals through his involvement in a broad range of collaborative projects. I begin with an examination of his 1979 improvisational public reading with Allen Ginsberg (a transcript of which was published under the title *Making It Up* in 1996) as an example of how cooperative and competitive tendencies can be set against one another in highly performative collaborative play. I then use Koch’s unpublished board game “The End of the Evening” to demonstrate how he exploits the interactive qualities of play to stimulate group interaction and so shift the emphasis away from finished projects and onto the process of shared creation. I go on to examine Koch’s textual and visual collaborations, which illustrate the importance of interpersonal interaction to Koch’s poetics of play. In Koch’s collaborations, traditional models of individual authorship are replaced by situations in which poets and artists become players in ongoing systems of creativity. Finally, I look at a special issue of *Locus Solus* (1961) that Koch edited. This volume reveals Koch’s own ideas on collaboration through its focus on collaborative texts. Moving a step beyond this thematic element, I also consider how the production of *Locus Solus* functions within the New York School as an instance of collaborative play.

In chapter 4, “Games of Pedagogy,” I consider how Koch’s interpersonal interactions include the transmission of poetic values—both between contemporaries and from generation to generation. I address Koch’s work as a teacher of creative writing to school children and college students as an example of the didactic yet anti-authoritarian nature of his play poetics. The process of transmission from teacher to student raises, however, the very spectre of authoritarianism that Koch sought to oppose. Koch’s semi-parodic instructional poems “The Art of Poetry” and “The Art of Love” (both published in *The Art of Love* in 1975, at the height of Koch’s success as a poetry teacher) show how he attempted to destabilise his own didactic authority in order to keep the pedagogic
relationship open ended. In these texts, dry didacticism becomes the kindling for game systems and improvisation that, like Koch’s other work, are directed towards the perpetuation of playful creative activity.

Finally, in my conclusion I consider Koch’s legacy, examining how contemporary responses to his work can be considered part of the ongoing process of play so central to his own career. I position these responses within the context of late twentieth and early twenty-first-century poetry and suggest how Koch’s poetics of play continues to provide a means for both poet and critic to negotiate the unstable landscape of contemporary literature.
Part One:

Play in Texts
Chapter One

Games of Paidia and Ludus:

Freeplay, Constraint, and the Space of Textual Play

Kenneth Koch’s work is marked by apparently paradoxical tendencies towards both the freeplay of paidia and the strictures of ludus. These tensions are especially clear in his early work. Many of these poems abound with riotous linguistic experimentation and wild leaps of the imagination, traits exemplified in texts such as *Sun Out: Selected Poems 1952–1954* (2002) and *When the Sun Tries to Go On* (written in 1953 and published in 1969). These poems appear, on an initial reading, to show Koch indulging in unrestrained poetic play: the text wanders wherever the poet’s imagination—in tandem with the vagaries of language—might lead it. Yet in other poems Koch adopts overtly structured and restrictive forms. Koch here contains his exuberance within the conventions of *ottava rima* (*Ko, or A Season on Earth*, written in 1957 and published 1960) and formal modes of his own invention.

It would be a mistake, however, to think that these different approaches to poetic play are antithetical to one another. Constraint is frequently considered to be a more sophisticated literary technique than freeplay. As Poucel puts it in reference to the Oulipo, “thinking through constraint provides the most efficient means of concocting strong moves in the game of innovation,” a sentiment expanded upon by Roubaud in his valorising of “the freedom of difficulty mastered” over unrestrained experimentation (41). Caillois, in his initial formulation of the concepts of paidia and ludus, likewise positions paidia at the lower end of an evolutionary scale: it is the primordial chaos out of which, as he puts it, the “conventions, techniques, and utensils” of ludus arise (29). These conventions consolidate into games, ludic structures that provide rule-governed frameworks within which play can
be regulated and sustained (29). It is tempting to view Koch’s navigation between the poles of freedom and constraint as playing out along such evolutionary lines. In such a narrative, the wild exuberance of his work in the early 1950s evolves into his experiments with ludic constraint in the second half of that decade. Such an interpretation would fit into the larger narrative, advanced by scholars such as Halliday and Ward, of Koch’s development from a poet of wild exuberance to a more restrained and self-reflective mature writer (Halliday, “After Excitement” 141; Ward 8). This interpretation, however, risks overlooking the interdependent relationship between freeplay and constraint throughout Koch’s vast oeuvre and the corresponding difference between Koch’s poetics of play and the strictly constraint-based work of the Oulipo writers.

In this chapter I investigate how paidia and ludus interact in Koch’s writing from the perspective of both poet and reader. I focus on several of Koch’s early poems in order to demonstrate how he utilises the tensions of the paidia/ludus dichotomy. Through this analysis, I reveal that his approach to this dichotomy changes significantly from text to text. *Sun Out* and *When the Sun Tries to Go On* are examples of Koch submerging ludic structures within the apparent chaos of paidia, while *Ko* is an example of him raising ludic elements to the surface of the poem, making of them a scaffolding around and within which the freeplay of paidia flows. Yet I also demonstrate how a common feature unites these quite different texts. In all of these poems Koch sets the freeplay of paidia and the constraints of ludus in generative opposition to each other. One mode of play is not subsumed by another: instead, the dynamic interaction of the two modes works to sustain both Koch’s own compositional play and the interpretative play of his readers. Finally, I examine the pseudo-novel *The Red Robins* in order to demonstrate how this intertwining of paidia and ludus generates textual spaces—play worlds—within which both poet and reader are free to move.
1. Instability and Solidification in “The Brassiere Factory”

and *When the Sun Tries to Go On*

Koch’s manipulation of paidia and ludus is driven by what Tassoni terms his concern with “solidification”: the collapse of fluidity and open endedness into stagnation and closure (125). Yet these same poems also demonstrate how openness and closure are more interconnected than it may at first appear. While Tassoni concentrates on Koch’s battle against solidification in the long poem *Ko*, this concern is evident throughout his entire oeuvre. In his later work it results in Koch branching out into different media and experimenting with collaboration. In his early writing, however, it drives him to attempt to create a poetry that would, as he puts it in his 1962 poem “On The Great Atlantic Rainway,” be “always in motion, [yet] lose nothing” (*Collected Poems* 73)—a poetry of perpetual movement and exhilaration.

The early poem “The Brassiere Factory,” included in the 1962 collection *Thank You and Other Poems*, can be read as a dramatisation of this project. Koch describes the poem as having had its genesis on a transatlantic voyage during which he noticed a container printed with the word “brassieres,” the French word for life jacket (*Making Your Own Days* 91). Two years later he combined the multiple meanings evoked by this single word into a poem beginning:

> Is the governor falling
> From a great height?
> Arm in arm we fled the brassiere factory.
> The motion-boat stayed on the shore! (*Collected Poems* 75)

The nature of Koch’s linguistic play is obvious here. *Brassiere* derives from the French *bra* (“arm”), a meaning that allows for both the English sense of brassiere and the French term
for life jacket—both items which, as Koch puts it, “you put your arms through” (*Making Your Own Days* 91). In Koch’s poem this insertion of arms is doubled back onto itself—the narrator linked “arm in arm” with his companion—while the nautical connotations of the French term are evoked through the reference to the “motion-boat.” Koch himself described the poem as a “wish for sexual freedom,” in which the narrator and his companion escape the “emblem of physical restraint” formed by the factory (91). On a deeper level, however, the poem can also be read as a commentary on the tensions that exist between freedom and constraint: its hectic narrative juxtaposes images of these two states.

The first three lines of the poem describe rapid movement. A governor plummets from “a great height”; the narrator flees, with his companion, from the factory. Yet these evocations of motion are set against the stillness of the heavy bulk of the “factory” and the beached “motion-boat.” This “motion-boat” is especially significant in the way it embodies a tension between movement and stasis: its landlocked condition contradicts the sense of movement implicit in its name. Similarly, the multiple meanings of the word “governor” work against the free fall of this opening image. A governor is, of course, a person or thing that controls, restrains, or otherwise governs something. While the image of a governor falling could, then, be interpreted as a symbol of the fall of authority, it could just as easily signify a controlled fall, a governing system that limits velocity and movement. In just these few lines, Koch manipulates the relatively straightforward language of the poem into a highly ambiguous zone of contradictory meanings and rhetorical tensions.

The narrator of the poem goes on to recount their escape from the brassiere factory, an institution that seems to embody restraint and stagnation:

Darling, we fled the brassiere factory

In forty-eight states,
Arm in arm,
When human beings hung on us
And you had been arrested by the cloths
Were used in making . . . (75)

Again, these lines enact a complex relationship between fluidity and stagnation. Every instance of movement is countered by one of restraint. The motion of “fled” is contrasted with the constraint of “arrested,” while the fleeing narrator and his companion are weighed down by “human beings hung” on them. Their escape attempt takes place across “forty-eight states,” a vast setting that is nonetheless restricted by the geopolitical boundaries of the continental United States. Even the central image of the poem—the narrator and his companion linked arm in arm—works against its equally central concern for liberation. Running while linking arms with someone is not conducive to a quick getaway, both individuals in such a position being comically hampered by having to moderate their movement in accordance with that of their companion. Yet even while the protagonist’s escape attempt is slowed down by such details, his flight never comes to a complete halt. The poem, in fact, presents stasis as only ever being a temporary condition. At one point, in the midst of a stream of disjointed phrases, the narrator asks “But will the buffalo on / The nickel yet be still?” This rhetorical question, which in its imagery of motile coinage evokes the etymology of the word “currency”—“the fact or condition of flowing” (OED)—suggests that, within the world of the poem, even the solidity of dead metal is open to the possibility of transformation.

Indeed, by juxtaposing motion with stagnation throughout the poem, Koch suggests that these forces are not so much working against one another as they are complementary. The confining relationship that unites the narrator and his companion—whose linked arms are reminiscent of the wearing of a brassiere or lifejacket—both slows them down and
provides them with the unity they require to make their escape together. Even the heavy bulk of the brassiere factory itself can be seen as an essential component in the poem’s forward momentum. Initially, a reader might interpret the factory as a symbol of authoritarian control. The protagonist’s movement away from the factory is then understood as a rejection of such control, a flight into liberty. Yet as the poem progresses the factory reveals its deeper significance. The narrator’s flight only gains meaning when set against the solidity of the factory so that freedom and constraint define and energise one another. Towards the end of the text, Koch’s narrator states that, “thanks to the metronome we got out alive, in the air” (75). This line is an explicit acknowledgement of this interconnectivity: the ludic regularity of the metronome—an image that evokes Ezra Pound’s characterisation of the restrictive cadences of conventional verse forms—enables the very liberty towards which the poem aspires.

For the most part, “The Brassiere Factory” explores these issues on a thematic level, playing out the contradictions of fluidity and stagnation through imagery rather than at the level of the text. Lines like “The music changed your fingers’ ends to pearl” (75) cause the reader’s forward momentum to falter, their lyrical and impressionistic imagery wrenching the reader’s attention away from the central escape narrative. Koch’s earlier work in Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On contains more overt examples of this disjunctive play. These texts exhibit strong signs of paidia in its most unrestrained form: indeed, Caillois might as well have been writing of them when he described paidia as “active, tumultuous, exuberant, and spontaneous” (x), a mode of activity committed to “turbulence, free improvisation, and carefree gaiety” (13). Halliday pinpoints these qualities, though without identifying them as paidia, when he identifies the “current of wacky wildness” integral to Koch’s writing style in general (“Koch and Sense” 203). This wildness manifests, in Halliday’s view, in Koch’s “verbal playfulness, his readiness to let
words jump out of their clothes and run free from their meanings, his bursts of comic surrealism,” and “his characteristic combination of urbanity with nonsense” (203). In these poems, Koch unleashes these wild energies across hundreds of pages of texts, resulting in a body of work that can be as intimidating to the reader as it is exhilarating.

When the Sun Tries to Go On epitomises this kind of exuberantly expansive text. The poem is book length at two thousand four hundred lines, and was originally published as a stand-alone volume. Koch’s reputation as a poet of pleasure notwithstanding, the poem is likely to intimidate a casual reader. While Huizinga and Caillois both emphasise the importance of structure in play—the idea that, as Motte paraphrases it, play “brings order to the world” (9; italics in original)—this poem seems, at first, a deliberate rejection of structure and order in favour of primal incoherence. Its opening lines are indicative of what awaits the reader throughout:

And, with a shout, collecting coat hangers
Dour rebus, conch, hip,
Ham, the autumn day, oh how genuine!
Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O
Real! The magistrate, say “group,” bowers, undies
Disk, poop, Timon of Athens. When
The bugle shimmies, how glove towns!
It’s Merrimac, bends, and pure gymnasium
Impy keels! The earth desks, madmen
Impose a shy (oops) broken tube’s child—
Land! why are your bandleader’s troops
Of is? Honk, can the mailed rose
Gesticulate? Arm the paper arm!
Bind up the chow in its lintel of sniff. (On the Edge: Collected Long Poems 3)

From a reader’s perspective, these lines seem designed to frustrate the conventional construction of meaning. The poem begins in mid-stride, its initial “And” suggesting that this is not so much a beginning as it is a moment in an ongoing stream of language. The lines that follow this pseudo-beginning do fall into accepted grammatical patterns—nouns, verbs, adjectives and particles arranged in the semblance of functional sentences. Yet the vocabulary that makes up these sentences is fundamentally garbled. The first line is all action without subject: the verbs “shout” and “collecting” arise out of nowhere, lacking connection to active pronouns. The syntactical flow of this phrase draws the eye onwards with a promise of clarification of just who is shouting and collecting coat hangers, but the next line collapses this momentum into a chaos of disjointed linguistic fragments. Words and phrases pile up—“Literary frog, catch-all boxer, O / Real!”—yet fail to adhere to any one unified object or narrative. Ambiguity abounds: it is unclear, for example, whether “glove” in “glove towns” is an adjective or a verb. A similar uncertainty hovers over the meaning of “earth desks”: is this a description of an object, a desk constructed of earth, or is “desks” a verb describing something earth does? The text itself provides no guidance as to a definitive interpretation of any of these linguistic fragments.

While it is possible for a reader to assemble semantic coherence from such lines, the resultant meanings tend to be so comically absurd as to mock the interpreter’s efforts. A “lintel of sniff,” for example, might be understood as an actual lintel: a horizontal beam spanning a door or window. Just how could such an object, however, be used to wrap either food or a specific breed of dog (the two most common meanings of the word “chow”)? To search for such a literal meaning seems, ultimately, to miss the point of the poem. These lines are constructed not to form a single unified meaning, but rather to deny the construction of any such single meaning. The poem’s textual surface opens out instead into
a spread of ambiguities that the attentive reader can hope only to map, never consolidate.

Such resistance to meaning can, of course, be read as a direct response to the dominant New Critical values of the 1950s and early 1960s. Alongside the rejection of modernist symbolic unity characteristic of John Ashbery and subsequent avant-garde poets, Marjorie Perloff has traced an avant-garde “suspicion” towards what she terms “imagefull” writing (*Radical Artifice* 57): a resistance to the “luminous detail” and imagistic precision valourised by Pound (55). Perloff identifies this antipathy as related to the changing ways images were produced and disseminated in the culture of the time (57). Across the U.S., “fifty million television sets” poured a flood of imagery into everyday life that could not be contained within the cohesive boundaries of any New Critic derived aesthetic, but that instead encouraged a sense of the image as anchorless and fragmentary (61).

While this cultural shift is undoubtedly significant for Koch’s developing poetics, the poet himself placed the moment of his inspiration elsewhere. Writing later in life of *Sun Out*, Koch describes how his approach to language in these poems was born out of his experiences in France as a graduate student. During this period he felt “immerséd,” as he puts it, “not only in French poetry but in the French language;” a language he “understood and misunderstood at the same time” (*Collected Poems* 3). Just as his encounter with the “brassieres” box aboard the ship carrying him from the U.S. to France resulted in interlinguistic reverie, his incomplete knowledge of French led him to superimpose meanings from his native English over French words and phrases, generating idiosyncratic homonyms from the intersection of these two language systems. Simple words gained multiple meanings: the French word “Blanc,” for example, meaning white, suggested to him the English word *blank*, as well as “in the feminine, Blanche, the name of a woman” (3; italics in original). He goes on to state that “the pleasure—and the sense of new meanings—I got from this happy confusion was something I wanted to re-create in
English” (3). His goal in writing became, as he put it, to keep his “subject up in the air for as long as possible” (4). He thus sought to create texts that deferred interpretation through a diversity of playful techniques.

This approach to writing has, however, opened up poems like “The Brassiere Factory”—as well as more thematically chaotic poems such as Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On—to criticism. Halliday has argued that Koch’s reliance on exhilaration in these early poems renders them only able to engage with the reader on a superficial level (“Koch and Sense” 204). This engagement may be strong initially, because the reader is at first startled and entertained by the unexpected convolutions of language or narrative. In Halliday’s analysis, however, this engagement is inevitably short-lived. The “fun” of the reading experience, as he puts it, “evaporates awfully fast” (204), quickly lapsing into tedium. This poses a problem in the cases of both Koch’s longer texts, where the reader’s attention must be engaged for an extended period of time, and for the process of re-reading and scholarly interpretation in general. There is for Halliday nothing beneath the linguistic surface of the poem for either critic or reader to gain interpretive traction on. Instead, Koch’s textual play simply washes over the reader until their patience is exhausted and the text is abandoned.

Halliday’s criticisms are paralleled by Caillois’s own reservations concerning paidia. In Caillois’s taxonomy, paidia is diametrically opposed to ludus. Due to its lack of rules and structure, play that prioritises paidia is frequently disorientating and disruptive in nature. Such play tends towards what Caillois terms ilinx or “vertigo,” where the player attempts through his or her dizzy velocity to “momentarily destroy the stability of perception” (23). Yet Caillois goes on to point out that games that rely too heavily upon such vertigo are unsustainable over extended periods of time. Devoted as they are to speed and exhilaration, they inevitably exhaust their players. To continue requires the imposition
of rules and conventions: ludic frameworks within which the energies of play can be channelled and sustained.

According to Halliday, Koch eventually overcomes this problem by abandoning his textual acrobatics in favour of more structured and reflective modes of writing. Collections like *Seasons on Earth* (1987) and *New Addresses* (2000) replace the nonsensical word play of *When the Sun Tries to Go On* and *Sun Out* with more coherent discursive chains of thought. In these works the explosive energies of the early poems give way to a slow-burning combustion fuelled not by shock and disjunction but by what Halliday describes as “discursive meditation and argument” (“Koch and Sense” 204–5), Koch frequently foregoing flights of wild fantasy for autobiographical topics. Halliday is correct in identifying Koch’s shift in subject matter, yet his valorisation of these later works risks obscuring the significance of earlier works such as *Sun Out* or “The Brassiere Factory.” The very features that Halliday criticises are, in fact, indicative of a broader mid-century avant-garde trend towards spontaneity and fluidity. In these texts Koch, as Silverberg points out, shifts his poetics away from the finished textual products favoured by New Criticism and prioritises the process of composition. His poetry—like contemporaneous projects such as John Cage’s “aleatory music,” “Fluxus Happenings,” Frank O’Hara’s “I do this, I do that” form, and Jean Tinguley’s “self destroying sculpture”—seeks solutions to what Silverberg terms the “problem of fixity” (13) and Tassoni calls “solidification” (125). In attempting to overcome this problem, artists and writers were driven to create an aesthetic of energy and improvisation centring on, as Silverberg puts it, “process, spontaneity, and performance” (13).

Many critics have noted the New York School’s predilection for this kind of fluid poetic play, this preference for what Silverberg terms an “art in motion rather than a static, stable, classical art” (13). Yet where influential poets such as Charles Olson sought to
codify their spontaneity within their own structures of rules and techniques (Davidson
*Guys Like Us* 37), Koch and his fellow New York School poets ostensibly sought to remain
outside any such system. Ashbery himself has claimed that the school was characterised by
“its avoidance of anything like a program” and its commitment to the idea that “the poet
should be free to sit down to his desk and write as he pleases without feeling that someone
is standing behind him telling him to brush up on his objective correlative or that he’s just
dropped an iambic foot” (quoted in Wasserman 72). Such a dedication to creative freedom
can be found in abundance in Ashbery poems such as “The Skaters” (1966), a dazzling
expressionistic extravagance, and in O’Hara’s “Easter” (1979), a poem that not only defies
formal constraint but that breaks Cold War boundaries of good taste though its depiction of
grotesque and obscene dismembered physicality. Both poems are characterised by their
sense of instability, images cascading one after another in sequences that do little to build
up coherent symbolic or narrative form, bound together instead by tenuous associative
connections. The same denial of coherence can be found in *Sun Out* and *When the Sun
Tries to Go On*, poems that not only evoke a sense of flux and fragmentation but that,
according to Koch, have their origin in an experience of language as something
fundamentally fragmented.

Tassoni, in his study of *Ko*, positions this self-subversion in the context of Michel
Beaujour’s analysis of poetry as a form of gameplay. While Beaujour focuses on authorial
play to the exclusion of the reader, his analysis does provide an insight into how a reader
might engage with the texts that emerge from such activity. Beaujour describes four ways
in which a poet can play the game of poetry. The first way involves playing the game
“according to the current rules” (59). Poets who do this “write poems which embody some
or all of the accepted *differentiae* of poetry: metre, rhyme, figures, etc.” (59; italics in
original). The second mode of engagement with poetry that Beaujour describes involves
pretending not to play at all. This, according to Beaujour, was the approach taken by the Dadaists. Such poets, he claims, “pretend to leave the game in disgust, saying—or implying—that I’m not a poet anymore, that poetry is a dirty game since it is a microcosm of a rotten society, that abiding by rules is degrading and inhuman” (59). This kind of poet writes “nothing, or just make[s] noises,” rejecting the conventional rules of the game to such a degree that signification itself appears to have been abandoned (59). Beaujour goes on to describe a third mode of play, what he characterises as the Surrealist approach, where the poet “leave[s] the game, saying something to the effect that I do not have to play in order to be a poet” (59; italics in original). In such play the poet sees poetry as “an activity which precedes and transcends the writing of poems.” The defining features of poetry are “transferred from the poem (seen as an artefact) to the life of the poet” in a romantic elevation of individual artistic persona (59).

Tassoni suggests, however, that Koch’s engagement with the game of poetics most closely fits Beaujour’s fourth category. In Ko, Tassoni claims Koch “may be said to play the game of literature in reverse” (123). Tassoni goes on to quote Beaujour on how the desire to play this way “arises when the straight way of playing has become a bore” and when the arbitrary rules of the existing game present themselves as “artificial, tyrannical, and dead” (Beaujour 61). Beaujour acknowledges, however, that such subversive play inevitably becomes normalised. As he puts it, “only a system can replace a system”: yet in the moment of slippage, the “interregnum” between systems, the player can experience “total freedom” (Beaujour 62). Beaujour is quick to point out that these differing modes of play are not mutually exclusive, the “actual poetics of any single poet or group of poets” being in practice “a variant of one of these, or a cross between two or all of them” (59). Yet, as Tassoni recognises, the concept of “playing the game in reverse” fits well with Koch’s writing. In all of his early works, Koch neither plays the game of poetry
conventionally nor steps outside of the game. Instead, he turns the rules of his chosen forms back on themselves, manipulating poetic convention not in order to present a new aesthetic ideal, but rather to maintain a sense of instability and disequilibrium. These are poems that seek to occupy, as it were, that space of possibilities that opens up as the rules of one game break down and the conventions of another begin to arise.

Koch himself recognised this orientation in his own work, describing *Sun Out* as being driven not only by his desire for textual freedom but also by the realisation that such freedom is constantly under threat. Because of this, he walks a stylistic tightrope, replacing sense with non-sense, creating poems that seem on an initial reading to comprise little more than streams of incoherence, while at the same time resisting textual chaos through his mimicry of conventional sense. This deliberate resistance to interpretation, coupled with Koch’s stated motivations in writing such poems, could be taken to mean that Koch intended this early poetry as purely private play. Like Beaujour’s Surrealist or Dadaist poets, he appears to be playing with language for his own amusement, with little consideration for any real or imagined audience. This view gains some credence from the fact that *Sun Out* remained unpublished until late in Koch’s career, having been written prior to 1960 but published only shortly before his death in 2002.

*Sun Out* and *When the Sun Tries to Go On* could both be read as turning language inwards upon itself, so that language becomes a solipsistic zone in which the individual writer puts any consideration of communication aside and focuses on linguistic play for its own sake. Yet such an understanding of Koch’s writing fails to recognise the intrinsically multifaceted nature of play itself. Every moment of play, whether acted out by an individual or otherwise, not only exists complete in itself but also contains the potential for incorporation into other play-systems. Once the nature of Koch’s game becomes apparent, the oblique and apparently impenetrable surface of his poetry opens up into a game
playable by others: no longer a finished textual product but an open-ended ludic system that overflows the boundaries of the printed page. In order to understand how Koch’s early poems navigate the dichotomies of chaos and stagnation, it is thus necessary to investigate how these textual tensions play out not only in the poet’s own engagement with language and the conventions of poetry, but in the relationship—the game—that connects poet to reader.

2. Authorial and Readerly Play in *Sun Out* and *When the Sun Tries to Go On*

Brian Edwards has argued that the term “game,” when applied to literature, suggests “an author’s construction of a text (the author as initiator or games-controller) and the view that each text challenges its readers to a contest (reading as game)” (14). He goes on to point out that “the situation of exchange” that exists between reader and writer is a feature of all literature, from the most straightforward to the most avant-garde and experimental (14). Motte reiterates these points, but adds that the “amplitude of play” varies from text to text (27); play takes place on a more overt level in an Oulipian word game based on mathematic principles, for example, than it does in a realist novel. Koch’s early poems do not present themselves to the reader as word games, yet they exemplify how certain types of texts emphasise the ludic nature of the reader/writer relationship by complicating the process of exchange. By resisting the construction of straightforward meaning they create a textual maze—a game—that the reader must engage with in a highly interactive and playful manner.

Steve McCaffery, writing of the more recent Language poetry movement, points out that in such writing, “the text becomes the communal space of a labour, initiated by the writer and extended by the second writer (the reader)” (quoted in Perloff, “After Language Poetry” 158). In such a communal space, he goes on, “the old duality of reader-writer
collapses into the one compound function” (158). Reading thus becomes “an alternative or additional writing of the text” (159). Elizabeth Bruss has made a similar observation, characterising how such texts instigate a kind of literary “game” played out between the writer, the reader, and the poem. In her analysis, this is a game in which “pragmatic values outweigh the semantic and the morphological” (152). The formal unity and “imaginary worlds” of the text become “subordinated to the conflict or cooperation of the participants in the communicative exchange” (152). This exchange is one, Bruss claims, of “give and take”: the text does not exist as the medium through which the writer communicates a single unified message to the reader, but becomes instead a space for both the production and the disruption of meaning (152).

As I have described above, the lexicographical, typographical, and phonetic play that is so intrinsically a part of Koch’s early poems discourages the reader from approaching them as anything other than linguistic constructions. Any underlying imagistic or narrative themes seem to be subordinated to the poet’s stylistic extravagance. And yet, as Bruss goes on to argue, such texts do not actually negate the readerly construction of meaning. Pelton has claimed that Koch’s more chaotic writing forces the reader, as he puts it, “back to the words themselves as the primal reality” (328). By emphasising the unstable nature of language—the multiple meanings generated through puns and homonyms, the way changing a single letter can radically alter the meaning of a word—such linguistic play discourages the reader from searching for any deeper meaning or underlying narrative thread. Yet such authorial subversions of meaning are countered by the reader’s ingrained tendency to construct meaning out of chaos. “Everything,” as Koch himself puts it, “even if it’s a wild chaos, is bound eventually to become itself a sort of subject” (Collected Poems 4). Denial of meaning and structure itself becomes a type of meaning and a form of structure, nonsense transformed into an ideal textual model for the poet to aspire towards.
Likewise the reader, when confronted with strings of words arranged at random on a page, inevitably attempts to ascribe to those words a pattern and so construct meaning out of chance textual relationships. Marcel Danesi, writing of the Oulipo movement’s obsession with play, points out that what he terms the “‘Janus-faced’ nature of language” ensures that even the most incoherent text can be read with an eye for coherency and meaning (68). As he puts it, Oulipian word games exploit the fact that “we are inclined to extract meanings from words even when we artificially restrict the ways they can be made” (69). No matter how far Koch’s sentences devolve into chains of nonsense and word play, then, the reader will attempt to make sense of them. Even if the reader actively resists this interpretive tendency in an attempt to preserve the text in a state of chaos, she or he nonetheless positions that text in a signifying context. The text thus becomes a site of contention between nonsense and sense, in which the poet continuously subverts the interpretive tendency to collapse free textual play into fixed meaning.

Koch complicates this process of subversion by constructing texts that mimic coherence even while resisting unified interpretation. Readers who approach these texts with an eye for coherence are thus confounded by the chaos of paidia, while those who expect pure nonsense are, if attentive, tempted away from this by the promise of coherency. Examples of this ambiguity abound throughout both When the Sun Tries to Go On and Sun Out. One poem from Sun Out, “No Job at Sarah Lawrence,” closes with the lines:

Bogs

Ladylike as the “perfeeect” hornet! Carpet repairs! Oh!

Save me! Logs, “hay-pron,” forehead, -sail, oh, of slim

Calcium! (Collected Poems 39)
Like the opening lines from *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, these lines encourage the reader to decode them while simultaneously resisting such interpretation. For the most part, Koch maintains conventional grammar and syntax throughout “No Job at Sarah Lawrence.” His choices of words may be incoherent, but they are arranged in ways that *mimic* coherency. This mimicry in itself imposes a centripetal force upon the freeplay of the text. The illusion of meaning gives the poem a semblance of form, enabling the reader to make individual phrases hang together in ways belied by the incoherence of their component parts. Yet this same incoherence ensures that the reader will not be able to construct a single fixed meaning for any given poem. As with O’Hara’s rambling, formally open poems of the same era, the reader must participate, as Jim Elledge puts it, “in the ongoing process of discovery . . . continually revising his sense of what the poem is ‘saying’” (177)—or, for that matter, not saying.

Again, Koch produces this open endedness through his emphasis on semantic slippage: “Perfeeeect,” for example, evokes an ironically imperfect rendering of the word “perfect.” Its bracketing within quotation marks suggests that this idiosyncratic spelling is the product of phonetic transcription. Yet the word “perfect” makes no more sense in the context of the surrounding sentence than any other word: hornets are not conventionally thought of as being particularly ladylike, and the short phrase “Carpet repairs!” that follows this sentence sheds no contextualising light on the matter. The word “hay-pron” in the next line sets up a similar cognitive dissonance. Contained, like “perfeeeect,” within quotation marks, this term suggests a phonetic rendering of the word “apron.” This reading is strengthened by the appearance in the same line of the word “-sail,” a term evocative, like “apron,” of an expanse of cloth. Yet other words within the same sentence work against this interpretation. The apparently meaningless insertion of the hyphen in “-sail” suggests that punctuation itself has lost its conventional function, has been transformed
into just another component in Koch’s complex linguistic patterning. “Logs,” which itself rhymes with “Bogs,” suggests a rustic setting that invites “hay” to be separated from “pron” and interpreted as meaning “dried grass.” Yet if “hay” is hay, what is “pron”? The sequence of short one- and two-word phrases that surround these words confuses sense further, providing a plurality of contexts that transform the meanings of both individual words and composite phrases.

Similar phonic play is evident throughout When the Sun Tries to Go On, where idiosyncratic spellings render the meaning of many words unclear. “Burgooning” (62) suggests, of course, “burgeoning,” yet its idiosyncratic spelling means that such a definition is not definitive. A similar uncertainty besets the phrase “inginns of timpistuous barracuties” (54). The reader might initially scan this as “engines of tempestuous barracudas,” a phrase that, while somewhat florid, makes sense if thought of as a metaphor for Piscean frenzy. Yet “inginns” might also be read as a play on the words “djinns” or “Injuns,” while “cuties” can be extracted from “barracuties” to give an unexpectedly comical tone to the phrase. At times the text itself unpacks these words, presenting the reader with a dissection that she or he is then free to reassemble. “Am burr lace” (26) can thus be left as three words in a phrase evoking, perhaps, ragged fabric (one meaning of “burr,” according to the OED, being “a rough ridge or edge left on metal or other substance”) or the reader’s imagination can collapse it into one complete word, “Ambulance.” Further examples of such semantic deconstruction include “Now-tation,” which can be condensed and converted into “notation” or left as it is, a neologism, perhaps, encapsulating the immediacy of the act of taking notation (67). “Tea-jamas” (58) can be converted into “pyjamas” or left as a weird combination of tea and jam. At times, Koch splits the problematic phrase through enjambment, heightening the dislocating effect, as, for example in the words “San-/Ta S weeping pigeons” (46). Should this be read as “San-”
and “Ta,” or scanned as “Santa’s weeping pigeons”? Or, for that matter, “Santa sweeping pigeons?” Such decisions are left to the reader’s discretion.

This potential for multiple readings is heightened by Koch’s use of quotation marks throughout the poem to create a sense of indeterminate polyvocalism. It is frequently difficult to identify the speakers of individual phrases, or indeed, how many individual speakers share the space of the text. Many passages or individual words are presented in this way, but it is never clear exactly what this presentation signifies. One section of *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, for example, reads:

Shooting the comet “Birthday” cement feet’s
Doorway, “Santa,” build of repeating tassel-
Commenced shirt yo-yos, unMarseilles! These say
Or after air is. “Rambling” “my pin” “the forest”
“How nigh he ware D (cooling) con Santa
Dim yay! yay!” Hopelesss, bobbed air

Eighteenth “Sir Face Din” cows limb (*On the Edge* 21)

In the first instance, the quotation marks around “Birthday” do not appear to indicate either direct speech or a quotation. Appearing as they do around a single word in the middle of a sentence, they might instead be interpreted as marking an ironic use of the word. Alternatively, “Birthday” could be considered the name of the comet mentioned immediately before it, an idea strengthened here by the use of a capital “B.” Yet this “B” could just as well work to separate the words “Shooting the comet” from “‘Birthday’ cement feet’s” by suggesting a sentence break—an invisible full stop, as it were—after “comet.” The word “Santa,” similarly singled out in the next line, can likewise be interpreted in several different ways: as a proper noun, a fragment of speech, or a combination of the two. The confusion increases in the fourth line of the section, when the
The poem is suddenly broken up into a sequence of quoted words and phrases—“‘Rambling’ ‘my pin’ ‘the forest’”—without any other punctuation to indicate the relationship between the individual components. This confusion heightens the impression that the poem is made up of a myriad of overlapping voices of no single origin and with no single discernible subject.

Occasionally a string of words begins to cohere in a more conventional way, but the language that follows inevitably disrupts this coherence. The final lines of the poem are a case in point:

Oxford! September air! Bun of old leaves of
Care each musical “Hooray, unpin the gong,” sylvan water
Ape shell-ladder! Egyptians! Mezzanine of deciding cuffs’
Anagrams who tea-tray “sigh them” objects “pay sign”
“Leaf-boat” “love-object” “base-ball” “land-slide”
“Tea-ball” “orchestra” “lethal bench.” Sum, are, lakes
“May-nagers” “love-times,” sweet
Counter ale pan-banned gypsy-bin fools cabana
Gentle hiatus of sarabande “roof” “wide” seam! (71)

There is nothing nonsensical about “Oxford! September air!” These words can be read as a straightforward evocation of a time and place. The beginning of the phrase that follows on from this adds to this interpretation, though it does it in a characteristically ambiguous way: “Bun of old leaves” could serve as a metaphor, albeit an eccentric one, for either autumnal Oxford weather or dismal baked goods. The next line, however, disrupts this reading. The syntax of the first lines leads the reader to expect that the “bun” phrase will continue past the enjambment onto the next line. The next line, however, disappoints this expectation by veering off-course and dissolving into the non sequitur of “Ape shell-
ladder.” The final eight lines of the poem are a cacophony of quotation, disjunction, and puns. The poem ends with an exclamation point, as if to reiterate its own moment of closure. Yet the text remains anything but closed. Interpretation here curls and coils upon itself. The reader is led in differing directions by myriad textual clues and is prompted to abandon one reading after another as she or he uncovers new nuances in the text.

One possible readerly response to this state of affairs would be to abandon literal interpretation in favour of symbolic analysis. Such symbolic readings, however, encounter the same kind of difficulties. For example, in “When They Packed Up, We Went,” a three page poem from *Sun Out*, the reader encounters the following lines:

O candy Frigidaires, eagles, and paint boxes

Paints are not a loan beneath the Frigidaire. No, here’s a pin

To wind some felonous hat-dog on; O sleepiness!

The fainting pine needles of racism oppress my box.

Fuss alone at the theatre, maleficent fooeys

Of carolizing. (*Collected Poems* 21)

Characteristically, any reader attempting a literal interpretation of these lines is left with comically absurd images—in this case a refrigerator made of confectionery, a dog used as a hat or a hat/dog hybrid, and fainting racist pine needles. A reader attempting a more symbolic interpretation might, however, be tempted here by the promise of hidden meanings. The phrase “pine needles of racism,” for example, lends itself to symbolic analysis: the abstract concept of racism finds its objective correlative in the sharp imagery of “pine needles,” while the mention of theatres and “maleficent fooeys / of carolizing” that follow evoke the theatricality of fascist rallies. Such interpretations are easy to make, yet they lack stability. The reader’s imagination must stretch ever further in its attempt to encompass surrounding textual detail into a single symbolic schema. An argument could be
made that Koch’s “eagles” are evocative of Nazi iconography—but what of the candy refrigerator? There is no larger unity of meaning—what Perloff would term a pre-established “symbolic network” (The Poetics of Indeterminacy 10)—through which any such single symbolic interpretation can be definitively established.

To say that these poems lack unified meaning or underlying symbolic structure, however, is not to say that they lack unity. For just as these poems mimic sense, they also mimic pattern. These patterns exist not at the level of symbol, but rather in the mechanical association of word-to-word, phrase-to-phrase. Motte has pointed out that, paraphrasing Elizabeth Sewell, nonsense writing can be considered not an exploration of irrationality but a conscious “attempt at reorganizing language according to the rules of play” (13; italics in original). Thus an attentive reader can, throughout the polysemantic chaos of When the Sun Tries to Go On, detect patterns of structure and repetition that seem to carry no semantic weight, yet assert a kind of order.

Such patterns exist, on the macro-level, in the very form of the poem. When the Sun Tries to Go On is divided into exactly one hundred stanzas, each stanza made up of twenty-four lines. This latter number has symbolic resonance that initially promises to illuminate, as it were, the mystery of the title: the twenty-four lines suggest the twenty-four hours in a day, the cycle between sunrise—or when, as it were, the sun begins to try to go on—and sunrise. This resonance is weakened, however, by the presence of the hundred stanzas, a number that seems to have more to do with the rigidities of the decimal system than the organic cycles of day and night. Yet if the reader tightens their focus to the micro-level of individual word and phrase, they encounter other patterns. Koch has a predilection for repetition that causes words to reappear, apparently unconnected by other thematic elements, across page after page. Thus on page 24 the reader encounters a “church of dismayed lint”; on 25 the phrase “Tennis on fields of lint.” Also on page 24 occur the
phrases: “her blondes the quiet sarsaparilla,” “Europe of a blond dress,” and “Sang ‘Blonds / of the breathing can,’” a flurry of hues blurring into a monotone of colour. Similarly, on page 16 occur the words “handkerchief / Yo-yo and butlers,” on 17 “The yo-yos of Paris,” and on 18 “The yo-yo’s mother is not from Paris,” a pattern of repetition that is as regular and as meaningless as the motion of a yo-yo.

Such patterns can be characterised as part of what William Watkin terms Koch’s “poetry machine”: his technique of creating grammatical, thematic, or, as in this case, vocabulary-based formulae to generate linguistic play (250). While critics tend to identify such formulae—or, as Perloff terms them in the context of Oulipo writing games, “generative device[s]” (“Oulipo Factor” 208; italics in original)—in more explicitly structured texts such as Ko, such formulae also populate these apparently more chaotic poems. It is not that the subconscious of the poet is being given free reign on the surface of the page, but rather that the poet consciously subverts syntactical coherence, creating a free play of signifiers that is closely intertwined with ludic constraint. The course of a line—or an entire poem—is thus determined through patterns of repetition and association that exist for no other purpose than to propel the poem onwards.

In When the Sun Tries to Go On, then, the reader encounters segments built upon exhaustive alliteration—for example, “Warren walked in Warren Warren’s warren” (67). These segments escalate into chains of chaotic association, in which phrases and images arise from the swell of language only to fall back into linguistic fragments:

O badgers, badges, bats, bags, bags is,
Black, blacks, rats is, as, is as, as, is
Badgers as, is, is, bridges’, bags, bags as is
Business of the fourteen (I noticed “Henry”) badgers. (On the Edge 27)

Similar generative mechanics can be observed in the kind of associative patterns that run
through Koch’s early poems. These texts are built up not through Surrealistic chains of imagistic association, but rather through linguistic play. Consider, for example, section two from “When They Packed Up, We Went”:

And divinely she gets up
And drives down
Into the bitterest theatres
Of leaves and in a frown
Chic races, mighty heart
Of hands into my tray
She sleeps at last
The acres man gives away. (*Collected Poems* 21)

Here, Koch creates a connection between the first two lines by ending one with the word “up” and the other with the word “down.” By itself, this pairing seems of little significance. Later in the poem however, at the end of section six, it is repeated:

A kindly white juror is safe as this bench, while
We sleep through town,
And the bargains go up—

O a great entertainer lies strapped to the down. (22)

This balancing of “up” and “down” continues in the next section:

The dads came up from Boston
With violence in their hearing
And their navels labeled
“The people of Venice,”
And they swiftly ate the dabs
Of tootling disgust. Everybody yelled, “Dads
Are secrets!” and “Any boot
In a brain-stir,” but the dads went down
Into the city of blue jeans
And calmness . . . (22–23)

The repetition of this simple balancing act draws attention away from the text’s referential content and towards its stylistic patterning. Indeed, in section two, another kind of more conventional patterning is already evident in the form of a rudimentary rhyme scheme involving every second line: “down” rhymes with “frown,” “tray” with “away.” The balancing of “up” with “down” throughout these sections works as another kind of rhyme scheme. In this kind of semantic rhyme, the meanings of words rather than their phonemes are played off against one another. The poem continues to its climax:

When Death cried,

“Add!” they began to scream,

“Force, Junior!”; yet time is all.
And nobody kissed the dads
Saturday afternoon, Sunday, and
We spit into the endearing carnival,
Seasons and faces. . . . (23; ellipsis in original)

By this point, the text has already primed the reader to pay attention to the surface play of language rather than any underlying themes or narrative. The dramatic resonance of words like “Death” and “scream” is thus reduced so that each term becomes just another linguistic token in the play of the poem. In place of deeper meaning, the reader becomes alert to still more instances of word play. Death’s unusual exclamation, “add,” is made to resonate phonically with the repeated word “dad”; the last letter of “cried,” in fact, can be
read as running past the enjambment and connecting onto the next line’s “Add” to form “d/Add,” in a clumsy echo of the word so dominant elsewhere in the poem. A more subtle kind of structural rhyme can be observed in the use of term “Junior” in contrast to this paternal theme. The alliteration of “Saturday,” “Sunday,” and “Seasons” also becomes prominent. As these elements of textual play mount, the poem dissolves into its own “endearing carnival” of dads and Death and screams and up and down—a cacophony of signification and phonics that buries any broader totality of meaning. That luminous detail described by Perloff as central to Modernist and New Critical poetics is replaced by, as she puts it (writing of Clark Coolidge’s poem “At Egypt:), “denaturalized” and “decontextualized” language the relevancy of which the reader must “puzzle out . . . within the given language field” (Radical Artifice 57). Koch’s challenge to his reader is thus answered not through a readerly consolidation of meaning; instead, the reader traces and creates rudimentary ludic patterns within apparently formless texts in a process that is limited only by their own ingenuity.

3. Ludus and Paidia in Ko, or A Season on Earth

If poems like When the Sun Tries to Go On and “When They Packed Up, We Went” constitute examples of rudimentary ludic structures within paidia, then Koch’s early mock-epic Ko, or A Season on Earth takes the opposite approach. Written in 1957, several years later than When the Sun Tries to Go On and Sun Out, Ko is formally very different from those poems. Here Koch replaces the irregular rhythms of free verse with ottava rima, a fixed metrical form most famously used in English in Lord Byron’s Don Juan. The poem begins:

Meanwhile at the University of Japan

Ko had already begun his studies, which
While making him as an educated man
Would also give him as he learned to pitch
And catch—for Ko was more than a mere fan,
But wished as a playing member to do a hitch
With some great team—something to think about
More interesting than merely Safe and Out. (On The Edge 75)

At first, Koch’s use of such traditional form might seem incongruous not only in comparison with a poem like When the Sun Tries to Go On, but also with the avant-garde sensibilities of the time. In 1950 Charles Olson in his “Projective Verse” manifesto had famously condemned conventional verse forms—described by him as involving “inherited line, stanza,” the “non-projective”—as “closed” and restrictive, valorising instead what he called “projective verse” based on the cadences of the poet’s breathing. Yet experimentation with formal verse features not only in Koch’s work but also in that of several other New York School members. Harry Mathews has worked extensively within the constraints of forms such as the sestina, the pantoum, and the sonnet, creating complex Oulipian variations on these forms that significantly increase their difficulty of composition. Ashbery’s early work also features significant experiments with traditional poetic forms: his 1966 poem “Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape,” for example, is a sestina in which the line-endings “thunder,” “apartment,” “country,” “pleasant,” “scratched,” and “spinach” alternate across seven stanzas (Selected Poems 105). These texts are, however, significantly different from the well-wrought urns lauded by the New Critics. Such texts, as David Gascoigne points out in the case of Oulipo, make manifest “the tension between textual order and disorder” (123): the poet channels his or her freeplay within the constraints of their chosen form. Paidia is not reduced but intensified. The constituent elements of the text are shuffled and rearranged according to
the ultimately malleable ludic rules of play.

In keeping with its stylistic differences from *Sun Out* and *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, *Ko* is also markedly different on a thematic level. Like Bryon’s epic, *Ko* is explicitly a narrative text, in which word play and surrealistic association are replaced by narrative play. Koch utilises elements of the Byronic epic tradition, populating his poem with larger than life heroes and villains who embark on grandiose schemes and globe-spanning voyages. Like *Don Juan* the poem is also comedic, filled, as Silverberg puts it, with “slapstick humour, outlandish exaggeration, bizarre adventures, and whimsical fantasies” (151). Nancy Lang has argued that these “ongoing comic elements” are of vital importance in *Ko* “because they undercut and subvert the potential for the fantastic elements to be viewed either as a romance, or as an epic” (114), ensuring that the poem does not fit into conventional generic categories.

It would, however, be a mistake to think that *Ko* is simply a subversion or parody of the Byronic mock epic. Silverberg claims that “*Ko* does more than simply invert epic conventions”: it creates a new kind of poetic genre containing “a new set of standards, new possibilities” (149). The poem certainly stretches the boundaries of narrative form. Its 110 pages feature a dizzying array of bizarre characters and divergent story lines. While the title “Ko” might initially suggest an abbreviation of Koch’s own name, Koch attaches this title to a character that appears to have little connection with the author: a Japanese university student who dreams of joining a professional baseball team. At the beginning of the poem this character leaves university and takes a forty-hour flight to Tampa, Florida, the spring training ground of the “Dodgers” baseball team. He later wins a place in the team by virtue of his superhuman baseball skills: he pitches a ball so hard that it penetrates “through the enormous blocks of wood” of the grandstand, making it “shiver where it stood” (81). At the close of the fourth stanza, however, the focus of the poem shifts away
from Ko and moves abruptly “to England, where the Coronation // Of Amaranth the First is taking place” (75–76). Here we are introduced to the hapless Huddell (“a cougher, / A belcher, and extremely ugly looking, / As well as scrawny from his wife’s poor cooking” [116]); Andrews, who falls in love with Doris the daughter of Joseph Dah the “action poet” and is promptly sealed into a coffin by the aforementioned poet and cast into the waves to spend the rest of the poem attempting to be reunited with his love; and Hugh Fitz-James or “Dog Boss,” a purple-faced comic-book-style villain whose ambition is to control every dog in the world.

To attempt to reduce the plot of Ko any further seems somewhat redundant. There is no central narrative thread or theme to be summarised: it can merely be described. This makes reading Ko a markedly different experience from reading Koch’s earlier more paidia-oriented work. To engage with the earlier poems is to seek out patterns and connections within the flux of the poet’s textual play. In Ko, however, the reader is caught up by the narrative flow of the text and swept along by its momentum. There is little time, at least on an initial reading, for consideration of hidden meanings or submerged structure. Everything is on the surface, so that the text resembles those that Susan Sontag described as “works of art whose surface is so unified and clean, whose momentum is so rapid, whose address is so direct that the work can be . . . just what it is” (11; ellipsis in original).

This is not to say that the reader is left with nothing to do in Ko. Several theorists have identified the intrinsically game-like nature of the poem. Tassoni has described it as constituting a “play world” in which elaborate games of narrative and language can be played out (125). Yet while both Tassoni and Howard identify these qualities in the poem on a thematic level, it is also true that the structure of Ko is in itself highly ludic. In Ko, the generative devices that lurk beneath the surface of Koch’s more nonsensical poetry rise to the fore in the form of the poem’s metrical scheme. In English, ottava rima usually
consists of eight line stanzas of iambic pentameter, adhering to a strict *abababce* rhyme scheme. Whereas in the hands of another poet this format might be subordinated to narrative necessities—the scaffolding upon which the poet’s chosen story unfolds—here Koch’s narrative arises directly out of the text’s structure. Literary techniques become generative devices that enable the poet, as Mathews puts it in an interview with Lytle Shaw concerning his own work, to get “to material through arbitrary, game like procedure” (37). Spurred on by the demands of the game in question, the poet’s imagination runs wild, simultaneously driven by and contained within the constraints of the form while at every moment testing and warping those same boundaries. In this way Ko constitutes, as Perloff has put it describing Oulipian texts, a “formal structure whose rules of composition are internalized so that the constraint in question is not only a rule but a thematic property of the poem” (“Oulipo Factor” 208). The poem is, ultimately, as much about the process of its own composition as it is about Ko, Dog-Boss, Joseph Dah, or Huddell. Play for the reader, then, involves holding on to narrative threads as best they can whilst simultaneously tracing the structural logic behind the story’s chaotic progression.

This close relationship between the narrative content of *Ko* and its form has been noted by Brian McHale, who claims that in this work “Koch allows the vicissitudes of rhyme to drag his story around; instead of planning ahead, he seems to allow the latest rhyme-word to determine such essentials as the names and attributes of his characters, their itineraries, and the turns of the plot” (“Telling Stories Again” 258). The result of this approach is to populate *Ko* with its plethora of fantastical characters while at the same time ensuring that none of their individual story lines dominate the text for any significant period of time. Lang, who describes the structure of *Ko* as extremely “convoluted and complex,” has pointed out that there are “at least six other plots of equal length and value appearing simultaneously with Ko’s story in the poem” (115). This plethora of plots not
only complicates any reading of the poem but also deflates the significance of its very title. The fact that *Ko* is named after the character Ko suggests, at first glance, that this character occupies a place of central importance in the text. The multiplicity of characters and plots contained within *Ko*, however, means that the poem could just as appropriately have been named after one of these other characters: *Joseph *Dah*, for example, or *Dog Boss*. Shortening the name to *Seasons on Earth* would have been even more appropriate, providing the text with a title suggesting its multifaceted, globe-spanning nature without drawing undue attention to any one of its protagonists. Yet in giving *Ko* such a misleading title, Koch further complicates the stability of his text. Ko is not the hero of *Ko*, and any reader attempting to read the text with Ko at its centre will eventually abandon this framework as the narrative falters, splits, and changes direction.

It is here that Koch’s approach in writing *Ko* has parallels with his earlier more chaotic work. In a poem such as *When the Sun Tries to Go On*, Koch sets the promise of coherence against nonsensical wordplay. In *Ko*, however, Koch sets the conventions of narrative poetry against the unpredictable energies of paidia. McHale, writing of the re-appropriation of narrative tropes in post-modern poetry, has termed this practice a form of “weak narrativity” (“Telling Stories Again” 260). The strength of the poem’s narrative structure is undermined and subverted by digression, anticlimax, and an ultimate lack of closure. Contrasting *Ko* with the conventions of epic poetry reveals further textual subversions. Georg Lukács has described how the traditional verse epic is founded upon the idea of “pre-established harmony,” a “blessedly existent totality of life” that serves as the ground for the progression of the single heroic protagonist (58). Koch, however, approaches these epic ideals with what Bernard Suits would term a “lusory attitude” (50): an approach that allows the writer to “engage in an activity that has been made, by the rules that have established it, a purposefully inefficient manner of obtaining certain ends”
(Wilson 179). Any kind of fullness or totality in the text is sacrificed in order that the moment-by-moment exhilaration of poetic play can be sustained. As Koch himself put it, his main preoccupation in writing the poem was that he be “surprised and delighted” by the flow of events (Art of Poetry 209). The composition of the poem is thus drawn out and extended, never allowed to settle for long in any single moment of closure.

Canto II of the poem, for example, begins with a detailed description of the origins and ambitions of Dog Boss, but quickly changes course:

He had to north, to south, to east, to west
Agents who searched continually for
Such dogs in every climate as were best,
Skye dogs in Skye, and sea dogs on the shore,
Which he had sent to him at his bequest.
Some agents worked for pay; some, fearing gore
If they should disobey, were slaves of Hugh;
And some were bound to the big purple stew

By family bonds, and sacrificed their happiness
To his impulsive passion! Now let’s cross
The ocean and go straight to Minneapolis
Where a quite distant cousin of Dog Boss
Receives a wire from him, which says “Go canvass
For spaniels in North California’s moss
And DO NOT MISS THE SAN FRANCISCO DOG SHOW.”
He took the train at once. However, a hog show
In Tucson stopped him . . . (123–24)

The poem goes on to describe how this “distant cousin” is so struck by the beauty of the hogs revealed in the Tucson morning sunlight that he begins to doubt his loyalty to Dog Boss and, eventually, abandons the mission entrusted to him. A handful of lines after the importance of the San Francisco dog show has been literally spelt out in capital letters, this narrative line is abandoned. Tassoni has pointed out that all such plot shifts in Ko are highly unpredictable: the “narration may rupture at moments of banality” or “stasis,” or “at moments of great intensity, producing a sort of ‘cliffhanger’ effect” that is seldom followed through (129–30). He goes on to claim that, through such “frequent shifts in plotline, Koch not only problematizes the expectations of his reader, but resists systematization at the level of construction itself” (129). Most significantly, this resistance to systematisation is inextricably bound up with the highly systematized nature of the text. The narrative ruptures and digressions in Ko are generated by the constraints of its own metrical rhyme scheme, the almost banal close rhyme of “dog show” and “hog show,” in this instance, derailing the narrative from its course and guiding it in a new (and equally short lived) direction.

Howard has described how this tension between readerly expectations and actual text results in a “pressure built up in the reader’s mind,” a pressure brought about “as the result of a promise to remain at the centre, yet a practice of eccentricity” (283; italics in original). Even once Ko’s non-centrality to the text is understood, a reader might be tempted to ignore the title—what Lang terms an “epistemological reversal” (115)—and search among the poem’s other characters for an alternative central protagonist. Ultimately, however, it must be recognised that none of these many characters are of central narrative importance. The reader approaching Ko as a traditional epic is thus compelled to engage in a mode of reading that, as Lang points out, demands that they reassess the poem “even at the simplest
levels of understanding” (115). For Lang this process of reassessment demands that the reader be able to “move freely and comfortably” within the text’s “new ontological patterns” (115).

While this ability to “move freely” is certainly required, the issue of comfort is somewhat more problematic. It is, in fact, the very discomforting nature of the text’s instability that gives the poem its energy. For Koch himself, Ko is a balancing act, an exercise in which the ludic constraints of ottava rima and linear narrativity—lineation, rhyme, scansion and so on—are pitted against the undisciplined and subversive energies of paidia. Similarly, the reader of Ko must be able to follow the poem’s seismic shifts and narrative digressions, while at the same time holding in mind the more stable models upon which the poem is founded. For the reader, “playing” Ko involves learning to ride the fault lines between these opposing tensions, never fully committing to any one mode of reading, but passing from mode to mode as systems falter and are subsumed by one another.

The poem also frequently references events, apparently unrelated to the other plots, which exemplify the kind of rebellion against conformity and stagnation already explored by Koch in poems like “The Brassiere Factor”: “Meanwhile in Kansas there was taking place / A great upheaval. High school girls refused / To wear their clothes to school” (92). This state-wide outbreak of nudity sparks:

   a broad hysteri-
   A, in other words, among the adulthood
   Of Kansas caused by the unaccustomed vision
   Of these young girls, brought on by the decision

   Of the High School Girl Committee of Kansas City,
   Kansas, in an attempt for something new
In good old Kansas where the girls are pretty

But life is dry, and there is not the dew

Of new ideas and excitement . . . (93)

Like “The Brassiere Factor,” these lines set images of constraint against images of hysteria and liberation. The mass nudity of the girls is promoted by an incongruously formal-sounding group—the “High School Girl Committee”—and provokes such a hysterical reaction amongst the general populace that the poetic line is broken, E. E. Cummings style, in the awkward enjambment of “hysteri- / A.” There is a significant sexual element to this depiction. “Hysteria” is, of course, a condition originally ascribed to the female reproductive system, while the idea that young girls would embrace nudism simply as a remedy for boredom seems a particularly male fantasy. The terms “dry” and “dew” build upon this by conflating a desire for “new ideas” and experiences with the physical symptoms of sexual arousal (or lack thereof). These social/sensual tensions manifest, in the play-work of Ko, in images of “upheaval” and the rupture of the mundane and the everyday. Whether in the straight, flat lines of the Kansas landscape or in the regular rhythms of its lines of ottava rima, the poem yearns towards the disruption of linearity and the dispersal of poetic energy.

Towards the end of Ko, this yearning for the liberating potentiality of rupture takes the form of an actual geographical event, a literal spasm of the earth as the “entire continent of Asia” moves “sideways unpredictably”:

This movement opens up a whole new ocean

Between where Asia now resides and Europe,

And sailors sail it with a wild emotion

Of new delight, and waiters pouring syrup

On Trans-New-Ocean steamers get the notion
Of buying boats themselves to start a tour up.
And sailboats, tramps, and tugboats rush into
This brand new sea, or sky, of fairest blue... (176; ellipsis in original)

This earth-splitting event, with its sailors rushing with “wild delight” into a newly created landscape, recalls the breakneck movement of the two protagonists of “The Brassiere Factory” as they attempt their escape from stagnation into movement. Here, too, the act of escape itself—the motion of movement—is more important than anything that might follow. It is the “movement” of the old continents that opens up the “new ocean” of possibility, the ocean which inspires the servile “waiters pouring syrup” to take up agency of their own and effect their own form of escape.

It is this kind of escape that Tassoni, in his final analysis, understands Koch as being engaged in. Just as the geographical landscape of Ko is split asunder, the textual surface of the poem—its regular lines of iambic pentameter—is eventually destroyed by the cessation of writing itself. Meandering and multiform as Ko is, the end of the poem fittingly brings little sense of thematic closure. The final line reads: “Huddell, meanwhile, is flaking at the knees...” (181; ellipsis in original). Robert Creeley, in his review of the poem, describes it as a “fading end” due to the sense that such a poem could potentially “go on forever” (195), picking up new characters and narrative threads as the old ones lose momentum, each stanza hauled onwards by its own generative devices. Because of this, Tassoni claims, Koch’s decision to bring the poem to a close constitutes not so much the conclusion of play “as his timely exiting of the game itself” (131). He goes on: “through Koch’s act of what we might call quasi-closure, he is able, ultimately, to call attention to the illusory nature of his work, to in the end draw emphasis upon the stiffened knees of stricture and the freedom of which he has partaken” (131). For Ko to come to a conclusive end would be to open the poem up for postmortem critique: the reader or critic (or indeed, the poet himself) would
be able to stand back and assess whether Koch had won or lost the game in which he was engaged. Winning, using Beaujour’s model, would involve Koch successfully creating a text on the mock-epic model of Don Juan; in a broader sense, it would also include the poet crafting a conventionally cohesive and fleshed-out narrative. Koch defers such judgement by causing his poem simply to come to a halt. The game has been abandoned, not concluded. The word “meanwhile” in the final line, along with the final series of ellipses, gestures beyond the boundaries of the text towards a fullness and a unity that Ko itself will never attain. For, as Tassoni points out, such attainment is never Koch’s goal. Ko exists as a means, not as an end. Koch’s purpose in writing the poem is not the creation of a cohesive epic narrative, nor even the skilful execution of a difficult literary form. His goal is simply, in Tassoni’s words, to keep “language ‘in play’ despite the artificial constraints posed by his octava rima [sic], or by poetry and language in general” and, through the disruption of his own text, to prevent “the coagulation of significance” (131).

Understanding Ko in this way enables us to grasp the commonalities between Koch’s more explicitly ludic work and the exuberance of his very early poems. All of these texts, be they a chaos of language or a chaos of narrative, engage both poet and reader in a play-relationship in which closure is placed eternally out of reach. In place of such closure, the game focuses on keeping poetry, as Koch himself put it, “up in the air for as long as possible” (Collected Poems 4). Rule systems, be they the fluid associative patterns of Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On or the formal conventions of Ko, become ludic structures that incorporate the freeplay of paidia at a fundamental level. By reading Ko through the tension between paidia and ludus, openness and closure, we can recognise that without the persistent gravitational pull of formal tropes and narrative closure, the lightness and exuberance of the poem would be of little import. For both poet and reader, the richness of the text—and the richness of play—exists in the spaces of possibility that open
up between these two extremes.

4. The Red Robins as Play World

While the intertwining narratives of Ko fade out amongst liberating images of geological rupture, Koch’s longest prose work, The Red Robins (1975), is set in a fractured world from the very beginning. Though the book has received little critical attention, Jordan Davis has assigned it a significant position in Koch’s oeuvre, claiming that the book straddles the gap between Koch’s early surrealism and his so-called mature style. The text’s “rollicking cartoon scroll of events” and disjunctive syntax are interspersed with “acute psychological insights and sudden poignant turns” (iv). In the context of Koch’s play poetics, however, the book is more significant in the way that it expands upon the project begun in Ko: the creation, via the intermingling of ludic convention and freeplay, of a fantastical, textually-generated space for both authorial and readerly play.

_The Red Robins_ combines elements of both paidia-oriented poems like _When the Sun Tries to Go On_ and ludic works like _Ko_, containing both disjunctive linguistic play and a marked narrative structure. In _The Red Robins_, however, Koch’s narrative and linguistic play is funnelled into the form of a prose novel, 172 pages long and divided up into fifty-four separate chapters. The novel tells the story of the titular Red Robins, an itinerant group of American fighter pilots the exact nature and make up of which Koch never clearly defines. During the course of the novel, the Robins, allied with “Santa Claus” (whether this is simply the character’s name or the actual fictional Santa Claus is left unclear), set out on an epic yet ambiguous journey. Their starting point is left unexplained. Their destination is equally unclear: at times they seek a fabled Chinese city called “Tin Fan” (167); at others, the nightmarish “octopus market at Ytek,” described at one point as “_The most horrible thing I have ever seen. And the most puzzling_” (155–56; italics in original). Tiger
hunting—specifically, the hunting of a talking tiger named Mike—also features significantly in the story, as do encounters and conflicts with tribes of apes. During the course of this journey the Robins also engage in an ongoing battle with the villainous “Easter Rabbit,” his allies “the Shards” (another group of pilots), and Dracula (75, 94–95).

Accompanying this proliferation of plots and characters is a bizarre mix of thematic tropes that contributes to the instability of the text. Foremost among these tropes are those directly associated with the Robins’ status as aviators: airplanes, engines, flight, and the wide expanse of the sky. Also emerging, however, are more eccentric and inexplicable themes. The Red Robins overflows with lepers, octopuses, apes, tigers, and, perhaps most unusual of all, “hawsers” (ropes used to moor ships). Davis has pointed out that the appearance of this latter term frequently marks a shift in the narrative, a moment when the text becomes unmoored, and the “story you may have thought would turn out to be the real action of the novel is in fact slipping away” (ii). This sense of narrative slippage permeates the entire text. Indeed, The Red Robins is not so much a ship slipping its moorings as it is—to borrow an image from Ko—a continent in tumultuous motion, a perpetually shifting mass of words among which surreal characters and fragments of bizarre and comedic narratives arise and disappear.

Throughout The Red Robins, Koch invariably prevents his narrative from following a linear course for any extended period of time. The first chapter of The Red Robins takes this to the extreme with its extreme disjunction. Koch himself claimed to be attempting to generate “a surprising sensation out of every sentence” through constant changes of narrative direction (quoted in Davis iii). This technique results in passages such as the very first paragraph in the book:

Jill ran her fingers down the tough golden beard of history. It was fine being there, but she wished there had been boards on the floor. Professor Flint was late; it was
already three o’clock. “Chow down!” shouted the corporal, and all the men ran into
the eating quarters. “Very tropical weather, Sergeant,” said “Dutch,” an unusual man
who had been hanging around the camp a lot recently. The cord snapped, having
suddenly come undone, and the hawsers slipped out into the blue, frothy waters of
Lake Superior. (Collected Fiction 45)

The reference to a “tough golden beard of history” in the initial sentence is difficult to
interpret. The “of” suggests the beard is a metaphor or symbol, but if so it is an
idiosyncratic one that fits into no commonly used symbolic system. Furthermore, Jill
interacts with this apparent metaphor as if it were a real, physical thing. If the beard is real,
who is “history”? Does the name refer to an embodiment of an abstract concept, or merely
to a bearded man who goes by an unusual nickname? Before the reader can begin to
answer these questions, the second sentence presents him or her with further ambiguities as
to where “there” is, and what kind of a place it might be for the absence of floorboards to
be an issue. Any attempt by the reader to combine the paragraph into a coherent story is
further complicated by the three sentences that follow. As Davis points out, “there are at
least three distinct scenes in this first paragraph alone, four if Professor Flint is late to meet
someone besides either Jill or the corporal” (ii–iii). The efforts of the reader to establish the
exact relationship of these scenes to one another dissolves in the “rapid dazzlement and
dislocation” that comes with each sequential sentence (iii). As Davis concludes, the
“‘slipping away’ feeling” produced by this dislocation is, ultimately, the “real action” of
the text, in which the jumbled, fragmentary narratives of the chapter form a shifting collage
of incidents and characters (iii).

While none of the following chapters are as disjunctive as the first, this sense of
narrative slippage is a recurring feature throughout the book. Narrative threads and even
individual sentences shift focus and direction without warning. At times these shifts work
on several different levels simultaneously, as in this section of dialogue between the Robins and a Chinese philosopher named “Ni-Shu”:

“Comparatively–comparatively,” announced Ni-Shu, “the poetry of Keats and Shelley can scarcely be compared. However, since I am one of the few critics (I think!) who very clearly prefer the work of Shelley to that of mountain Keats, I must blue birds begin with rotten straphangers as the Yugoslavian boat “sinks”; it dives into the ocean, and when it reemerges, Nineveh is on deck, by copulation submerged.”

Go on with your criticism, said Santa, it seems to me you are getting lost in that part.

Yes, said Chen-yu.

Ni-Shu said, It is all a part of that. It is a new kind of criticism.

Santa: Well, so . . . (105; ellipsis in original)

Here, the reader is first lulled into thinking they are reading a coherent and linear piece of dialogue. Then, with the phrase “blue birds begin,” they are led to believe that the text is, in typical Koch style, veering off into surrealism. Yet in the next moment this assumption is itself overturned. Santa’s comment reveals that this incoherence is not a feature of the narrative voice, but exists within the narrative itself at the level of Ni-Shu’s diction. The nonsensical sentences are thus subsumed into a larger, coherent context. At the same time, the process of evaluation and re-evaluation the reader must work through in reading the dialogue renders them unsure of their own ability to keep up with the shifting nature of Koch’s narrative game. The text is revealed as unstable ground on which the reader must maintain constant vigilance if they are to keep their interpretive footing.

Central to this instability is Koch’s manipulation of generic and formal conventions. Just as Ko adopts the form of the Byronic mock epic, The Red Robins utilises the ludic
conventions of a specific genre. It is presented not as poetry or even prose poetry, but as a novel grounded in the conventions of popular adventure fiction. Koch himself, in his 1995 interview with Davis, tells of an early desire to write “commercial fiction,” fiction that he describes as “what used to be known as ‘pulp’ fiction after the kind of paper used in the magazines in which such fiction was printed—True Detective, Spicy Western, Weird Tales, etc. However,” he goes on, “I tried to write pulp fiction and could write only parodies of it” (206). Like Ko, however, The Red Robins cannot be classified as a straightforward parody. Instead, the novel is an unruly hybrid of pulp-narrative tropes, comedy, and experimental, avant-garde stylistic devices.

This hybridity is indicative of what McHale has described as postmodern poetry’s adoption of, “to a degree unprecedented in ‘high art’ poetry, the conventions of popular narrative genres: science fiction and gothic fiction, the western and the adventure-story, comic-books and animated cartoons, soap-opera and pornography” (“Telling Stories Again” 252). In The Red Robins, such elements of popular literature are mixed with a myriad of other styles and formal devices. The narrative shifts—frequently within the space of a single paragraph—from relatively straightforward third-person prose narration to intensely disjunctive poetic play. Chapter 15, “The Apes of Banzona,” is written in a loose imitation of heroic verse drawing directly on Homer’s Odyssey:

Sing, Muse, the war between the Apes of Banzona

And the good people, who had come from over far over the sea

To hunt tigers, to have adventures, and in general

Escape from the terrible humdrum which they feared

Their lives would have if they remained in America,

Deutschland, Italy, Peru, and France! (Collected Fiction 89)

These lines contain a theme familiar from “The Brassiere Factory” and Ko: the
instantiation of stagnation or, in this case, “the terrible humdrum,” in physical and geographical realities such as Kansas or France. Yet the first line is also significant in its phrasing. This muse does not sing of the war between the apes and the Robins, but rather sings it into being. There is a sense here that the song creates its subject, just as *The Red Robins* as a whole generates its high-velocity narratives, the story inseparable from its own textual production.

This conflation of text with subject continues throughout the book. Chapter 40, “The Newspapers,” takes the form—like Joyce’s “Eolus” chapter in *Ulysses* or sections of John Dos Passos’s *U.S.A* trilogy—of a series of newspaper headlines interspersed with prose narrative:

**RED ROBINS EXPRESS CHOICE**

the headline said. And

**THEIR CHOICE OF FAR EAST TO BE DISCUSSED AT NEXT SESSION**

Every once in a while they’d fall prey to world publicity, “like telescopes.”

Caruso-Tsik Lost

**ELEPHANT BELIEVED LOST AT SEA; PARIS IN ARMS; CHANCE FOR HOSE**

**FEEDING STATION IN TUILERIES HELD COMPLETELY LOST**

Violence over the Ocean! An Elephant Devoured by an Octopus!

The Human Monster! (162)

Here, the blunt declarative statements of the newspaper headlines blur into the surrounding narrative until it becomes difficult to distinguish commentary from event. Narrative levels shift beneath the reader’s gaze, creating a sense of disorientation and cacophony. The centre-alignment of these lines, combined with the erratic and surreal subject matter, also destabilises formal distinctions. The journalistic connotations of newspaper headlines give
way to the free-association of poetry—“like telescopes”—giving the chapter something of the appearance of an extended poem. Such poems do, in fact, feature frequently within the main narrative, ostensibly composed by one of the Red Robins, the poet-aviator “Jim.” For example, a poem titled “Blame” begins:

I have traveled over twenty thousand miles
Seeking for happiness
And the sparkling of crystalline seas.
What I’ve found instead is a penchant for whales,
A neat tornado of tea leaves,
And the burning license-plate of your head. (84)

The nonsensical playfulness of lines like “A neat tornado of tea leaves” and “burning license plate of your head” recalls the style of Sun Out or When the Sun Tries to Go On. Jim’s poetry however—along with chapters like “The Newspapers”—does have an additional function. This usage of various forms and texts-within-texts positions The Red Robins firmly in what McHale classifies as the “postmodernist fiction” of writers such as Thomas Pynchon, Robert Coover, and Guy Davenport (Postmodernist Fiction 3–10). In McHale’s description such fiction centres upon questions of ontology, highlighting through a diversity of textual devices the artificial nature of the world represented in that text. Foremost amongst these devices is “heteroglossia”—the “juxtaposing and interweaving” of a “variety of languages, styles, registers, genres, and intertextual citations” (166). Such a practice, in postmodern fiction, destabilises the text through its evocation of polyvocalism, a multiplicity of voices and levels of narrative discourse that combine into a centreless tangle of language. In place of narrative cohesion and linearity, the text presents itself as a play world inside which both writer and reader have considerable freedom of imaginative movement, shifting ontological levels as the ludic conventions encoded in the text
themselves shift and change.

This model of text as world—what McHale would describe as the “projected world” of the text (101)—resonates with Koch’s own description of his textual practice in those highly disjunctive opening lines. As he put it, he attempted to “supervise” the shifts in his semantic flow so that the changes of direction “were like some kind of town,” a multiplicity of textual pathways projecting outwards into the imagination of the reader (quoted in Davis iii). Such pathways are to be found elsewhere throughout the novel in the dizzying array of geographical localities the Robins pass through—Asia, the South Pacific, North America—as well as in the proliferation of characters and subplots that spill out across this vast landscape. Chapter 52, for example, is entitled “The List of Organisations,” and complicates the universe of *The Red Robins* by describing a host of other groups of adventurers (some of them apparently also aviators, others more indeterminate in nature), including “The Cold Bachelors” (“commanded by an Irish teetotaler named John Patrick Shenahan,” and “now entirely dead”), “The Demented Acrobats,” “The Bluebirds,” “The Crowds,” “The Tuscan Traders” (whose “planes resemble sea gulls”), “The Thundering Octopus,” and the “Gorilla-flames” (197–98). This chapter appears towards the end of the book where, if the story were to follow a conventional narrative arc, the reader might expect plot threads to be tied together. Instead, they expand and disperse. On the last few pages of the book, still more groups of pilots are introduced in a sudden frenzy of invention, including “the Melody Muffets,” the “Promenading Plum Tree Blossoms” (211–12), and whole constellations of equally absurd and poetic titles:

Soon the Glittering Glee-birds were no more, and their planes had been taken by the Angry Aviators, who were intent on tearing everything down. These, in turn, gave way to the Monoliths of Northern Siberia and they in turn gave way to the Non-Serious Burns . . . Meanwhile the Radiant Raspberries have started dashing through
the Burmese clouds. Goodbye! choruses one Orange Oriole. (212)

These introductions are complicated by a sense of closure and departure. Groups fade out as soon as they are mentioned. The “Glittering Glee-birds” are replaced in the very sentence in which they first appear by the “Angry Aviators.” Pilot replaces pilot in a rapid succession that recalls the break-neck sequences of disconnected images that are so much a feature of Koch’s work. As these groups violently proliferate and accelerate across the page, the world of the Robins comes to resemble a picture-surface covered with frenetic activity. The play world that Koch has created is simultaneously deepened by its plethora of detail and made shallow by the shifting insubstantiality of those details, drawing attention to the highly artificial nature of the text.

In keeping with the postmodernist tendencies described by McHale, foregrounding of artifice is also reflected in the text on a thematic level. At one point, one of the Robins describes immense theatrical spaces set within the already artificial world of the novel—the Horror Places: “(you’ve heard about the Horror Places, no? Well, it’s a long story. They were nightmare versions of various world-famous places which were set up in Asia during the Unknown Years—1896–1910—no one knows by whom or why” (156). These Horror zones, which include “Burmese Horror Mexico,” “Lake Michigan Horror Castle,” (156) and “South Shanghai Horror Castle” (128), blend real-world elements into the play world of the Robins on both geographical and political levels. McHale has described how, in the works of writers such as Pynchon and Donald Barthelme, “identifiable place names”—Ohio, Israel, Germany—are placed alongside fantastical or unrecognisable localities (Postmodern Fiction 46). Familiar distances and distinctions between locations are erased in the text, generating what McHale terms a “heterotopian zone” of textual connectivity.

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3 This parenthesis is never closed in the original text, a feature in keeping with the eccentric structure of the book.
(45). In the creation of such zones, space is “constructed and deconstructed at the same
time” (45), and real-world geographical connections are broken down and replaced with
the explicitly artificial relationships of the textual play world. In *The Red Robins* Koch
heightens this sense of unreality by rendering his play world as artificial and game-like as
the text that brings it into being. Within the play world of the text, his toy-like figures play
out their high-velocity games across a landscape that is filled with fantastical playground-
like constructions. Play thus occurs on both stylistic and thematic levels, so that the reader
must shuffle the component parts of the text in much the same way as the book’s
characters navigate their unreliable, shifting geographies.

Like Koch’s earlier poems, *The Red Robins* has been criticised for the way its textual
slippages and subversions, harnessed to no overarching synthesis of meaning, effectively
exhaust the reader. Ezra Tessler has compared the “unending digressive nature” of the book
to “Proust’s narrator’s gossip” and the convoluted plot lines of Pynchon’s *Gravity’s
Rainbow*, yet goes on to claim that, unlike such discursive texts, “Koch’s version often
seems directionless.” Tessler argues that, as the “internal world of the Robins inflates
without end, Koch’s words flee their center,” eventually blurring into “white noise.”
Because of this, Tessler claims, the “richness and sensuality” of the writing rapidly
“diffuses.” The text “loses itself to its own entropy.” Its “plethora” of imaginative details
creates a world that, as he puts it, “has remarkably little specificity.”

Koch’s own comments on the book support Tessler’s assertions. In an interview with
Allen Ginsberg on a later theatrical adaptation of *The Red Robins*, he rejects Ginsberg’s
attempts at reading “Buddhist Wisdom” into the plot, insisting that there is no deeper
meaning “beneath the surface” of the book: that the surface is, in fact, its only meaning
(*The Art of Poetry* 181). This claim is problematic: as in *Sun Out* or *When the Sun Tries to
Go On*, the very opacity of Koch’s linguistic (and, in this case, narrative) play in *The Red
Robins invites interpretive speculation. The Robins, for example, could be read as emblems of naïve U.S. expansionism, and the dangers they face in their global wanderings could be seen as symbolising the prevalent anxieties of the Cold War. The fact that so many of the Robins’ adventures occur in a hallucinatory version of Asia invites further connections with the real world cultural climate of the early 1970s, the moment in which the United States, after almost a decade of armed conflict, finally faced defeat in Vietnam. Yet the lack of specificity that Tessler cites works against such interpretations. In lieu of such symbolic unity, the reader is confronted with a vast textual chaos that provides few stable reference points.

The readerly exhaustion that might result from engaging with such a text is, however, not as much a failure of the text as it is a symptom of its internal dynamics. The Red Robins—like “The Brassiere Factory,” Sun Out, When the Sun Tries to Go On, and Ko—is a text that requires its reader to navigate a range of textual, thematic, and aesthetic dichotomies. Forms and genres are engaged with and subverted, their ludic rule systems stretched and discarded even as they propel both writer and reader on through the unstable spaces they generate. Within the text, the odyssey of the Robins takes on the form of an endless battle between movement—represented by travel, physical freedom, and most importantly, flight—and stillness, constraint, stagnation. Despite their strange, bird-like dynamism, the pilots who make up the Red Robins are plagued by impediments to flight and motion. They experience frequent engine failures and crashes, and are grounded in blizzards and storms. Yet these moments of stagnation are always contrasted—frequently within the space of a single paragraph,—with an ecstatic sense of freedom and movement. At one point the text describes how “Lake Michigan Horror Castle was the one horror area the Red Robins were trapped in, though only for a short time. The ability to fly made it easier to get out of such places” (156). The empty space of the blue sky becomes a zone of
unimpeded liberty, into which the linear progression of the narrative ecstatically dissolves and reforms. As Chapter 28, “In the Sky,” begins: “In the sky, and this is something that has been noticed before, everything seems to be all right” (124). The chapter concludes with a paragraph that reads like a metaphor for both the writing and reading of *The Red Robins* itself:

> In the air, I feel completely occupied. There is the steering, there are the controls, there is the sense of being “above it all” yet participating in it in the most lively and exhilarating way. I wonder if “escape” is the right word, as someone once suggested when I talked of these things, for something which so wholly absorbs the being and which requires so much skill, and which brings so much of life into one small span. The countries that float by down beneath are like chapters in a book; and I feel them, and what is in the air above them, in my face, and in my heart, and in my mind. (125)

If “The Brassiere Factory” demonstrates Koch’s conceptual concerns with motion and stagnation, while *Sun Out, When the Sun Tries to Go On*, and *Ko* act out the complex relationship between freeplay and constraint on both thematic and structural levels, then *The Red Robins* reveals how these unstable energies can be used to create open-ended play worlds for both writer and reader. In navigating these play worlds, the reader takes part in a game not only with Koch himself but also with a range of textual and formal conventions: patterns of wordplay, rhyme, meter, and narrative become the ludic structures within which play arises and evolves. In the next chapter I explore how Koch expands this textual play onto social and political levels to further test the boundaries of form and its relationship to thematic content.
Chapter Two

Games of Expansion: Socio-Political Dichotomies
and Structural and Thematic Play

I have previously examined how Koch sets paidia and ludus in creative interaction with one another, generating through this interaction unstable textual play worlds open to both authorial and readerly play. In this chapter I consider how Koch expands this textual play on both formal and thematic levels. Motte has described how play never exists in isolation: there is, as he puts it, always a vitally important “articulative relation of player to player, player to game, and game to world” (25). Here, then, I begin by examining the relationship between Koch’s textual play and the cultural and personal contexts in which that play occurs. The orientation of play towards self-transformation—what James S. Hans has described as the tendency “not to work comfortably within its own structures but rather to constantly develop its structures through play” (5)—occurs on a diversity of both aesthetic and cultural levels.

The texts that I examine here exemplify how Koch develops his poetic play thematically through the manipulation of a range of narrative and rhetorical tropes, and stylistically through his experimentation with unstable and hybrid forms in response to the oppositional binaries of the Cold War environment in which Koch developed his poetics. I turn first to Koch’s iconoclastic and often-cited poem “Fresh Air” (from Thank You and Other Poems 1962), which subversively situates Koch both inside and outside the confines of these aesthetic and socio-political binaries. In this poem he uses the dynamic energies of play, primed as they are to the negotiation of textual dichotomies, to navigate a polarised cultural landscape. These tactics enable him to contribute to the polarised rhetoric of the era even while positioning himself outside of that rhetoric, carving out a space for his work.
that avoids, through subtle self-subversions, confinement in any one fixed position. I next turn to the poem “The Artist” (also from Thank You and Other Poems 1962) to demonstrate how Koch uses the same strategy to conceptualise the creative process itself by framing a narrative of artistic creation within a formally experimental text. I also consider Hotel Lambosa (1993), a collection of short and generically ill-defined prose texts, which expand and complicate the relationship between form and content by juxtaposing incompatible narratives in an open-ended sequence. Finally, I examine The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures (2004), a hybrid visual and literary work. I use this text to demonstrate how Koch’s comic-strip/poem blurs the boundaries between text and image and, through this blurring, transforms the page into a two-dimensional play-space across which textual and visual elements can be shuffled and rearranged.

1. Cold War Polarisation and the New York School of Poets

Looking back at the Cold War era from the vantage point of 1987, Koch wrote in the poem “Seasons on Earth”:

It was the time, it was the nineteen-fifties,
When Eisenhower was President, I think,
And the Cold War, like Samson Agonistes,
Went roughly on, and we were at the brink.

No time for Whitsuntides or Corpus Christis—
Dread drafted all with its atomic clink.

The Waste Land gave the time’s most accurate data,
It seemed, and Eliot was the Great Dictator
Of literature. One hardly dared to wink
Or fool around in any way in poems,
and Critics poured off awful jereboams

To irony, ambiguity, and tension—

And other things I do not wish to mention. (On The Edge 402; italics in original)

While on the surface Koch is here simply describing a moment in history—a season, as it were, in his own particular time on earth—there is a more subtle meaning to these lines that I will examine later in this section. For the time being I want to focus in more detail on the period Koch describes here. The polarised and antagonistic nature of the U.S. literary environment in which the New York School of poets came into being is well documented. The “anthology wars,” as Golding terms them, which broke out in the late 1950s and early 1960s between Donald Hall’s conservative New Poets of England and America (1957) and Donald Allen’s self-consciously iconoclastic The New American Poetry 1945–1960 (1960) inscribed textual battle-lines across the landscape of U.S. poetry (“New, Newer, and Newest” 7). Such binaries were deepened by statements like that made by Robert Lowell in 1960 when, during his acceptance speech for the National Book Award, he spoke of the division between “the cooked and the raw,” contrasting the “raw, huge blood-dripping gobbets of unseasoned experience” (epitomised by the Beats) with poetry “laboriously concocted to be tasted and digested by a graduate seminar.”

Lowell himself went on, in this same speech, to blur the boundaries between these two forms, describing his own work as “hanging on a question mark” between the poles of raw expression and “good workmanship.” Yet the evocative imagery of the raw/cooked distinction carries a rhetorical weight that obscures this more subtle ambiguity. Such polarised rhetoric was very much a part of the Cold War literary environment. This rhetoric was not only displayed in the pages of anthologies and in public announcements like Lowell’s, but was also reiterated through the day-to-day social interaction of individual poets and artists. These individuals, in the course of creating what Davidson describes as
their “imagined communities” (Guys Like Us 19), simultaneously constructed the spectre of a monolithic and authoritarian literary mainstream: the poets and critics aligned with the New Critical school, working along guidelines set by T. S. Eliot, William Empson, Cleanth Brooks, and others.

Ranged against this literary/political dictatorship was the Other of avant-garde poetry, existing—at the time—outside the sphere of academia and represented by Beat poets such as Allen Ginsberg, Gregory Corso, and Jack Kerouac; those associated with the Black Mountain School, such as Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and Denise Levertov; the San Francisco Renaissance figures such as Kenneth Rexroth and Jack Spicer; and, last but not least, the New York School. Despite the many stylistic, ideological, and personal differences that existed within and between these groups, they were considered to be united in their opposition to the literary establishment—an opposition characterised at a textual level, according to Allen Ginsberg, by an interest in “vernacular and idiom” and a commitment to the “transformation of the diction and the rhythms [of traditional prosody] into vernacular rhythms and/or spoken cadences and idiomatic diction” (quoted in Lehman, Last Avant-Garde 335). Ginsberg, discussing the era with Koch in the mid-1990s, described how in his view the Beats and the New York School formed “a united front against the academic poets to promote a vernacular revolution in American poetry,” a revolution against the “logical structure[s]” of “academic official complicated metaphor” (quoted in Lehman 337).

This rhetoric was also very much a feature of the contemporary political landscape. As Alan Nadel describes it, mainstream Cold War U.S. ideology was founded on “the rigid major premise that the world was divided into two monolithic camps” one dedicated to “capitalism, democracy and the (Judeo-Christian) religion, and one seeking to destroy that ideological amalgamation by any means” (3). The largest and most concrete manifestations
of this second camp could be found, on the global political scale, in nation states such as the USSR and the People’s Republic of China. It is not uncommon for political historians to analyse the relationship between the United States and these entities in terms of mathematical game theory: a zero-sum game in which, to quote Steven Belletto, “the particularities of various third-world countries are less visible than their status as stakes, and thus the world is mapped as a ‘two-person, zero-sum’ game” with little room for ambiguity or negotiation (335).

Caillois argues, in his more general analysis of play, that societies frequently work along such ludic lines. As he puts it, “observance of the established rules is nowhere so indispensable as in the relationship between peoples and states. If the rules are violated, society falls into barbarism and chaos” (335)—or so, at least, the rule-makers fear. Oppositional binaries thus become not only a feature of international politics, but permeate the internal structures of individual nation states. Indeed, as Whitney Strub has pointed out, while internationally the US government “strove for the spread of democracy and capitalism,” the war was also fought internally through the suppression of left wing or anti-American movements and the promotion and normalisation of heterosexuality and the nuclear family (373–74). This tendency towards polarisation, driven by what Suzanne Clark has termed the “hypermascilocinity” of Cold War politics resulted in what Nadel describes as “a gendered courtship narrative that is constantly trying to make impossible distinctions between Other and Same, partner and rival, for the purpose of acquiring or excluding, proliferating or containing proliferation” (Clark 3; Nadel 6).

This division of global and national society into discrete ideological units with clear and non-negotiable borders is key to what Nadel terms the “containment culture” of the times (ix). Just as it was seen as imperative that enemy ideologies were prevented from expanding beyond their own boundaries and infiltrating the US, internal discord was
understood as a danger that needed to be suppressed and contained on political, cultural, and social levels. Filtering down from government agencies into high culture and academia, this containment culture coloured every facet of everyday life. “Complicated social realities” were reduced, as Paul Bauer puts it, “to a Manichean simplicity” (29). Jonathan Monroe has pointed out that such rhetoric—characterised by the “terrorizing stability” (101) of its oppositional binaries—moulded anti-establishment poetry into a characteristically Cold War form: a game fought along strictly delineated lines of us and them.

For poets such as Koch, this cultural climate resulted in a dangerously polarised environment not only on political but also on social and aesthetic levels. The lines in “Seasons on Earth” previously quoted make subtle and playful reference to the problematic nature of such binaries by subverting them on a stylistic level. The rhyming iambic pentameter of the poem is itself closer to the formalism of traditional prosody than to the raw expressionism of the Beats or the composition by field of the Black Mountain School. Terry Eagleton has described how New Criticism viewed the ideal poem “as a delicate equipoise of contending attitudes, a disinterested reconciliation of opposing impulses,” and goes on to claim that this poetic model “proved deeply attractive to sceptical liberal intellectuals disoriented by the clashing dogmas of the Cold War” (50). Reading such poetry, he goes on, “meant committing yourself to nothing: all that poetry taught you was ‘disinterestedness,’ a serene, speculative, impeccably even-handed rejection of anything in particular” (50). Edward Brunner has also argued that, to give one example, Richard Wilbur’s 1950 poem “A World without Objects Is a Sensible Emptiness” received great critical acclaim due to “its ability to evoke and address an anxiety without directly naming it” (23). Similarly, the success of Wilbur’s even more critically praised poem “The Death of a Toad” lies in its “expression of strong feeling without particularly admitting that
strong feelings are being expressed” (26). While Brunner’s analysis may not be entirely fair to the rhetorical and psychological richness of Wilbur’s poem, his statement does reflect contemporary avant-garde caricatures of New Critical ideals as a model of restraint and suppression against which avant-gardists could explicitly orient their own iconoclastic poetics.

Contemporary critic Paul Goodman, writing in 1951, described such mainstream poetry as indicative of “a complete inability to bear anxiety of any kind, to avoid panic and collapse” (quoted in Herd, *Ashbery* 53). It was this same kind of poetry that Allen would later rail against in his introduction to *The New American Poetry*, where he called for “a total rejection of all those qualities typical of academic verse” (xi), championing instead those who, as Shetley puts it, “saw themselves fighting for spontaneity as opposed to calculation, immediacy as opposed to reflection, innovation as opposed to tradition, freedom as opposed to constraint” (14). Yet Koch’s use of language in “Seasons on Earth” speaks against such dogmatic rhetoric. Even as he casts the academic poetry of the time in a negative light, Koch repeats its conventions. His form is regular, his diction constrained. He uses archaic terms such as “Whitsuntides” and “jereboams” [sic] (the latter a bottle capable of containing an unusually large volume of liquid—a reference, perhaps, to the perceived pomposity of Cleanth Brooks’s metaphor of refined poetic craftsmanship, the “well-wrought urn”). The threat of nuclear war that permeated the Cold War era is trivialised by the playful assonance of “dread drafted all” and the nonchalance of “atomic clink.” Finally, his opposition to New Critical values is expressed in the same kind of disinterested language the critics themselves valourised: rather than attack them directly, Koch metaphorically turns away with the comment that he “[does] not wish to mention” them any further. Koch is here deliberately subverting the very binaries upon which the oppositional rhetoric of the Cold War avant-garde was founded. Golding has argued that
this rhetoric of “mainstream” and “margin,” while problematic in its reduction of complex socio-political realities to “misleadingly topographic metaphors,” is nonetheless significant in its historical context (“New, Newer, and Newest” 8). Koch’s treatment of such metaphors exemplifies that they are, as Golding puts it, “cultural locations that are in process rather than fixed” (8). Koch draws attention to the unstable and arbitrary nature of these metaphors even as he exploits the dynamic energies they generate.

Despite the public proclamations of figures such as Allen or Ginsberg, Koch’s resistance to the oppositional and polarising rhetoric of the day was prevalent amongst the poets of the New York School. Koch’s friend and fellow School poet James Schuyler, in a letter to Ashbery, described how oppressive this rhetoric was, claiming that Allen’s anthology had “misrepresented so many of us” by placing them in a context and a company that, as he put it, was “rather overwhelming” (quoted in Shoptaw 47–48). On the other hand, as Hank Lazer argues, the idea of mainstream poetry as a homogenous field is itself a “rhetorical straw man of the (similarly multiple) avant-garde” (136). Monolithic accounts of both the mainstream and the avant-garde erase multiplicity in favour of unified and antagonistic groupings. What Davidson describes as “the literary-industrial complex, dominated by East Coast publishers, Ivy league colleges, and debates conducted in the Kenyon Review or by the corporate boosterisms of the Eisenhower business cabinet” is conflated with the “mass culture” of “advertising, movies, radio, television, and rock’n’roll” (Guys Like Us 50–51). This conflation results in a representation of the world that does no justice to the ambiguity and complexity of actual historical dynamics.

Lehman has identified in the work of the New York School poets an undertow of resistance to these rigid and misleading binaries. He draws a parallel between the New York poets and the New York painters with whom they had such a close social association, arguing that “just as the Abstract Expressionists liberated painting from the tyranny of
subject matter, so the New York poets were intent on freeing their work from the burdens of political consciousness” (Last Avant-Garde 305). It would be more accurate to say that poets such as Koch and Ashbery sought a way to exist both within and without the rigid structures of the politics of the day. It is true, however, that in 1967—at the height of protests against the Vietnam War—Ashbery would praise O’Hara’s poetry precisely because of its avoidance of political topics and revolutionary rhetoric:

Frank O’Hara’s poetry has no program and therefore it cannot be joined. It does not advocate sex and dope as a panacea for the ills of modern society; it does not speak out against the war in Viet Nam [sic] or in favor of civil rights; it does not paint gothic vignettes of the post-atomic age; in a word, it does not attack the establishment. It merely ignores its right to exist, and thus is a source of annoyance to partisans of every stripe. (quoted in Lehman, Last Avant-Garde 308)

Lehman goes on to describe how, in his opinion, O’Hara created in his poems a realm of the imagination quite apart from mundane existence. As Lehman puts it, O’Hara’s refusal to take politics seriously resulted in a poetics in which “the imagination was a transcendent realm in which one could dwell in moments of rare refreshment,” aloof from the turmoil of politics or the ever-present threat of nuclear destruction (306). This refusal to engage politically was exemplified, according to Lehman, not only by his lack of protest poems but also by his irreverent references to the politics of the time. In the “untitled poem beginning ‘Khrushchev is coming on the right day,’” for example, the name of the Soviet leader “has the weight of a name on the radio news on September 17, 1959” and nothing more. Because of this lack of gravitas, it becomes merely “one element in a collage-like composition whose other parts include blueberry blintzes, the comment of a Puerto Rican cab driver, a painting by O’Hara’s friend Grace Hartigan, and the poetry of François Villon” (307).
Other commentators have made similar readings of this poem. Perloff points out that O’Hara is also making a wry cultural commentary, poking fun “at the American desire to make foreign dignitaries feel ‘at home’ in the United States” when, the poem implies, Khruschev himself could “couldn’t care less” (Poet Among Painters 147). She argues that the train that “bears Khruschev on to Pennsylvania Station” becomes “part of the ‘tossing,’ ‘blowing’ life of the city” of New York (147). Davidson has also claimed that O’Hara’s treatment of Khruschev emphasises his “importance as a cultural sign” not in the political sphere but in the realm of everyday life, as “someone around whom the quotidian is constructed” (Guys Like Us 67).

There is a paradox at play in these depictions of O’Hara’s poetical practice. Ashbery’s positive assessment of O’Hara’s work on the grounds of its disengagement with politics ultimately becomes, in his final sentence, a claim for the political significance of that same work: the poet who eschews overt subversion, he claims, is ultimately the most subversive of all. Similarly, Perloff and Davidson present O’Hara as engaging with political issues by re-contextualising them in the sphere of the everyday. These are all valid points. Refusing to play a game according to its established rules is, as poems like Koch’s Sun Out and Ko demonstrate, a viable strategic move—albeit one likely to be considered cheating, or even failure, by those with vested interests in keeping the game as it is. For those that are willing to step outside the confines of the game, however, such a strategy can, in line with Beaujour’s analysis of the role of play in poetry, result in the transformation of the game itself. Exactly what the rules of the game in question are—and what exactly constitutes, in this instance, a subversion of play—remains, however, an open question.

The fact is that Cold War game-play is not as straightforward as it may at first seem. Just as the oppositional rhetoric of the State Department and the “war of the anthologies”
fed into a game of polarised binaries, so the retreat from overt political action constituted another subtler mode of play. As I have already described, the so-called literary mainstream championed by the New Critics valourised a disinterested, abstract stance. In practice, however, the mainstream oriented itself around what James Smethurst describes as an “anti-communist, anti-middlebrow, high modernist model” (34). At the same time, Al Filreis has also described how New Criticism itself was attacked by anticommunist writers such as Alfred Kazin, who equated the New Critical values of aesthetic restraint with communist totalitarianism (78), and Stanton A. Coblentz, who saw modernism itself as “an instance of pure dogma . . . as vicious and tenacious as the Russian revolution” (172–73).

Such connections and antipathies are complicated by Eliot Weinberger’s observations of the odd points of connection between the New Critics and the early CIA. In his biography of James Jesus Angleton, one of the founding officers of that Bureau, Weinberger recounts how Angleton, himself a Yale English Major well-schooled in high modernism, “claimed in later years that he always tried to recruit agents from the Yale English Department. He believed that those trained in the New Criticism, with its seven types of ambiguity, were particularly suited to the interpretation of intelligence data” (53). The ability to both encode and decode hidden meanings—be they in a poem, a newspaper article, or a diplomatic cable—seemed to make the apparently abstract poetics of academic literature a highly relevant tool for survival in the Cold War environment.

The New York School response to Cold War politics was not, of course, quite the same as that of the New Critics, and it is doubtful that Koch, O’Hara or Ashbery would have made very good CIA operatives (Harry Mathews has, of course, claimed in his 2005 book *My Life in CIA: A Chronicle of 1973*, that he was just such an operative; the veracity of this “memoir” is, however, characteristically problematic). Yet both the New York School’s strategy of abstaining from direct engagement with political themes and their
more subtle work to subvert the dichotomous nature of the socio-political environment in which they found themselves were ultimately playing into the dominant rhetoric of the time. This sense of complicity with the values of the so-called establishment is a common feature of Cold War oppositional rhetoric. Maggie Nelson has pointed out that for all the anti-establishment rhetoric of the Beat poets, Ginsberg’s “rants about men who ‘lost their loveboys to the one eyed shrew . . . that winks out of the womb’” fit into the dominant discourses of the time, “from Jung’s mythos of the Terrible Mother, to Freud’s anxiety about the ‘universal tendency to debasement in the sphere of love,’ to Robert Lowell’s gothic depiction of heterosexual pathos in suburbia, to Robert Grave’s elaboration of the White Goddess” (53). Yet if it is impossible to subvert the rules of the established game—if both outright opposition and subtle subversion play into the larger authoritarian narrative—how is Koch, committed as he is to fluidity and escape, to respond to this situation? As the refined style of “Seasons on Earth” suggests, the answer is to play not one game, but two games simultaneously: a double game that both perpetuates and subverts its own ludic structures. It is this kind of game that Koch plays in one of his most often-cited poems: the 1962 manifesto-like poem “Fresh Air.”

2. “Fresh Air” as Self-Subverting Binary Play

Few of Koch’s texts position themselves more explicitly in their socio-political contexts than the five page poem “Fresh Air.” First published in Thank You and Other Poems (1962), the poem begins:

At the Poem Society a black-haired man stands up to say

“You make me sick with all your talk about restraint and mature talent!

Haven’t you ever looked out the window at a painting by Matisse,

Or did you always stay in hotels where there were too many spiders crawling on
your visages?

Did you ever glance inside a bottle of sparkling pop,

Or see a citizen split in two by the lightning?” (Collected Poems 122)

On the surface, these lines seem to exemplify the overtly oppositional nature of the avant-garde’s relationship to the so-called literary establishment. The poem, however, works on several different levels simultaneously. It can be taken at face value: the black-haired man’s condemnation of “restraint and mature talent” speaks for the avant-garde’s rejection of the refinements of the poetry promoted by New Criticism. Yet there is also a strong element of self-parody in the poem, a deliberate exaggeration of rhetoric that subverts its own oppositional posturing just as mercilessly as it attacks the New Critics. Just as in works like The Red Robins Koch dismantles and rearranges the boundaries of form and content in order to generate an open space for play, so too in “Fresh Air” he focuses his disruptive energies on the polarised and restrictive cultural climate of the Cold War United States. The result is a poem that has a fundamentally doubled existence: on the one hand, it is a fantastical and comedic exploration of creative possibility, on the other, it is a challenge to the oppositional rhetoric of the era.

The “Poem Society” depicted in the first lines of “Fresh Air”, with its valorisation of “restraint and mature talent,” clearly stands in for the New Critical school, with its establishment position in the academy and institutionalisation through periodicals such as The Kenyon Review. Koch satirises the insularity of academic poetry and criticism by shrinking it down to the size of a club meeting room. The “black-haired man,” having thrown out his challenge to the audience, is quickly joined by a “blond man” who announces:

“He is right! Why should we be organized to defend the kingdom

Of dullness? There are so many slimy people connected with poetry,
Too, and people who know nothing about it!

I am not recommending that poets like each other and organize to fight them,

But simply that lightning should strike them.” (122)

On the surface, “Fresh Air” itself can be read as analogous to the statements made by the black haired poet and the blond poet in its opening lines: a vehement call to arms against what Brunner describes as the “quietism” of the mainstream (ix). Read in this way, the poem clearly perpetuates the polarised rhetoric common to both confinement culture and the Cold War avant-garde. The poem is manifesto-like in its thematic rejection of New Critical values and, as Janet Lyon has pointed out, “the manifesto is the genre not of universal liberation but of rigid hierarchical binaries: on this reading, the manifesto participates in a reduced understanding of heterogeneous social fields, creating audiences through a rhetoric of exclusivity” (2–3). Perloff, writing of the Dadaist Tristan Tzara, has also described how the manifesto, while originally a political genre intended to communicate with mass audiences, in avant-garde hands has become “designed less to move the masses to action than to charm and give pleasure to one’s coterie, to those who are like-minded” (Futurist Moment 114). “Fresh Air,” taking poetics as its subject rather than overt politics, certainly fits this mode. Amiri Baraka, who at the time Koch wrote the poem was still known as LeRoi Jones and had strong connections with the New York School, would later claim that “Fresh Air” “single-handedly demolished the academic poets” (quoted in Thomas 297). This demolition, however, took place only in the minds of those already opposed to New Critical teachings: the “academic poets” themselves, with their poetries of refinement and quietism, remained unscathed.

It is here that the doubled nature of Koch’s game in “Fresh Air” comes into effect. For even as it announces itself as a manifesto-like call to arms on issues of genuine concern to Koch and his coterie, the poem simultaneously undermines its own oppositional
status. It does this on two levels: by adopting, in its own rhetoric, characteristics valourised by the New Critics; and by parodying, through exaggeration and comedy, avant-garde oppositionality itself.

As I have already discussed, many critics have interpreted New Criticism as symptomatic of a retreat into refinement and ambiguity away from politics and experimentation. In such works poetic language is closely bound up with metrical form, while meaning is conveyed not directly but through subtle irony, ambiguity, and symbolism. On an initial reading “Fresh Air” seems the antithesis of the kind of rarefied, disinterested poem promoted by New Criticism. Yet despite Koch’s overt proclamation of the virtues of spontaneity, innovation, and freedom, on a deeper level the poem plays into the quietism of the New Critics. Its iconoclastic battle-cry is subverted in a number of different ways to produce something that is more a game of antagonism than a serious, sustained challenge to the status quo. Many of these self-subversions concern the language used by the speakers in the poem and the imagery and events the poem narrates. There is a curious tension throughout between concretely oppositional rhetoric—the language of violence and uprising—and a more ambiguous sublimation of rebellion into poetic fantasy. The poem is not so much projecting its anti-establishment message outwards into the sphere of social action, but more seeking to create, within its own textual boundaries, a space in which a game of revolution can be played out.

This disinclination towards oppositional binaries and overt revolutionary action manifests in the narrative of the poem, lurking beneath the drama and the violence of the events depicted. In the first section of the poem, while both the black-haired poet and the blond poet seem to be initially making a call to poetic arms, the blond poet is careful to distance himself from militaristic rhetoric. Rejecting the Poem Society’s own militaristic programme—the call to “defend the kingdom / Of dullness”—the poet stresses that he is
not encouraging others to “organise and fight.” Instead, he makes a poetic appeal to the forces of nature, calling upon lightning to strike his opponents. This is met with a more physical response from the “assembled mediocrities” of the Poem Society: they “shoot arrows” at both young men, driving them off the stage (122). It must be emphasised that there is little suggestion that these arrows, within the narrative of the poem itself, are symbolic or metaphorical; they are presented with the almost child-like literalism characteristic of Koch in comic mode, actual arrows shot by actual bows. Having quite literally ‘shot down’ their two opponents, the members of the Poem Society quickly assert the superiority of their own poetics. The chairman of the Society rises to speak: “physically ugly” yet convinced of his own seductiveness, “bald with certain hideous black hairs” and with a voice like “the sound of water leaving a vaseline bathtub,” the chairman proceeds to announce a group discussion “on the subject of love between swans” (122). The meeting continues with the chairman reciting “the poetry of his little friends” while said friends shower him with candy hearts in self-congratulation. Like the arrows with which they shoot down dissenters, these candy hearts are part of an absurdly concrete rendering of the dynamics of group approbation and condemnation—Eliot’s theory of the “objective correlative” taken, as it were, to absurd lengths.

In the next section of the poem the establishment forces represented by these candy hearts are met by an equally concrete manifestation of the forces of subversion and revolution: “the Strangler.” Described by Silverberg as a “comic book super-hero” whose single-minded “vocation it is to kill bad poets” (59), the Strangler takes centre stage in the second section of “Fresh Air.” Here there are no speeches, neither on the stagnancy of mainstream poetry nor on “the subject of love between swans.” Poetry, in fact, features only in this section as a negative force to be eliminated by the faceless figure of the Strangler. The result is a eighteen-line masterpiece of comic violence:
Summer in the trees! “It is time to strangle several bad poets.”

The yellow hobbyhorse rocks to and fro, and from the chimney
Drops the Strangler! The white and pink roses are slightly agitated by the struggle,
But afterwards beside the dead “poet” they cuddle up comfortably against their
vase. They are safer now, no one will compare them to the sea.

Here on the railroad train, one more time, is the Strangler.
He is going to get that one there, who is on his way to a poetry reading.
Agh! Biff! A body falls to the moving floor.

In the football stadium I also see him,
He leaps through the frosty air at the maker of comparisons
Between football and life and silently, silently strangles him!

Here is the Strangler dressed in a cowboy suit
Leaping from his horse to annihilate the students of myth!

The Strangler’s ear is alert for the names of Orpheus,
Cuchulain, Gawain, and Odysseus,
And for poems addressed to Jane Austen, F. Scott Fitzgerald,
To Ezra Pound, and to personages no longer living
Even in anyone’s thoughts—O Strangler the Strangler!

He lies on his back in the waves of the Pacific Ocean. (124–25)

*Disinterested* might seem an odd adjective to apply to the frenzied comedic violence of
these lines, but their overall effect is in fact analogous to the quietude of “the maker of comparisons / Between football and life” mocked here. The exaggerated rhetoric of “Fresh Air” ultimately sabotages its veneer of radicalism and neutralises its oppositional energies. There is no visceral feel to the murders the Strangler commits; both the Strangler and his victims, the one “on his way to a poetry reading” and the aforementioned football-inspired poet, are ciphers. They are empty symbols in a fantastical world in which it is difficult to imagine real pain or real death. This section consists almost purely of breakneck narrative action, “similar,” as Lorenzo Thomas points out, “to American adventure serials of the 1930s” (296). Combined with such references to this pulp literary tradition is, according to Thomas, an echo of Robert Desnos’s Fantomas, a work with its own roots grounded both in the French Surrealist movement and in the traditions of French popular fiction (269). Like much of “Fresh Air,” the section is also punctuated with “comic strip sound effects” (269)—“Agh! Biff!”—and liberal use of another form of punctuation beloved of the comic strip: the exclamation mark.

In keeping with his use of this least subtle of all punctuation marks, Koch rejects sublety throughout this section. In its place he presents the reader with bawdy and violent comic action. Lehman has claimed, in fact, that these lines recall the conventions of popular U.S. comic books on both thematic and stylistic levels. The outlandishly energetic and violent behaviour of “the Strangler,” who leaps dramatically upon any enemy of poetry he comes across, recalls the violent slapstick of early comics and Warner Brother cartoon shorts, while Koch’s onomatopoeic use of sound effects to accompany this violence mimics common comic book practice (Introduction 6). On one level, these elements—along with the features described by Thomas—work to orient “Fresh Air” away from the high art of modernism and the New Critics, positioning it instead in an alternative tradition of pulp fiction and comic books. Yet at the same time Koch loads his lines with elements
that sit more comfortably with the conventions of the very high art he mocks. He here plays his game in two directions simultaneously, alternating between the colloquially comical and the conventionally lyrical. The Strangler moves in “the frosty air” while “summer [is] in the trees,” ending his murderous activity by peacefully lying on “his back in the waves of the Pacific Ocean,” having left behind the turmoil of the mainland. Indeed, many of the objects of the Stranger’s condemnation, such as comparing flowers to the sea, are in themselves things held in contempt by high modernism. This fact further undermines the violence of the poem in that it suggests the Strangler shares values with the very mainstream he appears to reject.

It is interesting to contrast Koch’s writing here with that of another poet closely associated, as we have seen, with oppositional poetics. Paul Christensen has described how Ginsberg launched, in his 1955 poem “Howl,” an overt attack against New Critical constraint, developing “a technique of expression that fundamentally subverted calculated choice and revision of word” that would constitute “a means of opposing a calculating and oppressive society” (219). Koch, in the first section of “Fresh Air,” seems to be launching a similar project. After the black-haired and blond dissenters have been shot full of metaphorical/literal arrows and chased from the stage, “Fresh Air” shifts into a surge of Ginsberg-like fantasy:

the blond man stuck his head

Out of a cloud and recited poems about the east and thunder,
And the black-haired man moved through the stratosphere chanting
Poems of the relationships between terrific prehistoric charcoal whales,
And the slimy man with candy hearts sticking all over him
Wilted away like a cigarette paper on which the bumblebees have urinated (122).

These images, with their “thunder” and their “chanting,” recall the dramatic imagery of
“Howl” with its “angelheaded hipsters burning for the ancient heavenly connection to the starry dynamo in the machinery of night” (*Collected Poems* 127). There is a strong sense in “Fresh Air,” however, that Koch does not let himself get caught up in Ginsberg’s prophetic mode: the poets in his poem might chant poems ecstatically, but Koch himself retains a greater degree of restraint over his own text.

This is not to say, of course, that Ginsberg’s use of language in “Howl” is undisciplined. Perloff has pointed out that Ginsberg has here “thoroughly internalized the aesthetic of” High Modernists such as “Eliot, Pound, Williams, [and] Hart Crane, his use of repetitive “biblical strophes” constructing a sense of formal and thematic cohesion while enabling considerable variation in rhythm and line length (“Language of Modernism” 30). Koch however—for all his loud affirmation of wild, undisciplined poetic revolution—balances the energies of “Fresh Air” in ways that evoke the carefully calculated forms of Louis Simpson or Donald Hall more than they do the wild energies of either the Beats or high modernism.

“Fresh Air” features prolific use of exclamation marks that transcends mere exuberance and emphasis and soars into the ridiculous. A comparison can be made here to Ginsberg’s use of exclamation marks in the “Moloch” section of “Howl.” All but one of Ginsberg’s ninety-four exclamation marks occur in this section—the exclamation mark is, in fact, almost the only form of punctuation in the entire section⁴ (*Collected Poems* 132–33). In Ginsberg’s poem, this extreme use of punctuation can be interpreted as having a clear function on both formal and thematic levels. The exclamation marks in the “Moloch” section shift the tone of the poem, as Nadine Klemens describes it, from “the contemplative, resigned catalogues” of the first part of the poem “into a raging accusation

⁴ The single exception to this rule is the opening line, which is punctuated by a question mark.
of the machinery of Moloch” (12). Koch’s use of exclamation marks in “Fresh Air” also works to a specific end, but in this case the end is not to strengthen the poem’s condemnation of the New Critical values, but rather to subvert his own rhetorical stance. At times, punctuation in “Fresh Air” parallels “Howl” in function. The exclamation marks in the line “Ugh! what poisonous fumes and clouds! what a suffocating atmosphere!” (126) work to convey the vehemence of the speaker against the toxic stagnation of mainstream literature. More frequently, however, Koch uses punctuation simply to exaggerate the absurdity of his own polemics, as in these lines from later in the same section:

States symbolized and divided by two, complex states, magic states, states of consciousness governed by an aroused sincerity, cockadoodle doo!

Another bird! is it morning? Help! where am I? am I in the barnyard? oink oink, scratch, moo! Splash! (127)

The first of these lines begins with mimicry of the complex, abstract language of New Criticism, a mode of analysis in which meaning is wrapped within a cloud of ambiguity, irony, and, frequently, obscure symbolism. The phrase “states symbolized and divided by two” in particular seems more an extract from a piece of New Critical theory than part of a poem. This critical vein continues in the phrase “states of / consciousness governed by an aroused sincerity,” although there is an element of comedy introduced through the hyperbolic formulation of “aroused sincerity.” The line then veers suddenly into absurdity, the exclamation “cockadoodle doo” breaking the flow of sophistry and deflating any hint of “aroused sincerity.” The tone of the language ceases to be ponderous, but it does not change, as might be expected in such a poem, to exhilaration or rebellion. Panic replaces denunciation; frenzied exclamations, questions and entreaties build up only to break down into the kind of childish sound effects so common throughout the poem.

Elsewhere in the poem, Koch crafts his verse into more refined forms. “Fresh Air”
oscillates between lines of extreme length—in the fifth and final section, these lines extend
to as much as four lines of wrap-around text—to shorter, more rhythmically conventional
lines. This refinement is most pronounced in the fourth section of the poem, which features
relatively short lines in free verse with four regular stresses per line and irregular identity
rhymes (that is, rhymes using the same repeated word):

Supposing that one walks out into the air
On a fresh spring day and has the misfortune
To encounter an article on modern poetry
In New World Writing, or has the misfortune
To see some examples of some of the poetry
Written by the men with their eyes on the myth
And the Missus and the midterms . . . (125)

Koch works here with ideas to be found elsewhere in his oeuvre: the reference to “the
Missus,” for example, draws a connection between stereotypically mundane male/female
roles and mundane poetry, a move that echoes the connection between sex and poetic
exhilaration made in Ko. On a formal level, however, the monotonous banality of Koch’s
writing mimics and mocks the refined metrical verse of the so-called academic
mainstream. Koch drives the point home by compiling, in the section’s twenty lines, a
compendium of contemporary mainstream literary journals and books: New World Writing,
the Hudson Review, Encounter, Partisan Review, Sewanee Review, Kenyon Review and the
Italian multi-lingual journal Botteghe Oscure are all referenced. “Review” is used
repeatedly as an end-word, in each case being rhymed with either the phrase “to do,” or
with an identity rhyme. The monotonous rhythms created are highly significant: the very
names of these publications are made to form a network of banal musicality within which
the protagonist of the poem is quickly entrapped. This protagonist, who initially stepped
out into the fresh air of a spring day, is rapidly suffocated and surrounded by these journals. The spring day is “blasted to ruins,” and the seeker of fresh air becomes lost in a world of literary journals, academic authority and iconic literary figures such as Eliot and Ezra Pound (125).

As Silverberg has pointed out, “by proclaiming a loud and consequential resistance to the academic enemy, the oppositional poets imbue the enemy with a kind of power” (60). A more subtle and effective way to undermine the enemy then, “is by not taking him seriously; by turning the well-wrought urn into a ‘critical manicure’” (60) that deflates the significance of the opposition. Yet in “Fresh Air” Koch manages to take both approaches simultaneously. He inflates and deflates the polarised binaries so central to oppositional poetics, creating a rhetorical straw man of New Critical refinement that he then proceeds to play both against and with. Through this doubled play he draws attention to the problematic ways in which complex realities can be reduced to stark binaries, even while recognising the importance of these binaries to the construction of avant-garde identity and revolutionary poetics.

Even in the most violent and overblown rhetorical passages of “Fresh Air,” the stridency of Koch’s condemnation of the so-called mainstream gives way to a more uncertain tone. In the second part of the poem, the speaker lists a string of rhetorical questions:

Who are the great poets of our time, and what are their names?

Yeats of the baleful influence, Auden of the baleful influence, Eliot of the baleful influence

(Is Eliot a great poet? no one knows), Hardy, Stevens, Williams (is Hardy of our time?),

Hopkins (is Hopkins of our time?), Rilke (is Rilke of our time?), Lorca (is Lorca of
our time?), who is still of our time?

Mallarmé, Valéry, Apollinaire, Eluard, Reverdy, French poets are still of our time, Pasternak and Mayakovsky, is Jouve of our time? (123)

Even in posing the question “who are the great poets of our times,” Koch parodies the concerns of literary academia. Literary history is transformed into a narrative the true meaning of which must be deciphered: the poet him or herself is reduced to a student struggling with the complexities of tradition and group affiliation. Yeats, Eliot, and Auden are pilloried for their “baleful influence,” but this condemnation is diffused by the uncertainty of the following lines. Qualifications are attached, in parentheses, to almost every statement the speaker makes. This speaker even deigns to pass judgement on Eliot, the adopted figurehead of the New Critical movement. Conversely, figures such as Apollinaire and Éluard—poets whom the New York School thought of as belonging to the alternative tradition in which they placed themselves—are given ambiguous status by their inclusion under the final question mark.

On one level, the uncertainly in these lines can be read as part of the doubled game Koch plays throughout all of “Fresh Air.” The homicidal dogmatism exemplified by the Strangler falters into a weaker—albeit more reasonable—kind of uncertainty. The speaker’s failure to make any great pronouncement—a failure magnified by his incessant use of question marks and bracketed sub-clauses—renders the tone less that of a strident manifesto and more that of an uneasily ambiguous modernist poem. Koch’s withholding of judgement here is, however, more than a rhetorical flourish. It is also an acknowledgement of his debt, and the debt of his fellow New York School poets, to the poetic traditions valued by the so-called literary mainstream. By playing the game both ways, then, Koch is able to reflect his and his fellow New York School poets’ more nuanced relationship to both so-called mainstream poetry and the avant-garde.
Indeed, outside “Fresh Air,” Koch made no secret of his own affection for Eliot and Pound “of the baleful influence,” describing later in life how he remembered “being spellbound when I first read The Waste Land. It seemed more than a mere work. With its vagueness, its clarity, and its dissociations it was like a big spacious mystery voyage” (Art of Poetry 202). As with Ashbery, this connection to literary history extended beyond mere affection to leave a mark upon the poetry itself. Lehman has, in fact, pointed out—in reference to the Allen and Hall “war of the anthologies”—that “the New York poets were the one group—the only group—that could plausibly fit in either anthology” (Last Avant-Garde 405). Lehman goes on to describe how a selection of Ashbery’s poems were in fact initially to be included in Hall’s supposedly traditionalist New Poets, removed only in the final stages of the book’s production due to space limitations (405). The early influence of W. H. Auden on Ashbery’s poetry has also been well documented—his senior thesis on Auden’s poetry was determined by the Harvard English department to be “so sensitive to the nuances of [Auden’s] poetry and so well written” that his honours degree was granted on its strength alone (Lehman, Last Avant-Garde 136–37), and Auden would later award Ashbery’s Some Trees manuscript the Yale Younger Poets Prize. By implicitly acknowledging these connections to the mainstream tradition, Koch is able to avoid both the solidification of contemporary binary divisions and the rewriting of historical affiliations. Davidson has described how the “early cold war narrative engaged in shoring up American consensus” was exemplified, in the literary sphere, by F. O. Matthiessen’s book 1941 The American Renaissance (Guys Like Us 107). This text sought to incorporate historical figures such as Melville, Emerson, and Whitman into the contemporary canon, “vaunting,” as Davidson puts it, “one form of democracy” to the exclusion of other potentially liberatory narratives (107). In “Fresh Air,” Koch subverts such a monological construction of tradition, creating a space in which the nuances of actual interpersonal
engagement can co-exist.

Appropriately, Koch ends “Fresh Air” with the same kind of metaphor that closes *Ko*. Exhausted, finally, by his fruitless interrogation of high theory and literary history, the narrator of the poem wades out through the “scum floating on the surface of poetry” (127) to the open sea:

Ah, but the scum is deep! Come, let me help you! and soon we pass into the clear blue water. Oh GOODBYE, castrati of poetry! farewell, stale pale skunky pentameters (the only honest English meter, gloop gloop!) until tomorrow, horrors! oh farewell! (128)

The characteristically sexualised imagery of “castrati of poetry” and the contemptuous reference to New Critical refinement— “the only honest English meter”—seem almost an afterthought here. The cadence of the poem pulls the reader on into its final lines, an oceanic space in which the anxieties of the preceding sections are abandoned:

Hello, sea! good morning, sea! hello, clarity and excitement, you great expanse of green—

O green, beneath which all of them shall drown! (128)

As is common in Koch’s texts, this ending—with its salutations to the sea and the “clarity and excitement” to be found therein—has more the feeling of a beginning than an end. The drowning of the bad poets and the academics opens up a new space for Koch’s ecstatic narrator to move into. In the next section I will follow, metaphorically speaking, Koch’s journey into this textual space of possibilities, tracing how Koch expands and complicates his play across both formal and thematic boundaries as he goes.
3. Expansions of Formal and Thematic Play in “The Artist” and Hotel Lambosa

After two brief opening sections, Koch begins the third section of his poem “The Artist” with the lines:

I often think *Play* was my best work.

It is an open field with a few boards in it.

Children are allowed to come and play in *Play*

By permission of the Cleveland Museum.

I look up at the white clouds, I wonder what I shall do, and smile.

Perhaps somebody will grow up having been influenced by *Play*,

I think—but what good will that do?

Meanwhile I am interested in steel cigarettes . . . (*Collected Poems* 113; ellipsis in original)

If “Fresh Air” is concerned with the rhetoric of opposition central to the post–Second World War avant-garde, “The Artist” (a poem that, appropriately enough, immediately precedes “Fresh Air” in *Thank You and Other Poems*) is simultaneously a study and an enactment of a certain kind of artistic conceptualism characteristic of that era. As in “Fresh Air,” here Koch plays multiple games simultaneously. The difference is that in “The Artist” his aim is not to negotiate political and aesthetic binaries, but rather expand and deepen the potentiality of his own textual play.

The speaker of these opening lines is not Koch the poet, but a fictional conceptual artist who narrates the entire poem. This artist is introduced, in the first two sections, as the creator of grandiose sculptures and installations: an “amazing zinc airliner” displayed in the Minneapolis zoo, and a piece called “Cherrywood avalanche” in Toledo, Ohio (113).
The reference to Ohio resonates with Koch’s use of that locality in the long poem *Ko*. Here, as in *Ko*, Koch uses Ohio to juxtapose the flat linearity of the Midwestern landscape to the spectacular—the latter embodied, in this case, by an avalanche of cherrywood (whatever that may be). The image of the zinc airliner sets up a similar contrast, analogous to those explored in “The Brassiere Factory” and *The Red Robins*, between the tropes of movement and stagnation. Just as the protagonists of “The Brassiere Factory” are beset by stagnation and the pilots of *The Red Robins* oppressed by the pull of gravity, this zinc airliner is grounded in the limitations of a zoo environment—its flight is curtailed both by the weight of its composite material and its status as an exhibit. In “The Artist,” however, Koch goes beyond these texts by turning his narrative focus to the act of artistic creation itself. Here Koch plays with the concept of play, illuminating, as Silverberg points out, the very “conceptual basis” of Koch’s own writing (108).

Stylistically, the poem is prosaic. Its lines of free verse follow no strict pattern or meter, and its language consists, for the most part, of straightforward declarative sentences. In this early section, the piece entitled *Play* is presented as a thing of contradictions, an “open field” of possibilities (a term that itself recalls Olson’s rhetoric of “open field” composition) that is encircled by the administrative constraints of the Cleveland Museum. Like the zinc airliner, it constitutes a liberatory trope grounded in a constrictive environment. Furthermore, the potential for play within this environment seems relatively limited: an empty field with “a few boards in it” is not the most exhilarating of playgrounds. There is also a bored tone in the speaker’s thoughts. His ruminations on the importance of his work are qualified by “perhaps” and punctuated with a rhetorical question mark. *Play* seems a thing of limited potentiality, and the artist’s attention quickly shifts away from it to focus on a future project involving “steel cigarettes.”

Read in this way, the opening lines of the poem can be interpreted as a reflection on
the paradoxes and contradictions of contemporary art and, by extension, poetry. Silverberg has pointed out the similarities of the artworks that Koch describes to the “Installation or Environmental art” of the time, claiming the “Artist” himself may have been modelled on conceptual artist Robert Morris (107). Like such art, the artworks described in “The Artist” emphasise, as Silverberg puts it, “art as idea, as commodity” (108). *Play* is “an event which occurs when audiences respond to, or play with, the artist’s provocation” (108); as the artist proceeds from project to project, each one more grandiose than the last, this sense of audience interaction is expanded upon and complicated. The artist moves on from his “field with a few boards in it” to create first an artwork titled “Bee”—a massive construction of white sailcloth, iron scaffolding, gold paint, and “a huge number” of red, pink, and yellow balloons (*Collected Poems* 114–15)—then a piece called “The Magician of Cincinnati”—“twenty-five tremendous stone staircases, each over six hundred feet high” placed in the Ohio river “between Cincinnati and Louisville, Kentucky” (116). The last few pages of the poem concern projects even more outlandish: “Dresser,” a range of artificial hills incorporating birdlife and “stone deer-head[s]” (118–19), and, finally, an ill-defined enterprise involving the Pacific Ocean and “sixteen million tons of blue paint” (121). As the artist proceeds from the plausible to the practically impossible, the reader of the poem finds her or himself in the same situation as the Artist’s audience. In describing the Artist’s conceptual art Koch himself enacts a kind of conceptual creativity, constructing on the page a portfolio of impossible artworks that could never be physically realised.

Central to this conceptual element is Koch’s focus, in the second half of the poem, upon the concrete nature of language. As “The Artist” progresses, the poem comes to resemble a collage of differing media and genres reproduced textually: newspaper headlines, transcripts of spoken conversation, journal entries, written proposals for artworks. Silverberg comments that this practice mimics the focus on documentation
characteristic of conceptual art, a feature that emphasises the importance in such projects of “process over product” (108). The words upon the page mimic other media in a way analogous to the techniques of Concrete poetry, yet these media—these objects—are presented as little more than the by-products of the Artist’s larger conceptual process.

Koch begins this exploration of the materiality of language with a list of stark one-line headings. Initially these appear to be newspaper headlines charting the artist’s career. “GREATEST ARTISTIC EVENT HINTED BY GOVERNOR” (117), for example, is accompanied by text resembling a quotation from the story it purportedly announces. As the poem continues however these individual lines become more isolated on the page, their words left to fend for themselves without accompanying explication. Rather than describing photographs and drawings associated with the artist’s projects, they mimic these forms:

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

PHOTOGRAPH

............... SKETCH

DEDICATION CEREMONY

GOES SWIMMING IN OWN STREAM

SHAKING HANDS WITH GOVERNOR
Here Koch engages in the same kind of ontological play he practices in The Red Robins, creating a representation of representation—that is, photographs and written texts—within the already artificial play world of his poem. Even when his lines become more descriptive, it is difficult for the reader to interpret exactly what the words or phrases are meant to signify. Is “shaking hands with governor” a description of a photograph, or a caption accompanying such a photograph? Should “the head of the artist” or “the artist’s hand” be understood in this same newspaper context, or simply as lines of poetry? The flat, concrete nature of the text resists—even while inviting—such interpretations. The result of this tactic is a doubling of sense. The words on the page both assert their concrete nature and refer beyond themselves to the imaginary world of the narrative. In “The Artist,” this kind of ontological play enables Koch to manipulate the text on several different levels simultaneously. On one level, the poem works as a narrative of the artist’s experiments. On another, it is a commentary on contemporary creativity and, by extension, Koch’s own involvement in the artistic and literary worlds of the post-war era. Yet on a third and more fundamental level, “The Artist” itself is an act of play. Koch’s textual representation of artistic creativity becomes itself artistic creativity, allowing him to extend his play through a diversity of textual and stylistic modes and to explore an equally diverse range of narrative and thematic possibilities.

Decades after “The Artist,” Koch would expand this exploration further through his
prose collection *Hotel Lambosa*. Modelled, according to Koch himself, on Yasunari Kawabata’s *Palm of the Hand Stories* and the fictions of Leonardo Sciascia and Isaac Babel (*Art of Poetry* 211), the eighty-five pieces in this book are in places suggestive of prose poetry, in other places prose fiction or even autobiographical prose. Most pieces are shorter than a single page in length, though a small number stretch to two or three pages. As the book is neither a novel nor a collection of short stories the title of *Hotel Lambosa* can be interpreted as a metaphor for its own open-ended structure. Like a hotel, Koch’s book contains a multiplicity of discrete units—rooms, if you will—that can be explored both individually and in terms of their thematic and stylistic relationships with the structure as a whole.

In many ways, this textual space contains a compendium of the many subversive techniques developed in *Sun Out, Ko, The Red Robins*, and poems such as “The Artist.” At times textuality rises to the fore, drawing attention to itself and obscuring the narrative or themes that lie beneath. In pieces such as “Em Português” (“In Portuguese”), for example, Koch plays with ontological levels by shifting the focus of his text without warning:

They were listening to the fados, sung one after another. Each fado sang of the scorched terrible unsatisfiable lost wretchedness of love. There is no happy side, except for intensity of feeling, to a fado song. They felt the excessively narrow reality of the fados shoving into and bumping them, like a drunk. The man’s hand untightened itself from the woman’s after the momentous finale of the song. As they got up to go back to the Hotel of Ionia and of Camoëns, they were accosted by a waiter at the exit, saying You forgot your coats. We didn’t wear any coats. My love is gone, my heart is like a smashed mask of glass. If my shoeprints are steeped in your blood, woman, you will know that I have come back. These coats belong to somebody else. (*Collected Fiction* 224)
The piece begins straightforwardly enough. The first seven sentences develop a description of a couple, presumably tourists in a restaurant, listening to “fados”—Portuguese folk songs. Details are sketchy but evocative: the couple are referred to through the indefinite pronoun “they,” or, individually, as “the man” and “the woman.” The fado to which they listen dominates the scene in an almost physical way, constituting almost a third character—a “drunk,” “shoving into and bumping them.” Yet in the final few sentences of the piece an ontological shift takes place. A mundane interaction with a waiter slips suddenly into the emotionally charged rhetoric—that “excessively narrow reality”—of the folk song. The borders between the composite parts of the play world—the restaurant, the folk song, the inner mental states of the couple, and their dialogue with the waiter—break down. The couple become part of the folk song, or vice versa, and the piece ends with a simple sentence—“These coats belong to somebody else”—that, coloured as it is with the surrounding highly charged emotion, could be a line from the song as much as it could be a comment spoken to the waiter. This ambiguity is heightened by the absence of speech marks, an omission that allows the ontological status of the lines to remain unfixed.

In other parts of *Hotel Lambosa*, however, the writing achieves a prosaic transparency. In these pieces, Koch presents scenes or stories that, in their very simplicity, belie the textual subversions of so much of his other work. Richard A. Lanham argues that readers “expect to look through prose, to the subject beneath, but at poetry where the language forms part of the subject” (quoted in Perloff, *Poetry On and Off the Page* 117). While Perloff goes on to point out, citing Henri Meschonnic, that there is enough formal ambiguity between prose and poetry to make such assumptions problematic (117–18), these readerly expectations are persistent. In *Hotel Lambosa*, Koch plays a subtle game with such assumptions by juxtaposing apparently transparent autobiographical sections with more textually opaque material.
"Hotel Lambosa" opens with a piece titled “Antonellos.” This piece, two pages in length, sets an autobiographical tone with its very first line: “Janice and I decided to look for every Antonello da Messina in Sicily” (221). Janice is presumably Koch’s first wife, Janice Elwood, with whom he lived and travelled in France and Italy during the mid-1950s. “Antonellos” maintains this autobiographical tone throughout, mentioning Koch’s mother Lillian by name. The pieces that immediately follow “Antonellos” are less explicitly autobiographical, yet they maintain a sense of connection to the opening piece by presenting similar tropes of travel and family. The fourth piece in the collection, for example, titled “The Villino,” begins with the line, “my wife and I were waiting for the train to come that would take us from Rome to Florence” (225). Soon after, another more concrete connection to Koch’s personal history is made: the piece titled “Negative Blood” describes, in blunt yet emotionally resonant detail, the 1956 miscarriage of the Kochs’ first child. It also references Janice’s death, decades later in 1981:

The baby had miscarried and was born dead in a violent hemorrhage . . . she was losing a lot of blood and needed more and there was a shortage of it . . . It was a lucky chance that a container of A-RH-negative blood was there and had not been sent to Hungary along with all the other containers of blood for people in the failed rebellion against the Russians. It was nineteen fifty-six. His wife lived for twenty five more years. For her, the experience of this night, while she was experiencing it, had nothing to do with driving, with nuns, with Hungary, but with one wild wish, that the baby not be dead, that she be herself again, and that she and the baby be together, as they had never been, but as she had imagined, for so many months now, that they would be. (230)

The narrative here is straightforward. The details of the miscarriage are integrated into an historical context—the uprising in Hungary—and the piece shifts, as it nears its end, into a
novelistic psychological study of Janice’s internal state. There are none of the sudden flights or fantasy or moments of linguistic play characteristic of so much of Koch’s other poetry and prose (with the exception of the play on the term “negative blood” in the title).

Yet Koch’s playfulness has not departed: it has merely shifted its location. Here, it is not to be found within the individual text, but rather in the relationship of that text to the other texts around it.

The eighty-five texts that make up Hotel Lambosa are not united by any single narrative, theme, or style, yet there are enough connections between individual pieces to make the book as a whole more than an arbitrary collection of texts. Joseph Conte has identified two poetic forms “peculiar,” as he puts it, “to and in many ways typical of postmodernism: serial and procedural form” (3). In Hotel Lambosa, Koch hits upon a simple procedural form—the composition of short prose texts—and arranges them in such a way that they form a kind of discontinuous continuity. He deliberately subverts the cohesion of the book as a whole in order to highlight the artificial nature of the text and the problematic nature of textual representation, while at the same time enabling multiple connections to be made between individual texts. In this way, he provides an open structure for the reader to play within. This structure also allows Koch himself the space to explore a multiplicity of narrative and autobiographical possibilities without his writing solidifying into any single stable form.

Koch achieves this balance by playing cohesion and dispersal off against one another, subverting the stability of his writing even as he develops its internal structures. After his apparently autobiographical opening piece, Koch disrupts the flow of the sequence by branching out into a diversity of topics and styles. As in early works like Sun Out or The Red Robins, it is possible to trace thematic connections between these component texts. None of these connections are, however, capable of unifying the entire
book: the best they can do is trace minor patterns across its textual surface. Even these patterns are disrupted by Koch’s formal manipulation. Styles clash: the personal essay tone of “Luxor”—“My woman friend and I had been quarrelling; throughout this brief but difficult trip we had a very hard time” (312)—leads into the phantasmagoria of “Dead,” in which visions of Egyptian funerary gods mix with the bustle of tour boats upon the Nile:

He dreamed he was walking along a dusty white road with a bird-headed individual. He dreamed of being ferried across a river on a boat as he lay flat on his back and wrapped up in cloth. He dreamed of being welcomed by animal-headed people, being gestured to, being handed an ivory staff. (313)

Koch treats this theme of death and mortality, which connects these two texts with “Negative Blood,” in such different ways that comparing the texts serves more to push them apart than to pull them together. In “Luxor,” death is merely a backdrop to a postcard; in “Dead,” it is an alternative realm of existence; in “Negative Blood,” it evokes a recollection of deep personal pain. Further references to (presumably) Koch’s travels in Europe, Asia, and China give way to curiously detached anecdotes from the Second World War—“Every day, near lunchtime, the small planes flew over and dropped explosives” (“Over” 319)—and historical scenes—“Ronsard and his friend and fellow poet Valdeluzes were walking in the valley of the Var... Cassandre Salviati is there, in her grey-white silks” (“Peter and Cassandra” 350). A sequence of several stories (“The Drummer: A Oaxaca Legend,” 337; “A Miracle of Saint Brasos,” 340; and “A Man of the Cloth,” 344)—disrupt the cohesion of the work even further by turning the theme of death into a comedic trope. These stories narrate the adventures of inexplicably reanimated corpses who mingle causally with the living:

“It’s odd to be dead and making cars.”

“It’s kind of a confusion!”
“Explain it to me.”

Mrs. Wallabee is standing talking to the Corpses working in the used-car yard.

“Why don’t you people just enjoy your life, er, uh, death?” she stumblingly said.

“We like to make a contribution,” an old Corpse said.

“It’s a job,” said a younger one. (”A Man of the Cloth” 344)

There is no way this scene could be mistaken for any form of autobiography. The comic understatement of the opening line—“It’s odd to be dead and making cars”—launches the text into a realm of pure fantasy that has no connection with the narratives of “Antonellos” or “Negative Blood.” This fantasy works, in fact, to destabilise the already ambiguous mimetic nature of such texts. The fact that some of the individual rooms that make up Hotel Lambosa contain outright fiction raises the possibility that all of them might contain similarly fictional material.

Koch complicates this referential indeterminacy further by reworking material from Hotel Lambosa in other contexts. In one apparently autobiographical piece, “Steps,” he writes:

The baby was walking up and down the steps in Herakleion . . . The palace was dedicated to the Cretan version of the Olympian gods—Apollo in the guise of Helios was a prominent one . . . The baby walks crazily, she is like King Minos. She does what she does to make sure she can do what she is doing. She, though, does no one any harm. Still, if she had the power . . . A hot breeze slapped him, the dust in his face. From a stair his daughter fell and she was screaming. Rapidly he turned around to get her, and then he was like a god. (235)

Within Hotel Lambosa, this is clearly a relatively generically stable text. It shares the sense of personal memoir or essay characteristic of “Antonellos” or “Luxor.” The protagonists of “Steps,” united together in their family unit, take on the roles of tourists in Mediterranean
settings. Yet in “Edward and Christine,” a stage play written in the early 1990s and published in the collection *The Gold Standard*, this material is transformed through its positioning in a new context. The scene upon the steps is performed as follows:

EDWARD: Our baby is walking up the stairs.

CHRISTINE: She’s not quite a baby any more. Sixteen months!

..............

EDWARD: Watch
Out! Molly is falling!

(EDWARD rushes over and catches the BABY before she hits the ground from the top step where she was)

EDWARD: Ah! Safe! Molly!

HELIOS: Curses, I'm defeated—
I, the fierce monarch of the sun!
(He again becomes one with the fallen statue)

EDWARD: I caught her!

CHRISTINE: Oh, now you are like a god! (237)

In *Hotel Lambosa*, the players in this event are unnamed; because of this, they could easily be identified as Koch and his wife. Yet in “Edward and Christine,” Kochforegrounds their fictionality by labelling them with other names and inserting the mythological figure of
Helios, “fierce monarch of the sun” into the narrative. The discrete space created in “Steps” opens up into another, broader network of interrelationships. The reader is confronted with the question of whether these events—the falling of the infant, her rescue by her father—take place within the realist framework of the earlier textual depiction, or upon the stage of the latter more fantastic iteration. The answer to this question is, of course, that neither version takes precedence. The network of connectivity that unites the many rooms of Hotel Lambosa expands to become part of a broader process of invention and reinvention: an open-ended structure that has no fixed centre and no defined limit, that can be expanded into a multiplicity of potential forms and media.

4. The Art of the Possible as Decentred Ludic Structure

Koch takes this idea of centreless structural connectivity to its extreme in a work that occupied the last decades of his life: The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly without Pictures. This book, edited by Koch’s friend and ex-student Jordan Davis and published posthumously in 2004, is composed of a selection of Koch’s hand-written and/or drawn texts. The pieces included represent only a fraction of Koch’s graphic output: boxes of similar unpublished material remain in the archives of the New York Public Library. Indeed, the project arose out of Koch’s life-long interest in cartoons and comic strips—his library included anthologies of Mad magazine as well as books of poetry and critical studies. Lehman has also mentioned an aborted collaboration attempt between Koch and Marvel comic book writer and publisher Stan Lee on a 1960s anti-war comic. This “peace comic,” to be scripted by Koch and illustrated by a professional comic artist, was eventually scrapped after “someone on Stan Lee’s end found Kenneth’s ideas or first draft to be too ‘far out’ ” (Art of the Possible 8).

Each page in The Art of the Possible constitutes a single graphic work. Like the individual texts in Hotel Lambosa, some of these pages are linked thematically. Also like
Hotel Lambosa, however, these connections are complicated by the diverse approaches the book takes to its subject matter. No narrative or theme dominates The Art of the Possible: it is its primary mode of representation, its “comics without pictures,” that gives the collection its fullest sense of cohesion. Under Koch’s pen, these hybrid pieces open up the flat surface of the page into a multi-dimensional complexity that makes explicit the textual connectivity and the formal and thematic subversions implicit in Koch’s earlier work.

Each page has its own distinct title, frequently declaiming its status as a comic: for example, “Masked Hand Comics” (40) or “Appliqué Comics” (55). The pieces themselves fall into two broad categories. In the first category, the page is treated like a kind of open space—a blank surface upon which simplistic pictorial elements (usually consisting of little more than lines or outlines) are arranged. These pieces invite comparison with the collage-poems of Dadaists such as Tristan Tzara or Raoul Hausmann—works constructed from texts and images clipped from newspapers and arranged together on a flat surface—as well as with Guillaume Apollinaire’s Calligrammes in which the poet’s words form the shapes of their subjects—horses, the Eiffel Tower, the sun and so on. In the second category, Koch divides the page up into grids that give a strong visual impression of what Thierry Groensteen, writing of graphic novels, describes as “the strip” or “the horizontal band” that is fundamental to graphic literature, constituting “the first level of arrangement for the panels” in which pictorial elements are contained (21).

In The Art of the Possible Koch’s juxtaposition of these two types of graphic literature creates an immediate sense of generic instability. These pages can be read as concrete poetry, cartoons, or comic strips. Johanna Drucker has claimed that the term concrete poetry, “in its most generic application . . . is used to designate all manner of shaped, typographically complex, visually self-conscious poetic works” (39). In The Art of the Possible, however, the way Koch combines pseudo-comic book elements with
playfully avant-garde tropes complicates such definitions. The generic/formal identity of the book is kept in suspension: it is not poetry, or concrete poetry, or comic book, but a space in which multiplicities of formal and generic elements orbit around and enrich one another.

Several of the central principles of concrete poetry, as described by Siegfried J. Schmidt, fit *The Art of the Possible*. There is extensive “experimentation with materials, techniques, forms of textual arrangement and themes,” as well as an attempt to expand upon or “transcend,” as Schmidt puts it, “all traditional forms of poetry and poetry presentation” (101–2). Most significantly, Schmidt claims that readerly play is fundamental to the poetics of concrete poetry. The reader or “receiver” becomes an “active co-author who engages in visual play and intellectual games” with the concrete poem (102). *The Art of the Possible* can thus be seen as a product of Koch’s tendency, evidenced in texts such as *When the Sun Tries to Go On* and *The Red Robins*, to create open-ended texts that necessitate readerly engagement.

Other essential elements of concrete poetry, however, are at odds with Koch’s work here. Schmidt sees concrete poetry as fundamentally anti-narrative and anti-genre, stating that “the receiver must learn to see and read precisely what is there—not, as is common in literary communications, to interpret, that is, to pretend that it is something else” (106; italics in original). Koch’s comics-without-pictures, however, cannot be thought of in this kind of essentialist sense. Many of his pieces make extensive references to the conventions of popular comic strips, not only making use of comic book-style grid formats but also referencing the paratextual elements that conventionally frame the genre.

As I mentioned previously, many of the pages that make up *The Art of the Possible* are labelled as comics in their titles, a common practice in early comic publishing. In one case, Koch even appears to reference a specific comic book. While the title of “Stopping
Off for Death in Life Comics,” (see fig. 1 page 127) brings to mind Emily Dickinson’s poem “Because I could not stop for Death” (200), Koch’s narrative also closely resembles a story told in the 1951 Tales of the Crypt horror comic “Reflection of Death” (see fig. 2 page 128), in which a zombie protagonist wanders the night unaware of his own demise in a car crash.

These references to both literary history and popular comics are unsurprising. Just as Koch referenced popular prose fiction in The Red Robins and pulp tropes in “Fresh Air,” here he connects his work with an even more derided art form in a calculated subversion of the refined aesthetics of high modernism and the New Critics. Koch was not alone in such positioning: other members of the New York School made similar aesthetic statements. O’Hara, for example, commented in a letter to fellow writer Lawrence Osgood that Plato’s Dialogues “are the best thing since Mutt and Jeff” (quoted in Silverberg 135), a humorous comparison that was meant, as Silverberg points out, not “to devalue Plato but rather to elevate” Bud Fisher’s popular newspaper comic strip—and by extension, comics in general—to the level of sophisticated and iconic texts (135). In making such statements, New York School writers rejected the elitist tendencies of art theorists such as Clement Greenberg, who in his influential 1939 essay “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” attacked low culture, which he saw as having as its only purpose to “serve ‘the masses’ (in the most derogatory sense of the term)” (Silverberg 138). Greenberg presented modernism and the avant-garde as being in polar opposition to the products of popular culture. The New York School poets, by contrast, through “taking pleasure in and elevating just those products that Greenberg and other cultural guardians most despised (ads, pulp fiction, comics, Hollywood movies),” raised “exactly the kind of questions simultaneously articulated by Pop Art” and challenged established aesthetic hierarchies (138).

Silverberg goes on to point out that critics like Greenberg saw popular culture as
motivated “by profit rather than aesthetic motives” and as working along formulaic lines to mass produce commodities for quick consumption and easy disposal (138). David Carrier observes the fact “that comics usually have dates, not titles, is a reminder that they are consumed, then discarded” (63). While referring to newspaper strips more than comic books, Carrier’s observation indicates how comics can be thought of as the epitome of such disposable popular culture. In The Art of the Possible, Koch delights in mimicking the cheap and commercial aspects of the form. Eight pages in the book are occupied by a sequence dealing with an imaginary publication: the “Kenya Comics” sequence. Each page involves a simple visual pun. Koch’s primitive drawing of an elephant with its trunk upraised—sans ears, face or limbs—is given a heightened level of absurdity by the conceit that the elephant is in fact swearing “to tell the truth,” like a human with his or her hand upraised. The first of the “Kenya Comics” pages (titled, like the subsequent four pages, simply “Kenya Comics”) frames its text within this pachydermal silhouette, beginning “The ELEPHANT / swears / that he is true,” and ending, in extra large type, with the injunction to “READ KENYA COMICS.” The next page continues this theme (see fig. 3 page 129), taking on the appearance of a testimonial-style advertisement for a line of comic books. Indeed, the elephant silhouette, with its simplistic, pared-down lines, begins to itself resemble a comic book logo, an emblem designed to stand out on the store racks for the eyes of the browsing consumer. By paying homage in this way to the idiosyncrasies of the genre, Koch directly challenges the high-art position of a critic like Greenberg, transforming what would be to Greenberg a symptom of corruption into a part of his own textual repertoire.

Other pages make similar references to the paratextual paraphernalia of the comic book genre. “Puzzle Page” (51) is made up of a large, loosely drawn spiral with the words

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5 Diagonal slashes here indicate panel divisions, not line breaks.
“FIND THE MOOSE” inscribed beneath it. The page does not resemble a conventional comic book page—there is no grid, no panels. Instead, the page seems to resemble a minor piece that might be inserted into a popular comic book as a space filler. An identically titled page later in the book (see fig. 4 page 130), expands upon this form by presenting no less than twelve individual puzzles, seven of them incorporating spiral patterns, the remaining five being made up of zig-zags, squares, dots, and dashes. Each of these simple designs is accompanied by an apparently nonsensical instruction. The top three designs, like the “find the moose” page, initially discourage the reader from taking them seriously as a puzzle. How is one supposed to go about finding “Trotsky,” “René Char,” or “the Irishman” (whoever he may be) in simple, hastily drawn spirals? This instruction seems more of a joke than a genuine puzzle, a reference to the histories of Trotsky and René Char—the former famously exiled from the Soviet Union and pursued to Mexico, the latter hunted by the Nazis as a Resistance fighter in occupied France. In some cases connections can be imagined between the drawing and the thing it supposedly hides. The jagged angles of the lines in which the reader is instructed to “find energy,” for example, suggest the lines of a lightning bolt, while the two pointillist drawings accompanied by instructions to “find Arcturus” and “find New York City” can easily be interpreted as the sparks and specks of light that make up constellations and nocturnal cityscapes respectively. Similarly, the short spoke-like lines that punctuate the “find Agamemnon’s tomb” spiral hint at the visual appearance of brickwork or stone slabs. Finding any traces of “the color green” in an angular spiral or “a wife” in a roughly drawn zig-zag pattern, is, however, significantly more difficult. While it soon becomes clear that no straightforward answer exists to these puzzles—that, unlike a conventional comic book puzzle, there is no list of answers printed upside down on a subsequent page—the simplicity of the graphics and the occasional connections between word and image encourage the reader to play with possibilities. The
concrete (or as he put it, “constructivist”) poet Pierre Garnier has described how placing words in proximity to images works to point “the spectator’s mind to the relationships it can realize” (303). The word WIND written beneath a square, for example, can cause the reader to see “the origin of the wind in the square”; lengthening the square into a rectangle creates a different kind of illusion, giving the impression of “the wind blowing” (303). In just this way, the reader of Koch’s “Puzzle Page” is primed by the juxtaposition of text and image to seek out connections and extrapolations that far transcend the simple visual elements on the page.

“Comics Mystery Game” (see fig. 5 page 131) utilises the puzzle format in a different way. Like the “Puzzle Page” described above, “Comics Mystery Game” is composed of twelve individual frames. In this case, however, these parts are not spirals or other abstract shapes, but panels arranged horizontally in four separate rows. Each panel contains a word or brief phrase. Each of the three horizontal sections can be seen to resemble a section from a comic strip. This visual element, combined with the title’s declaration that the page constitutes a “comic,” invites the reader to view the rows as components of what Will Eisner termed “sequential art” and Scott McCloud defines as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence” (5, 9).

Yet just how the reader is supposed to link these panels together sequentially is unclear. McCloud, in his analysis of the mechanics of graphic literature, has described three basic ways in which individual panels can be linked together. What he terms “action to action progressions” (70), sequences depicting the actions of a single subject, are relatively easy for a reader to link up into a narrative, as are “scene to scene transitions” (71), where significant shifts across time and/or space are implied between individual panels. More demanding on the reader’s creativity, however, are what McCloud terms “subject to subject” sequences, in which there is little obvious connectivity between panels
(71). This kind of sequence demands, as he puts it, a significant degree of “reader involvement” in order to be rendered meaningful (71). It is this kind of task that the readers of “Comics Mystery Game” find themselves engaged in as they scan its twelve panels. Despite the panels being arranged into comic book-style rows, there is no obvious left-to-right narrative flow. Instead, the reader is confronted with an arrangement of apparently discrete units. The page comes, however, with its own directions for play: the title, “Comics Mystery Game,” provides enough information for the reader to begin to grapple with its enigmatic content. The word “game” in itself primes the reader to think that some form of active engagement is required. The word “mystery,” for its part, provides a kind of thematic schemata upon which the content of the panel can be arranged. Words and phrases like “tomb” or “secret woman,” brought together under the rubric of the “Mystery Game” title, infect the other, more prosaic texts—“hockey player,” “village green” and so on—with an ominous atmosphere. At the same time, the grid of panels suggests a rudimentary board game, each panel constituting a place upon which a counter could rest. The overall impression created is of a game-like mystery in which the basic elements have been provided, but which have been left to the reader to assemble into some kind of coherent form.

“Omar Bongo Comics” (see fig. 6 page 132) shifts the emphasis from the paraphernalia of comic books to comic book style narrative itself. “Omar Bongo Comics” conforms to the conventional grid form of the comic book page and so resembles a page of comic book narrative far more than the “Kenya Comics” pages. The illustrative elements associated with comics are, however, noticeably lacking. The story of Omar Bongo, late president of Gabon, is told purely through text. Scenes and actions that would usually be depicted visually in a comic are instead described verbally. The only visual reference to graphic literature—other than the grid structure—is the use of speech balloons instead of
conventional quotation marks. This lack of illustration renders the narrative’s status as a comic problematic.

The next page after “Omar Bongo Comics,” “Omar Bongo Free-Style Relax Comics” (see fig. 7 page 133) heightens this generic instability by maintaining certain comic book tropes while subverting others, resulting in an especially confusing text. “Omar Bongo Free-Style Relax Comics” uses the same grid pattern as “Omar Bongo Comics,” but complicates the straightforwardly linear connections between panels. The first two lines have little syntactical coherence. Whereas the one phrase-per-panel ratio of “Omar Bongo Comics” eases transitions between panels (the panel borders function as a form of punctuation or line break), restricting each panel to a single word has the opposite effect. Like the words and phrases in “Comics Mystery Game,” each word comes across as isolated from those around it, alone in its individual panel. In the third row, however, this disjunction slips into a kind of coherence, and what previously seemed to be rows of unconnected panels become sentences. The presentation of these words in a grid format is essential to the impact of this shift. If the text is transcribed, line breaks being inserted where each row comes to an end, the result, while highly poem-like, is quite different:

Brief sweet leaf light break top
Energy sanity equity irony funeral truck
You based it on another story then I ducked
For entry for seminary for ideal stuff
But leaves come back as malaria
Does the engineer’s cousin comes back
As a postage stamp does on a letter when it is not enough!

Here, where the natural unit into which the text can be broken up is the line, even the first two lines hang together with a certain unity. Because of this, the shift in the third line to
conventional coherence is less striking; such coherence seems the text’s natural mode. On
the original page, however, the grid pattern, in which each word is framed within its own
discrete panel, heightens the sense of fragmentation to such a degree that the sentences that
emerge from the third line onwards still have a highly stilted, disjunctive feel to them.

It is interesting in this context to note Koch’s own reflections on the comic book
form, made not in relation to *The Art of the Possible* but to his earlier work *Ko*, itself a text
inspired by such popular forms: “the comics format suggested new ways of talking about
things and dividing them up . . . in a comic strip you can emphasize any detail or moment
of the story—the pattern of the hero’s necktie, a bus passing outside the window, a grin, a
tear drop” (*Art of Poetry* 195). At first, Koch’s avoidance of illustration in *The Art of the
Possible* appears to cancel out the potential for this kind of emphasis. “Omar Bongo Free-
Style Relax Comics,” however, emphasises a different kind of detail. Rather than focusing
on specific pictorial detail, Koch’s use of the comic book grid here enables him to draw
attention to the individual word, emphasising its discrete nature even while the reader
works to form it into patterns and clauses. The horizontal linearity of the poetic line is
disrupted: the text becomes something that can flow across the page in a multitude of
potential ways. The surface of the page becomes the concrete manifestation of those open
spaces so vital, thematically, to texts like *Ko, The Red Robins*, or “Fresh Air.” Meaning is
kept aloft, suspended between the page’s visual, comic-like elements and its textual
aspects.

“Paul Klee Comics” (see fig. 8 page 134), takes this disruption of textuality to an
extreme through its relative lack of text. All that Koch presents beneath the title is a dense
square space of cross-hatching. At first glance, the juxtaposition of the name “Paul Klee”
with “Comics” seems straightforward, especially in comparison to the “Rennaissance
Comics” [sic] page which proceeds it with references to Michelangelo (104): Klee’s
playful and minimalistic figures are, unlike the work of Michelangelo, frequently cartoon-like in form. A slightly more subtle homage to Klee’s distinctive emphasis on line can be seen in the close cross-hatching that makes up the bulk of Koch’s page. But the implications of the piece do not end there. If viewed alongside pages like “Omar Bongo Comics,” the cross-hatching comes to resemble the comic book style grids within which those more text-heavy pieces are presented. The interstices of the lines become empty panels, spaces devoid of text yet open to the possibility of interpretation. As Carrier has pointed out, frequently the only thing that distinguishes a panel from a comic strip from a work of art is presentation: place the former in a frame upon a gallery wall, and it becomes the latter (65). Placed upon the space of the page, the words “Paul Klee Comics” and their accompanying graphic enter a more complex kind of relationship with the viewer. The piece can be interpreted as a mimicry of high art, or as a transformation of high art into low—or it can be viewed as something entirely different, an arrangement of visual and textual elements that remain open to readerly interpretation.

This structured openness can be considered the end point of the process Koch began in the doubled games of poems like “Fresh Air.” Just as that poem navigated socio-political and aesthetic binaries, subverting the stability of both quietism and oppositional rhetoric even as it perpetuated both these kinds of rhetoric, so *The Art of the Possible* opens up a space in which a multitude of contradictory forms, genres, and aesthetic systems co-exist. The solidity of the page itself is broken: the centreless network that a work like *Hotel Lambosa* creates on a textual level expands outwards to encompass other forms and media. In order to continue to track this expansion, in my next chapter I move beyond the boundaries of Koch’s own texts and examine how he broadened the scope of these networks still further into the spaces of interpersonal interaction and collaboration.
Fig. 1. “Stopping Off for Death in Life Comics.” The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures 63.
Fig. 2. Frame from “Reflection of Death,” Tales from the Crypt #23. April 1951: 1.
Fig. 4. “Puzzle Page.” The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures 102.
Fig. 5. “Comics Mystery Game.” *The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures*
Fig. 6. “Omar Bongo Comics.” The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures
Fig. 7. “Omar Bongo Free-Style Relax Comics.” *The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures* 33.
Fig. 8. “Paul Klee Comics.” *The Art of the Possible: Comics Mainly Without Pictures* 105.
Fig. 9 “Storm Window.” Berg Collection, New York Public Library. By permission of Karen Koch. Any further copying or republication of this image is not permitted.
Fig. 10. “Cincinnati.” Berg Collection, New York Public Library. By permission of Karen Koch. Any further copying or republication of this image is not permitted.
Fig. 11. Sketch of *The End of the Evening* board game. Berg Collection, New York Public Library. By permission of Karen Koch. Any further copying or republication of this image is not permitted.
Fig. 12. Cover of *Collaboration*, Kenneth Koch and Larry Rivers (New York: Tibor de Nagy, 1994).
Fig. 14. Untitled. Jim Dine and Kenneth Koch. Print
Fig. 15. Kenneth Koch and Larry Rivers with *New York, New York, 1950–1960*.
Part Two:

Texts in Play
Chapter Three

Games of Sociality: Collaborative and Competitive Play

The Art of the Possible is Koch’s most overtly playful text. Every element in its composition is open to manipulation. In that work, textuality is wrenched away from the linearity of print, and the two-dimensional page is opened up into a space of possibility. Yet Koch engages in even more expansive and complex modes of play on another level: that of collaboration. His many creative interactions with writers and artists are the logical next step in his playful approach to poetic creation. The centrifugal forces of play gravitate towards group engagement. Play is revitalised as additional players—each bringing their own unpredictable individuality—are incorporated into the ludic system. It is unsurprising then that, as Huizinga has pointed out, “poetry as a social game of little or no aesthetic purport is to be found everywhere and in the greatest variety of forms” (124). This is as significant a feature of avant-garde play as it is of playground rhymes or riddles. For example, the Oulipo has been marked since its inception by a characteristically formalised commitment to social interaction. Roubaud describes how the group “is bound by rule to meet once a month,” following a “strict and immutable agenda” including “the item ‘Creation,’ that is, the presentation and discussion of new constraints” (39). Koch’s sociality is, however, far less regimented than that of the Oulipo (writing in 2006, Poucel somewhat proudly points out that the Oulipo has “held 550 uninterrupted monthly meetings” since 1960; no such records remain of New York School gatherings).

In this chapter I turn my attention away from Koch’s individually created texts to consider how his distinctive approaches to play—his manipulation of freeplay and constraint, his self-subversion, and the doubled modes of play that allow him to simultaneously engage and disengage with a range of concepts, styles, and forms—shape his collaborative work. Shaw has pointed out that coterie-oriented poetries are never a “pure textual phenomenon”: they inevitably involve “both a mode of address and an actual context for that address.” The act of creation constitutes what Shaw terms “the seam between the textual and the empirical” (4). Through studying Koch’s involvement in
collaboration, I am thus able to cast light on the interpersonal dynamics that operate on more submerged or metaphorical levels elsewhere in his work.

I begin by examining *The End of the Evening*, an unpublished poetry-oriented board game designed by Koch, to demonstrate how he uses the cooperative dynamics of group play to provoke creative engagement between individual players. I then consider how such interpersonal engagement functions in Koch’s own collaborative projects with other writers and artists, as well as in the collaborations of his fellow New York School poets. For this purpose I read Ashbery and O’Hara’s collaborative novel *A Nest of Ninnies* alongside Koch’s own collaborations with visual artists Larry Rivers, Red Grooms, and Jim Dine. These examples demonstrate how Koch’s style of collaboration allows him to bring his own poetic voice into dialogue with a collective model of identity. Individuality is not subsumed into the collaborative process, but rather recontextualised into an open network of playful interaction.

I go on to demonstrate how the performative aspects of these collaborations heighten their open-ended nature. The reader is not excluded from such play—they can still engage in interpretive interaction with the finished text or artwork—but authorial play takes place not just on the page but in the moment of interaction between individual collaborators. I use Koch’s 1979 improvised performance with Allen Ginsberg—published under the title *Making It Up* (1996)—and several of Koch’s experimental play scripts as examples of the open ended and context-dependent nature of the collaborative process.

In examining these different collaborative projects, I demonstrate how they feed into broader networks of exchange and inspiration. Salen and Zimmerman, borrowing Bernard DeKoven’s term “play community” to describe how individual players bond together through their mutual engagement in games, describe how such interaction unfolds “like a conversation, in which the improvisational act of communication itself creates the conversational context” (471). The networks of collaboration in which Koch was involved exemplify what Salen and Zimmerman term “transformative social play”: games in which players “extend, transform, and manipulate existing social relationships through play itself” (489). In this way Koch both perpetuates his poetry and opens it up to the
transformations that other individuals bring.

1. The End of the Evening as Guided Play

In his editorial to issue 4 of the literary journal *Locus Solus*, an issue dedicated to the theme of literary collaboration, Koch writes:

The act of collaborating on a literary work is inspiring, I think, because it gives objective form to a usually concealed subjective phenomenon and therefore it jars the mind into strange new positions. It is this newness which has most interested poets who have written together in the 20th Century. The strangeness of the collaborating situation, many have felt, might lead them to the unknown, or at the least to some dazzling insights at which they could never have arrived consciously or alone. (193) Koch’s words, along with his decision to edit an issue on collaboration, give an indication of the high value he places on the collaborative act. Subsequent critics, including David Lehman (1998), David Herd (2000), Daniel Kane (2004), and Mark Silverberg (2010), have also recognised the central role collaboration plays in the social dynamics and construction of group identity in the New York School in general. Koch himself, gregarious and “eager,” as David Lehman recounts, “to collaborate on poems with whoever might be willing” (74), described how for his contemporaries “collaborating was like making a game out of social life” (quoted in Lehman, *Last Avant-Garde* 79). Collaboration was a way of extending personal relationships into a sphere of spontaneous and exhilarating creative activity.

Cynthia Jaffee McCabe identifies this valorisation of collaboration as a characteristic of avant-garde movements in general: as she puts it, “camaraderie, friendship, mutual interests and ambition, the dynamism of nascent art movements, and proximity amid wartime or other disruptive conditions are all incentives toward the creation of collaborative works of art” (15). Kane, in his study of the so-called second generation New York School, has described how this group was committed to “collaboratively produced poems” as well as “the collaborative book (which threatens privileged authorship and the fetishization of the book as organically connected to a single person in favor of a more
collective vision)” and “the intersocial text (poems drenched with the proper names of those writers in the ‘scene’ and/or serving as initiative rites welcoming new poets into the community)” (“Angel Hair Magazine” 333–34). This description fits the first-generation New York School equally well.

New York in the 1950s was a focal point for avant-garde writers and artists. The bars, clubs, and private homes of the city formed a setting in which poets and artists interacted socially on a daily basis. The particularly social nature of the New York School within this context has been well documented in Lehman’s history of the group (Last Avant-Garde). Koch and his fellow poets congregated in places such as the San Remo bar, a gathering point for Beat writers Allen Ginsberg and Jack Kerouac, or at the nearby Cedars Tavern, where New York School painters including Willem de Kooning, Elaine de Kooning, and Jackson Pollock regularly drank. Informal poetry readings were held, often in conjunction with live jazz music, at clubs like the Five Spot Café in the Bowery, itself a popular meeting spot for New York City musicians, artists, and writers. During such events, the boundaries between artistic disciplines were frequently broken down. On some occasions Koch would read out his poetry to the accompaniment of jazz pianist Matt Waldron; on others, painter Larry Rivers would accompany him on saxophone. These spontaneous interactions led to more focused collaborative projects. Koch, Ashbery, O’Hara, and Schuyler all collaborated with New York abstract impressionist and pop painters. Both Koch and O’Hara also worked with artists, musicians, and actors to stage productions of their own plays, as well as with film makers and musicians on both original works and on adaptations of poetry into cinematic and musical forms. Jochen Schulte-Sasse, summarising Peter Bürger, has described how avant-garde artists “reintegrate art into social praxis” through the creation of “unclosed, individual segments of art that open themselves to supplementary responses” (xxix). These fragments function “very differently than the organic whole of the romantic artwork,” for they demand that the reader or audience “make [them] an integrated part of his or her reality” (xxix). In the context of the intense sociality that surrounded the New York School, these fragmentary moments of creativity became components in open-ended and centreless networks of collaboration.
Yet despite critical recognition of the importance of collaboration to the School, collaborative texts and artworks continue to be treated as marginal in the oeuvre of individual authors. The construction of an oeuvre typically involves the culling of works that do not fit easily into a writer’s textual identity and that are therefore deemed minor or idiosyncratic. While a poet’s own decisions can play a part in this process of selection, this culling is done primarily by the editors of anthologies and compilations. These critical interventions have lasting significance for how both the poet and their work are conceptualised. Kane has pointed out that the editors of academic journals and presses “generally tend to promote (and in a sense to create) individual achievement by rewarding it with critical and editorial attention” (“Angel Hair Magazine” 96; italics in original). The textual products of collective authorship are, therefore, “marginalized as secondary to [those of] the privileged single author” (96). This focus on individual achievement feeds into the idea of the finished poem as a unified whole: just as the writer is removed from his or her context to stand in isolation, her or his work is viewed in terms of its own aesthetic self-sufficiency. This value system, perpetuated by critics such as Harold Bloom, Helen Vendler, and Charles Altieri, continues to dominate significant strands of literary discourse, within which the perceived aesthetic value of the finished poem causes issues of procedural or social context to be viewed as secondary in importance to the text itself (Beach 11).

For Kane this valorisation of individual authorship is especially noticeable in the critical treatment of second-generation New York School poets (“Angel Hair Magazine” 338). This group includes Anne Waldman, Bernadette Meyer, Ted Berrigan, and Padgett, all poets influenced to a significant degree by the work of Koch and his peers. These poets, Kane argues, have received less academic attention than their forebears because their work “tended to foreground process and collaboration within the context of a decentralised community” (338). For Kane, this foregrounding demonstrates “more clearly than previous groupings had done that the place of the solitary and muse-inspired author could productively give way to a poetics of sociability” and collective authorship (96). While it may be true that these later poets have received less attention than Ashbery or O’Hara,
Kane’s analysis of critical neglect is also applicable to the way in which the products of New York School collaborations have tended to be marginalised in favour of works grounded in a single authorial identity—texts where, as Roland Barthes puts it, “book and author stand automatically on a single line divided into a before and an after” (145; italics in original). Collaborative texts remain uncollected outside of the few anthologies dedicated to collaboration: Koch’s many collaborations with Ashbery, O’Hara, and other writers are not included in his Collected Poems, and likewise do not appear in the collections of his collaborative partners. The myth of the author, predicated as it is on the idea of the artist as individual creator, remains persuasive even in areas where the prevalence and significance of collective creativity has been duly acknowledged. Herd, for example, draws a distinction between Ashbery’s early collaborations—through which Herd claims the School established its identity and “held itself together”—and his later work in which his collaborative partner is “no longer a fellow poet but the reader” (Ashbery 67). This distinction renders Ashbery’s collaborations more significant as precursors to his later solo productions than as objects of interest in their own right. Yet, it is precisely in such collaborative enterprises that the most overt manifestations of play are to be found.

Theorists from Huizinga and Caillois onwards have emphasised the importance of interpersonal engagement in play. Some modes of play and some types of game are, of course, solitary pursuits. Caillois describes how a type of play he terms ilynx, the pursuit of disorientation and vertigo, can be achieved solo, by running until breathless or spinning a top (12). Even if one believes that games are “inherently competitive” (Salen and Zimmerman), this competition can involve the blind forces of chance—the fall of cards, for example, in a game of solitaire—instead of a human opponent. Koch’s own authorial play in the composition of texts such as Sun Out, When the Sun Tries to Go On, and Ko bears this out. While such texts do, on one level, constitute a game played out between writer and reader, they are also a form of solo play, in which the author tackles the ludic conventions of their chosen form.

Play does, however, undeniably gain depth and complexity when two or more players are engaged with one another. In such circumstances competition is coupled with—or even
superseded by—an imperative towards cooperation. This cooperation is vital in that engagement in play and games is, as both Caillois and Huizinga stipulate, of necessity a voluntary choice on the part of the player (Caillois 6; Huizinga 7). This rule holds true on the most basic level in that, as Caillois points out, “a game which one would be forced to play would at once cease being play” and instead become “drudgery from which one would strive to be free” (6). Yet, games that involve more than one player require such voluntary cooperation for an additional reason. Unless all players consent to follow the arbitrary rules and aim towards the designated goals of the game they are engaged in, that game cannot be played. Group gameplay and collaborative creativity are thus synonymous. When Koch collaborates with Ashbery, O’Hara, and Rivers, he is quite literally playing a game with them.

Zimmerman claims that the kind of cooperation integral to group play is particularly important in the case of board games. As he puts it, “unlike painting, film, or even a computer game, a board game requires constant and dedicated participation from several players to move the experience forward.” This is due to the fact that, in most cases, the concrete elements that make up such games—boards, tokens, and so on—are simplistic and highly abstract, not in themselves stimulating or immersive. They offer no challenge to physical prowess, no lure of the exhilaration of ilynx to draw the player onwards. In lieu of these challenges and pleasures, the players must work together, accepting and following the set rules of the game to mutually create an experience that transcends the mundane physicality of the game elements. These dynamics of cooperative competition are the same energies that drive Koch’s collaborative interactions with his fellow poets and artists. Collaboration only comes to life through the active participation of individuals who, like the players of a board game, must continually “inhabit the rules, playing them out,” and “iterating the system to its next step” so that the process will not come to a halt (Zimmerman).

Given the collaborative nature of such gameplay it is unsurprising that Koch was highly interested in games—not just the games that go unrecognised as such under the rubric of poetry, but games that are generally thought of as such. He would frequently
invent such games, both for solo use and for the enjoyment of family and friends. In keeping with his lifelong obsession with poetry, these games frequently involve language and word play. Some of the games are relatively simple, involving the imposition of a rule or set of rules on his use of language. His experiments with the sestina form in “Crone Rhapsody” and ottava rima in long poems such as Ko fall into this category, as does his practice, recounted by Karen Koch, of speaking in iambic pentameter (interview with the author). When working with others, he would create more elaborate games designed not only to entertain but also to provoke his companions into creative play. None of these games were produced commercially, and many exist only in the form of diagrams with no explanations appended. “Storm Window” and “Cincinnati” (see fig. 9 page 135 and fig. 10 page 136) are just such games—all that exists of them now are sketches amongst Koch’s unpublished manuscripts. Their resemblance to the hand-drawn pages of The Art of the Possible is striking. As games however, their rules and goals are unknown.

One game does, however, survive in more detail. The End of the Evening, a board game Koch designed for use with his friends, exists in the form of unpublished notes, sketches, and descriptions. In his introduction to it Koch writes:

The END OF THE EVENING is a board game for two or more players. The object of the game is to reach the square marked THE END OF THE EVENING. The first player to do this wins the game.

The necessary equipment for the game consists of the Game Board; Markers: Cards for DREAM, LIFE AFTER DEATH, BEACH, THE UNIVERSITY, POWER, and LITERARY REPUTATION; a number of Blank Cards; two Dice; a Log Book; and Animal Masks. The complete board for The End of the Evening has not survived. Koch’s written description, along with a rough and indistinct sketch of one of the boards (see fig. 11 page 137), provides an idea of its layout.

The game involves a series of boards featuring circular tracks along which the players progress their representative player tokens via dice throws. The movement of these
tokens is representative of an individual’s path through life, beginning from infancy and proceeding through adulthood. The end goal of this life-path is somewhat enigmatic. The game ends when all players have reached the titular “End of the Evening,” a goal located in a space in the centre of the final board.

Lehman has rightly pointed out that it was “competition as much as collaboration that linked” the New York School together so “that they acquired a group identity” (Last Avant-Garde 71–72). It is fitting, then, that The End of the Evening is a competitive game. Lehman cites several examples of how Koch in particular had a tendency to frame interactions with his fellow poets in a competitive light. In a taped 1965 interview between Koch and Ashbery that Lehman describes as “like a prolonged fencing match” (87), Koch at one point comments to Ashbery: “I see that you are obviously going to win this interview” (quoted in Lehman 87). Later, in 1994, when trying to recall a reading with Ashbery at St. Mark’s Church, he would comment: “was it ten years ago? I forgot who won” (quoted in Lehman 87). The transcript of the interview between Koch and Ashbery, published as a chapbook in 1965 and now available online, demonstrates the game-like nature of their interaction:

**KK:** Have you ever been physically attacked because of your art criticism?
**JA:** No, because I always say I like everything.

**KK:** Would you say that is the main function of criticism?
**JA:** If it isn't it should be.

**KK:** How can one talk about what should be the function of something?
**JA:** Our problem seems to be to avoid it.

**KK:** To avoid what?
**JA:** Talking about what you said.

**KK:** Let me go back a little.
**JA:** That's always a mistake.

**KK:** All right, I'll take you at your word. But we were getting on to something interesting—but it went by so quickly.

**JA:** This is true of much great poetry.
Initially, Koch appears to be playing the game straight, attempting to pin Ashbery down in a concrete statement that qualifies his position. Ashbery’s responses are initially more subversively playful as he skilfully deflects each of Koch’s advances through ambiguous or indirect responses. Ashbery is pushing, in this instance, for an open-ended exchange that does not settle on any one subject for more than a moment. Koch pushes back against this outward pressure, attempting to clarify Ashbery’s points rather than expand upon them. The conversation rapidly becomes more about the flow of interaction between the two than about the subject of Ashbery’s art criticism. The dialogue coils back upon itself—“talking about what you said”; “let me go back a little”; “but it went by so quickly”—until a new subject (“great poetry”) emerges out of the flux at Ashbery’s humorous suggestion. Conversation itself becomes a kind of collaborative poetic activity.

It is clear, then, that Koch thought of his relationship with his fellow poets in terms of creative competition. Yet as his interview with Ashbery demonstrates, such competition does not exist separate from the collaborative drive. Competition is in fact closely bound up with cooperation: their combined forces hold players together while simultaneously providing them with the impetus to move play forward.

Koch was clearly conscious of this competitive element to collaboration. In his issue of *Locus Solus* he includes the court verse of mediaeval troubadours and warriors as a form of collaborative poetic combat, a combat in which each performer, even while directing their aggression and one-upmanship at their opponents through verse, creates with them a collaborative work of literature. As Zimmerman puts it, “game conflict is productive conflict,” a conflict that can only take place within the cooperative dynamic of the game. In the case of *The End of the Evening*, however, this competitive drive is complicated by a range of other factors that push the players of the game in different directions.

The paths along which the players move their tokens feature a large number of squares containing text instructions of some kind. Koch divides these instruction squares into two types, “obligatory” and “not obligatory.” Obligatory instructions require the player to physically move their token to another part of the board—similar to the game of *Snakes and Ladders*—or to carry out some other in-game action. Landing on the “Literary
reputation” square, for example, requires the player to compose a poem of as many lines as their last dice roll. Most of the other obligatory instructions require the player to take a card from a pile (as in the “Chance” or “Community Chest” cards of Monopoly) and follow the instructions written upon the card. Koch outlines the different squares and their corresponding card types in his notes:

- DIE (LIFE AFTER DEATH cards)
- SLEEP or NAP (DREAM cards)
- BEACH (BEACH cards)
- POWER (POWER cards)
- UNIVERSITY (UNIVERSITY cards)

The instructions on the non-obligatory squares are not so clear cut. These squares give the following directions:

- EAT
- CRY
- PLAY
- MAKE LOVE
- DEVELOP UNDERSTANDING
- GIVE BIRTH TO A CHILD
- KISS ME
- GO TO SCHOOL
- MAKE A SCULPTURE
- DATE
- ROMANCE

Other squares that might be considered injunctions to behave a certain way but which require no obvious immediate action are:

- MEASLES
- MUMPS
- ADOLESCENT PIMPLES

Salen and Zimmerman have pointed out that games which involve role-play demand that
their players juggle several different identities simultaneously. These identities include
their everyday identity (that of “a person in the real world”), their identity as a “player in
the game space,” and their character identity in the play world created by the game (Game
Design Reader 35). In most conventional games, these identities are kept relatively
distinct. Indeed, a player unable to keep them separate may well cause the game to be
interrupted. This is because the cooperative effort required to keep the game in motion
demands that the artificial nature of the game is recognised on an intuitive level and that
the rules and conventions of social life and the physical universe are not confused with the
rules of the game. The End of the Evening, however, differs from conventional games in
this respect. It exploits the potential for confusion of identities by blurring the line between
the instructions that the player character must carry out and instructions that appear to refer
to the player themselves.

The obligatory instructions are clearly directed at the characters played by the
players: it is the fictional self represented by the token on the board that must go to
university or the beach, or move a set number of spaces forward or backwards. Exactly
whom the non-obligatory instructions are directed at, however, is not so clear. “Eat,”
“Cry,” “Play,” “Kiss me” and “Make a sculpture” can all be interpreted as being directed at
either the player character or the player. Other injunctions—“Develop understanding,”
“Give birth to a child,” and “Go to school”—are directives impractical if not impossible to
carry out on the spot, and so appear to belong more to the fictional world of the game. Yet,
if this is the case, it is still difficult for the players to understand how they are expected to
carry these actions out. There is no provision in the game to simulate a player token giving
birth to a child, for example. Because of this, these instructions do not serve any apparent
function in the overall system of the game.

In a successful game, according to Salen and Zimmerman, “each element in the
system is assigned a meaning” (61), from the throw of a die that determines how far a
player token is moved, to the injunctions that might arise from placing a token on a
specific part of the board, to the rules by which scores are accumulated and tallied.
Understanding the methods by which this kind of meaning is communicated by the
designer of a game to its players is vital to understanding that game’s mechanics. To gain such understanding, Salen and Zimmerman posit that a critic should examine exactly how a game system interacts with the individual player—for example, how the possibility of a potential action is conveyed to a player, or how the results of actions completed are made known to the player (63).

When applied to *The End of the Evening* these kinds of critical questions can, for the most part, be answered in a straightforward way. The means by which a player token advances around the board are straightforward enough and many of Koch’s “obligatory” instructions also provide the player with a clear set of actions and consequences. A player who lands on a “Die” square and is thus obliged to take a “Life after Death” card from the pile might find him or herself shifted to another part of the board (that is, reincarnated) or removed from play altogether. “University” cards also have a clear function, allowing a player to collect points towards degrees in different academic subjects. When a full degree is attained, the player can then effect changes to the game: “with a degree in English he can make up a Card and add it to the DREAM pile; with a Degree in History of Religion he can make up a card and add it to the LIFE AFTER DEATH pile,” and so on. Similarly, players who select the “Power” cards can potentially gain the power to remove elements from the game or even rewrite the game rules.

Where *The End of the Evening* departs most from conventional games is in the amount of superfluous activity its players are caught up in. In conventional game design, as Salen and Zimmerman point out, a game element can be said to fail if the decisions the player makes in relation to it are felt by the player to be “arbitrary” and unconnected to the game’s overall goal (*Rules of Play* 65). If the overall goal of *The End of the Evening* is indeed to reach the titular central location, then many of the elements that make up the game must be said to be failures. Viewed in this way, *The End of the Evening* constitutes an open-ended game system. It is not at all clear how certain actions fit into the overall design, and this allows the player considerable freedom of interpretation. On the micro level, each move a player makes demands a certain kind of response from the player, from shifting the position of their token on the board to taking a card and completing the
instructions given on it. On the macro level of the game as a whole, however, it is not at all obvious how all these injunctions and responses are supposed to come together in the context of the stated goal of the game. A player who draws a certain “Life after Death” card, for example, may be obliged to wear an animal mask for the remainder of the game representing their reincarnation as that animal. As far as attaining the final square is concerned, these masks have no purpose. A player’s willingness to sing an improvised song to a fellow player, as certain cards instruct him or her to do, likewise has no impact on the progress of that player’s token across the board. Similarly, creative skill or talent is not required to play, as the game does not require that a player’s songs, sculptures, or poems be of any set quality.

This open-ended aspect of The End of the Evening signals to its players that reaching “The End of the Evening” is not, despite initial appearances, the primary goal of the game at all. The key to its ludic system lies elsewhere, in the shifting zone of interpersonal interactivity that orbits the hub of the game board. I have already examined, in the context of Koch’s early poems Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On, how Beaujour describes the different ways a poet can play “the game of poetry” (60). The poet can play “according to the current rules,” or leave (or pretend to leave) “the game in disgust,” or—by playing the game of poetry in “reverse”—deliberately subvert the rules of the game (59, 61). Just as Koch playfully subverts the conventions of poetry in those early poems, so in The End of the Evening he breaks the rules of conventional game design. The End of the Evening is a board game that is deliberately designed badly, a ludic system that intersperses meaningful elements with meaninglessness. While still progressing towards the final square, players are instructed or encouraged to write poems, draw pictures, wear masks, revise each other’s work, and interact with one another physically in a variety of ways, the details of which are left to their own interpretation. There are no penalties for failing to take part in the game in such a way, other than the fact that, if a player refuses to participate in a playful manner, the game is reduced to a lifeless sequence of dice-throws. The End of the Evening does not, in fact, depend upon cooperative collaboration so much as it has such collaboration as its goal.
The End of the Evening is ultimately an open-ended system for bringing people together and encouraging them to interact with one another in creative ways. While the completion of the game achieved when one player reaches the final square provides an ostensible focal point for this collaboration, this goal is of secondary value. Of primary value are the many digressions and diversions in which the players participate along the way, playfully interacting with one another as they move within the open spaces of Koch’s loosely defined ludic structure. This is, in fact, the model of interactivity common to all of the New York School collaborations. Open-ended and centreless, these networks of engagement provide a multiplicity of ways for the poet or artist to connect with others. In the next section I will examine just how individual players make—and exist within—such connections.

2. Individual and Collective Voice in New York School Collaboration

Artistic collaboration has often been associated with a weakening of individual voice as individual agency is absorbed into the group identity generated via the collaborative process. Ward connects the desire for such a group identity with what he terms the New York School’s orientation towards escapism. Just as Koch and his fellow poets pursued “dream and escape” in an attempt to transcend what Ward describes as the “thermal lock of the Cold War” (130) they engaged in collaboration in order to exist “for a while outside that singularity which Auden called ‘the cell of himself’” (129). This idea of literary collaboration moving away from the mythologies of individual authorship towards models of communal creativity fits well with theories of avant-garde literature. Perloff has identified just such an orientation in earlier European avant-garde movements, pointing out how, in Marinetti’s 1909 Futurist manifesto: “selfhood is subordinated to the communal ‘we’ (the first word of the manifesto), addressing the ‘you’ of the crowd, the mass audience whom he hopes to move as well as to delight” (Futurist Moment 87). Davidson has also described the so-called San Francisco Renaissance—a poetic movement, preceding and overlapping with the New York School, that centred around figures such as Kenneth Rexroth, Robert Duncan, Jack Spicer, and Robin Blaser—as foregrounding
“primitivist notions of community (the oral tradition, the role of the tribe, the divinity of nature) through which collective activity takes precedence over individual volition” (*San Francisco Renaissance* xi). In this way, these poets attempted to bring about “a new poetics [that] implied not only formal innovation but also discovery of alternative social forms” (xi). Davidson makes a similar claim for the New York School poets: their “spirit of collaboration . . . challenged poets to relinquish some of their authorial control over a text and create a more communal or dialogical art” (*Ghostlier Demarcations* 15).

Collaborative writing and art is often characterised as oriented towards this kind of communal ideal, because it challenges conventional notions of authorial agency through an erasure of individuality. The personal style and idiosyncrasies of the participants in the collaboration are merged into a single unified voice. Vera John-Steiner has termed this kind of collaboration “integrative collaboration,” a process that “transforms both the field and the participants” involved in it (70; italics in original). In integrative collaboration, “partners frequently suspend their differences in style” to create a seamlessly unified text (70). This state seems the instantiation of Barthes’s death of the author, in which “writing is the destruction of every voice, of every point of origin,” a “neutral, composite, oblique space,” and “all identity is lost, starting with the very identity of the body writing” (142). While it is debatable whether such a unification of voices is achievable, it is true that different collaborations approach voice in differing ways. The New York School text that best fits this unified model is Ashbery and Schuyler’s novel *A Nest of Ninnies*. Under closer examination, however, this text reveals a different model of collaboration at play in the New York School: one in which the individual voice is not subsumed into the collective, but rather becomes part of a dynamic system of tension and juxtaposition.

Begun in 1952 and finished seventeen years later in 1969, Ashbery and Schuyler wrote *A Nest of Ninnies* in alternating sentences. Three long excerpts were published in *Locus Solus*, the journal produced by the New York School poets for five issues between 1961 and 1962. Notable for the comic banality of its narrative and characters, the book has been described by Lehman as one in which Ashbery and Schuyler “dissolve their own personalities and merge so entirely into a common style that the book’s author is neither
Ashbery nor Schuyler but a third entity fashioned in the process of collaboration” (Last Avant-Garde 82). Yet, while A Nest of Ninnies exhibits a veneer of textual cohesion, it is still a work in which the play of individual voices is of fundamental importance. 

A Nest of Ninnies is stylistically uniform and lacks any self-referential acknowledgements of its own collaborative origins. The flow of its narrative, however, is built around the subversion of each sentence by the sentence immediately following it, one writer steering the text in a certain direction only to have his partner immediately nudge it off course. At times this subversion sends the narrative off in an unexpected direction. At others it brings the action to a halt, when sentences double back upon themselves to echo or expand upon the previous phrase in comically exhaustive ways. An example of the former can be found early in the text:

“What a lovely painting, Mrs. Kelso,” Fabia said. “Did some member of your family do it?”

“Yes, they did,” Mrs. Kelso said, “and no one so very far away.”

“Could that be the famous haunted castle?” Fabia asked.

“It has certain features of that castle,” Irving said with a blush, “but the basic idea came from my own head.”

“I heard a most interesting broadcast today,” Mrs. Kelso said firmly. Fluffy entered the room carrying a dead mouse.

“Funny, I never noticed that place on the ceiling before,” Irving said.

(Locus Solus 106)

Here, Ashbery and Schuyler keep the subject of the conversation between Fabia, Mrs. Kelso, and Irving from settling on any one subject. The dialogue, while initially seeming to be about a painting, quickly jumps track with Mrs. Kelso’s mention of the “interesting broadcast.” The sentence that follows this is an especially significant example of the type of game the two writers are engaged in. The writer of this line does not respond to the sudden change of subject by attempting to continue in this new direction, but neither does he steer the dialogue back to the original subject of the painting. Instead, he changes direction yet again, introducing a new element to the narrative in the form of the cat.
“Fluffy” and the dead mouse. Not to be outdone, the next writer shifts subject yet again, with Irving’s deadpan comment on the ceiling. The conversation as a whole comes across to the reader as highly unfocused, never settling on one subject for long before veering off on a new tangent.

This is not to say, however, that this exchange of dialogue cannot be read as part of a coherent and linear narrative. The odd dead-ends and shifts of the conversation could be interpreted as representing the clumsy, awkward relationships of the characters involved—characters who can, after all, be presumed to number among the “ninnies” of the book’s title. Mrs. Kelso’s reticence to continue discussing the painting, along with Irving’s embarrassment and his subsequent distracted response to the dead mouse, might be read as the result of social awkwardness. It might also represent tension or secrets buried beneath the surface narrative—the broadcast Mrs. Kelso refers to, for example, might be something Irving wishes to avoid talking about. Yet more fundamentally the conversation between Fabia, Mrs. Kelso and Irving mirrors, on a narrative level, the interaction that is playing out between Ashbery and Schuyler during their composition of the text. *A Nest of Ninnies* is fundamentally a dialogue between these two writers. Each participant takes it in turn to pass on a line of text, seeded with possibilities, to his partner, who then passes it back transformed. The process, like Koch’s 1965 interview with Ashbery, becomes a game of push and pull, in which each player shapes the course of the writing through his cooperatively competitive engagement with the other.

Occasionally these tensions are not explicit in the finished text. In the following paragraph, for example, the plot advances in much the same way as it might under the direction of a single author:

A maid silently entered the room and withdrew to indicate dinner was served. To reach the dining room it was necessary for the guests to file down a long hall past several shut doors. The hall was hung with etchings of various New York skyscrapers under construction. (108)

This example exemplifies a dynamic that does not depend for its effect upon the clash or conflict of their two distinct voices. Ashbery and Schuyler here engage in a game of
deferment, playing at unification even while continually subverting each other’s lines. They prime each sentence with an idea of what should follow. The mention of dinner being served in the first line here suggests a smooth segue into a dinner scene. The next writer follows this suggestion not by veering off on a tangent but by lengthening out the transition, moving the characters not into the dining room but into the hall leading to that room. This hall is itself primed with unnecessary and potentially diverting detail in the form of “several shut doors.” The next writer adds still more detail, refusing to progress the characters onwards towards their waiting dinner, and instead describing the etchings on the corridor wall. If the paragraph involving the painting, the broadcast, the dead mouse, and the ceiling is made up of diversions and changes in direction, this section is in contrast made up of refinements and extensions. Each writer nudges his sentence forward in the same direction, but each does so in such a way that the end point of this momentum is deferred again and again.

Despite being, then, highly textually cohesive, *A Nest of Ninnies* still does not constitute an erasure of individual authorial identity in a communal voice. Instead, it sets individual voices in contrast and, at times, opposition to one another. Illusions of unity are created only so they can be broken down, and surface cohesions are torn so that the underlying dynamic tensions can be revealed. This model of collaboration exemplifies how, if the New York School can be said to possess any kind of group identity, it is one in which the voices of individual poets are paramount. These voices come together in collaborative interactions yet retaining their individuality. It is, in fact, the very individuality of these voices that drives the collaborative process onwards. It is the tension between individual players that gives their textual interactions meaning. They cooperate with one another to maintain their collaborative gameplay even as they work against one another in a diversity of playful ways.

A less explicit example of such a play of voices can be found elsewhere in *Locus Solus*. The very existence of the journal is symptomatic of what Brad Gooch highlights as one of the primary differences between the literary worlds of the 1950s and the 1960s: the “paper river of magazines, broadsides, mimeos, and poetry chapbooks” that flooded the
latter decade (138). As Kane has pointed out—again, in the case of second generation New York School poets—collectively produced journals and magazines were a way of making concrete the networks of relationships initially formed through poetry readings and social contact, a way of “enacting—within the confines of the mimeographed page—the level of sociability inherent in the real world of the poetry community” (*All Poets Welcome* 59).

*Locus Solus* certainly constitutes an example of the strong community bond existing between the poets of the School. The journal was a group project, the majority of its issues edited by Koch, Ashbery, Schulyer, and Mathews. Like any journal edited by a group, *Locus Solus* was in itself a collaborative project. It was also collaborative in the sense that its pages were made up of a multiplicity of voices. All four editors also published their own work in the journal: Koch’s “The Circus” and part of Mathews’s novel *The Conversions* are both featured in the first issue. While editorial collaboration was restricted to the four male members of the school, Barbara Guest’s work also appears in this issue, along with Anne Porter, Fairfield Porter, and two poets connected with the San Francisco poetry scene: Ebbe Borregaard and Robin Blaser. In this way the journal not only consolidated the social cohesion of the New York School core, but extended this sphere to include contemporaneous groups that might otherwise be thought of as distinct entities.

The second issue of *Locus Solus* is especially significant because of the insight it provides into Koch’s own understanding of the nature of collaboration. In his editorial, Koch maps out his understanding of the global history of collaborative poetry. For the poets of “ancient China,” he claims, poetic collaboration was a pastime—it was “not taken very seriously” (194). In Japan it was a form as natural as solo author productions in the Western tradition, while in Renaissance drama, Koch claims, it was simply a means of producing play-scripts faster than a single playwright could manage. Finally, Koch makes the claim that among the romantic poets the goal of collaboration was to achieve a unified voice, a voice that demonstrated how individual poets were speaking, as Koch puts it, out of a “community of feeling” (194).

The accuracy of Koch’s understanding of literary history is not my concern here. What is important is what these lines reveal regarding his own conception of collaboration
and the New York School. In collecting together works by classical Chinese poets, Japanese haiku poets such as Basho and Sensiu, mediaeval troubadours, romantic poets, Surrealist poets, and his friends and contemporaries, Koch constructs a non-linear lineage for his own work—a historical collage, as it were, within which he can implicitly position his own collaborative practice. The way he configures this lineage provides a further insight into his attitude towards the kind of collaborative activity he engaged in on almost a daily basis. As Ward puts it, Koch’s editorial choices demonstrate his belief that “a collaboration can be not only the work of two writers, but the contestation & collaboration of any number of different writings, set in motion but not controlled by a single writer” (127). Koch describes these forms of collaboration in terms of how they engage with existing texts. They engage by “adding to them” (Koch gives the example of John Fletcher’s addition of a second verse to a single verse written by Shakespeare); or by “answering them” (Koch gives the example of Richard Crashaw and Edmund Waller, who wrote verses in response to existing poems written by Abraham Cowley and Sir John Suckling respectively). Texts, Koch goes on, can also be engaged with by “cutting them up and rearranging their words, like Burroughs and Corso”; and by “drawing on them at regular intervals—i.e. using them as if they were other poets in the room” (196–97). In illustration of this last mode of practice, Koch cites pieces by Daniel Krakauer and Ruth Krauss. Krakauer’s single piece consists of a play-script created using the poet’s own words intertwined seamlessly with quotations from Aeschylus, the New York Daily News, and “a Handbook on Birdlife” (132), while Krauss’s two poems constitute a kind of textual collage with lines drawn from newspapers, Shakespeare, and Yuri Gagarin (153–55).

The cover of the catalogue for Koch’s 1994 “Collaborations with Artists” exhibition at the Tibor de Nagy gallery (see fig. 12 page 138) constitutes just this kind of collaborative intertextual collage. Alongside drawings by Rivers of seven artistic and literary figures—Cezanne, O’Hara, Whitman, Poe, Picasso, Matisse, and Dante—Koch has written quotes authored by these same figures. The first four parts are numbered like a deck of cards (ace, two, three, and four) and arranged across the page in a left-to-right fashion. This numbering and the spatial arrangement of the texts and images encourage the
viewer to link the quotes together sequentially. The numerical sequence continues with the fifth and sixth pieces, culminating, at the bottom right hand side of the page, in Dante’s numeral “VII.” If the quotations are read according to this pattern, they can be taken as a complete poem:

All of nature is derived from the cube, the cone, and the sphere
They do have meaning they’re strong as rocks
For every atom belonging to me as good belongs to you
In a kingdom by the sea
The important thing is not to search but to find
A pink brushstroke on a white canvas
Where the straight way is lost

It is important to note, however, that such a reading works against many of the visual elements in the piece. Like the similarly expansive text/graphics that Koch creates in The Art of the Possible, the picture surface here is transformed into a space that disrupts linearity and closure. The quotations are not arranged in anything approaching conventional strophe form. Each phrase functions more like a mini-paragraph written in idiosyncratic script, scattered across the picture surface, and set at odd angles to its companion texts. The numerical sequencing, even while it shapes the text into a pattern, also foregrounds its own arbitrary nature by mimicking the form of playing cards. The first four numbers, sequential yet affiliated to different suits—hearts, spades, and diamonds—give the impression that they have been dealt from a deck at random. This apparently haphazard arrangement brings into question, by association, the sequencing of the quotations and the accompanying images of their authors. It is, of course, possible to attach symbolic meaning to the distribution of the suits. Cezanne’s heart can be read as an emotive reference to his work, Poe’s diamond a reference to his rich prose style, while O’Hara’s and Whitman’s spades—a lower ranking suit—could be a reference to the two poets’ connections with the earthy and the everyday, as well as their marginalised status as homosexuals in mainstream society. These interpretations are, however, by no means definitive. For every interpretive framework that pulls the piece into cohesion, there is
another that pulls it apart.

Budd Hopkins, writing of what he sees as “the collage aesthetic” dominating twentieth century art and literature, defines this aesthetic as being characterised by “the presence of several contradictory systems in a work of art, and the absence of a single controlling system” (6; italics in original). This is the same kind of centreless ludic network that Koch designs in *The End of the Evening*. Just as his board game functions on multiple levels simultaneously in such a way that the game overflows its own boundaries, the cover of *Collaborations* transcends both illustration and artwork. Perloff has also described how “each element in the collage has a dual function: it refers to an external reality even as its compositional thrust is to undercut the very referentially it seems to assert” (*Futurist Moment* 49). While Koch and Rivers’s textual/visual collage does not involve the incorporation of actual pre-existing print or images, their work is given a similar kind of referential complexity through the multiplicity of elements involved and the many different ways in which the text can be put together. Contexts shift and merge: the piece can be seen as grounded in the context of the catalogue for which it serves as a cover, or as an intertextual collage gesturing back to the texts from which its fragments have been appropriated. Alternatively, it can be seen as something more blind and mechanical: a group of objects scattered across the page in a random arrangement.

All of Koch’s collaborations with artists utilise this kind of tension between text and image to some extent. The cover of *Collaborations* is an unusual case in that its texts are appropriated from sources other than Koch himself. Other works, however, generate the same kind of effect using Koch’s own texts. His untitled 1967 rubber-stamp print with Red Grooms (see fig. 13 page 139) or “The Blue Sky is Bread to the Scarf” with Jim Dine (see fig. 14 page 140) are examples, respectively, of collaboration as illustration and collaboration as captioning. In both these works the physical imprint of Koch’s hand is absent from the compositions: the artists incorporate his texts into their own graphic layouts, as opposed to Koch writing his words on the picture plane itself. In the Grooms piece, an existing Koch text is incorporated comic-book style into a pre-existing pictorial scene in a process the Oubapo (an offshoot of the Oulipo devoted to “potential comic
strips”) would term “verbal substitution” (Oulipo Compendium 322). The piece forms part of Stamped Indelibly, a limited edition book of rubber stamp graphics created by fifteen different poets and artists including Allen Ginsberg, Robert Creeley, and Andy Warhol. The Koch/Grooms piece is the only collaborative work included. Each other contributor produced his or her own artwork to go with their own text. Grooms produced the print alone, working with a text provided by Koch from his play The Oxen from the Sea. This text is taken by Grooms and set into a new context of his own devising: a pictorial scene involving a boy in a sailor suit and a dog. Koch’s lines are positioned in speech bubbles extending from the two figures. Shown in this way, the words can be understood as a dialogue—the eyes of the boy and the dog are directed towards each other, and the dog’s line works as a response to the boy’s more extended statement regarding the nature of the sea and tides. Yet, to a reader familiar with the text’s original context in a play, the fact that the graphic elements are supplementary to this text gives the print an aura more of illustration than of cartoon. “The Blue Sky is Bread to the Scarf,” on the other hand, has the opposite genesis. In this 1966 Koch/Dine piece, one of Koch’s signature one-line poems is set above a grid-like pattern. The words function as elements in the overall composition, but they do not so much engage with the pictorial elements as complement them. Koch has recounted how the graphics preceded the text. Dine showed him “an early version of the print” for which he then “made up some words”—a process closer to the captioning of an image than to illustration (Art of Poetry 174).

Both these works depend on the same collaborative game-dynamics that drive The End of the Evening, A Nest of Ninnies, and the Koch/Rivers Collaborations cover. They are, however, truncated examples of the collaborative game form. They are games that consist of a single exchange of move and counter-move. In both cases, the work of one participant is taken and responded to by the other, after which the game ends and the artwork is complete. Other collaborations between Koch and Rivers, however, constitute a more open-ended kind of game, one in which the exchange of moves is much more complex and no elements can be said to be antecedent to any other. Such a work is New York, New York 1950–1960. Rudy Burckhardt’s 1961 photograph of the work in progress
(see fig. 15 page 141) gives an indication of both its layout and the process of its composition. Koch and Rivers stand in the latter’s studio, in front and to the side of the panel.

Most of the picture surface is taken up by Rivers’s images interspersed with words handwritten by Koch. Both graphics and text take a variety of forms: some of Rivers’s pictorial elements are simple, spare sketches, lines enclosing spaces empty of pigmentation. Others are painted, large areas of the panel occupied by blocked-in colour. Abstract lines and scralls exist alongside figurative work. Koch’s texts vary from extended blocks of prose to short, epigrammatic lines. Some sections are difficult to interpret: for example the words “WAH KEE,” written in bold block characters in the upper left corner of the piece. The meaning of these letters is not immediately clear: they suggest a weird phonetic cry more than they do any single word. The meaning of these letters is further complicated by the palimpsest-like appearance of this area. Letters are scrawled over one another, some faint, others heavily inscribed. Between “WAH” and “KEE,” for example, are two faint circles that could each be read as the letter “O,” enabling an alternative reading of the line—“WAHooKEE”—that does little to clarify any interpretations that might be attempted as to the words’ meaning. Rivers has acknowledged that the painting, consisting of his images interspersed with Koch’s handwritten words and phrases, exhibits an initially impenetrable face to the outside viewer, saying that “it was like a colorfully decorated gossip column where the content is so obscure you are forced to look for something else to distract yourself” (quoted in Silverberg 132). For the two collaborators themselves, however, the painting exhibited a very different face: it comprised “chunks of the canvas devoted to mutually experienced parties, neighbourhoods, resorts, houses, studios, people, and restaurants” (quoted in Silverberg 132).

These different pictorial and textual elements work, again, in a collage-like way. Hopkins has identified the same effect in Picasso’s 1911 painting “Still Life with Chair Caning,” one of the first examples of collage in modern art. In this painting Picasso combines a painted Cubist still life with a pasted photograph of cane chairing. As Hopkins
puts it, the juxtaposition of these two representational modes—the mimetic photograph and
the abstracted still life—work together to “appear to do the impossible: to exist flat and
intact on a surface that is seemingly full of holes” (5). The “real” and the “artificial,” he
goes on, are “thus locked into an open-ended equation which contains no fixed term” (5).
The representational is made, through its proximity to the abstract, to seem abstract and
artificial. Simultaneously, the abstract is made to look out of place through its juxtaposition
with illusory photographic depth. Because of this juxtaposition of elements there is no one
interpretive framework within which the viewer can position the work. They must jump
from one framework to another as they navigate, in a similarly disjointed fashion, from
point to point across the flat surface of the painting.

There is one significant difference between such a collage as created by a single
artist and a collaborative work. One of the defining characteristics of the Cubist aesthetics
of which such collage is a part is an emphasis on the deliberate, controlling hand of the
artist, who directs the juxtapositions and disjunctions of the composition as a whole.
Kenneth Rexroth, writing of Cubist poetry, describes it as “the conscious, deliberate
dissociation and recombination of elements into a new artistic entity made self-sufficient
by its rigorous architecture” (253). Yet Koch and Rivers’s creation does not work in this
way. While it would be wrong to mistake the chaotic appearance of New York, New York
1950–1960 for the automatic free association of the Surrealists, it is equally mistaken to
think of it as the result of the kind of considered thought and planning that guides both the
Cubist poet and the Oulipian game player. The difference here lies, again, in the mixture of
paidia and ludus that Rivers and Koch bring to their collaborative interaction as they fill up
the blank surface of the panel.

As can be seen in Burckhardt’s photograph, the lower right hand corner of the
unfinished painting is relatively blank: there is an indication of surface priming, but no
graphics or text of any sort. This might be a stylistic choice done to draw attention to the
materiality of the canvas, just as Picasso’s use of chair caning disrupted the two
dimensional unity of his picture surface. It can also be inferred from this detail that Rivers
and Koch have moved across the surface of the panel together, filling in spaces as they go,
responding to one another’s additions not as part of an organised plan, but as the moment dictates. Davidson has argued that the emphasis in post-Second World War avant-garde poetry lies “not so much in what the poem says as paraphrasable content but in the ways the poem displays its own processes of discovery” (Guys Like Us 29). As he goes on to point out, this orientation towards process has its precedent in the aesthetics of abstract expressionist painting, with its emphasis on the physical activity of painting over the finished product (29). New York, New York 1950–1960 emphasises this physicality, foregrounding not just the activity of the artist but also the interaction that takes place between the collaborators. The blank surface of the panel is not solely a field in which the poet and artist draw together a web of cohesion and meaning. It is also a space that mirrors the physical space—the stage—in which the voices of Koch and Rivers came together to make their collaborative acts. The finished painting—which, ironically enough, is now viewable only to the general public in photographic form—is the trace of this past moment of action, a means by which the energies unleashed between the two individuals are perpetuated into the future.

3. Making It Up and Collaboration as Event

The trace of another such interaction can be found in Making It Up, a transcript published in 1994 of a 1979 improvised performance by Kenneth Koch and Allen Ginsberg. This performance, organised by Koch’s friend and ex-student Padgett, was held at St. Mark’s Church, a hub of New York poetic activity since even before the inception of the St. Mark’s Poetry Project readings in 1966. The Koch/Ginsberg performance had its origins in a moment of highly informal banter between the two poets. While Padgett claims not to remember who initially suggested the event, the genesis apparently came during a taxi ride shared by the three poets, during which, in Padgett’s words, “Allen and Kenneth started joking about and even parodying each other’s work” (Making It Up v). From this interaction came the idea of an evening of collaborative improvisation performed in front of a public audience. This performance was preserved in audio recordings, and the published transcript constitutes an oddly theatrical display of intimacy. The performance,
as Padgett recounts it, was the focus of exceptional interest:

the parish hall was absolutely packed, with around 225 people. For fresh air we had opened the three big windows on the west side of the room, windows that were soon filled with the faces of those who had arrived too late to get inside. Others gathered behind them in the churchyard. (vii)

Koch and Ginsberg play and joke with one another under the gaze of this crowd. Large portions of the transcript are made up of conversations between the two poets, reproduced in the texts of the transcript in italics. Each improvised poem is preceded and punctuated by exchanges between the two poets negotiating just what composition rules they will follow. At several points in the text these italicised sections show how external factors influence the decisions they make. These external factors sometimes even break into the midst of an improvisation and cause a change of direction:

[Noise of whistles outside.]

KK: Whistles outside.
AG: Is it cops? Is it robbers?
KK: Is it a sick frog?
AG: Is it a clownish frog?

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KK: Do you feel, Allen, the haiku is a more natural form for us than blues? It seems to be.
AG: One thought follows another.
KK: What should we do next?
AG: More haikus. I think they’re very interesting. I could go on forever. The ground, the recognition, and the comment.

[Noise of sirens outside.]

AG: Sirens wailing down 11th Street
KK: Ron Padgett sitting

AG: The audience rubbing its chin

KK: Some lights on, some lights off

AG: Sweat on the neck

KK: Passion in the heart (29; italics and square brackets in original)

Despite the efforts of the editor to divide this exchange by means of italics into sections of poetry and non-poetry, the differences between the two modes of speech are by no means clear. One exchange between Koch and Ginsberg even falls into a haiku-like 7/5 syllable pattern: “One thought follows another” / “What should we do next?” It thus becomes difficult for the reader to determine the exact moment when the conversation taking place between Koch and Ginsberg halts and the composition of poetry begins. The cause of this difficulty lies in the fact that both the conversation and the poetry are parts of the same game. All of the factors that surround the two poets and enter into their improvisations and their conversations—the heat of the room, the watching audience, sounds from outside, the history and traditions of poetry itself—become elements in the overall game system as Koch and Ginsberg deliver their alternating lines. Ginsberg segues from relatively abstract thoughts on the nature of haiku and an analysis of their three-part structure to reportage on the sirens outside. This in turn leads to three more lines, Koch-Ginsberg-Koch, of reportage before Ginsberg narrows his focus, suddenly, to a more intimate observation with the line “sweat on the neck.” Koch’s counter-move is to continue the level of intimacy but shift to a more emotively metaphorical level, shifting Ginsberg’s evocation of physicality into the less concrete rhetoric of “passion in the heart.”

While passages such as this demonstrate the to-and-fro rhythm of Koch and Ginsberg’s interaction, even more illuminating is the way the transcript provides detail that would be hidden from public view in the production of a written text. Both the audience present in St. Mark’s and the readers of Making It Up are privy to the larger system of play within which the more formalised games of the evening are situated. Jenny Quilter has discussed the relationship between audience and collaborative text in regard to O’Hara and
Rivers’s collaborative works, observing that “the work contained a particular intimacy, and an associative give-and-take in composition (each responding to the other’s etching) meant that each connection between image and text was often extremely personal” (58). In the case of these etchings, the issue is complicated in that the moment of composition is unavailable to the viewer: there are no recordings of the step-by-step process by which the two individuals created the finished work. Yet even in such circumstances, as Quilter goes on to point out, the audience is not shut out (58). Ultimately, “collaborative art is on a party-line call,” which the audience is able to “listen in” on, filling in the blank areas where required with their own creative interpretation and knowledge of the background context (58). *Making It Up* is unusual in that many of these blank areas—the procedural context in which the collaborative act takes place—are filled in with vivid detail.

Kane has observed how important audience engagement was to the poetry readings of the second generation New York School. Writing of the readings held at St. Mark’s in the 1970s for the anti–Vietnam War “Committee for Non Violence,” he describes how audience response “often affected the voicing of a given poem. Laughter at St. Mark’s parish hall begat an increase in volume on the part of the poet, audience heckling elicited poet’s coyness, and so on” (“Angel Hair Magazine”127). These changes in the poet’s recitation would, of course, cause various further reactions from the audience, creating a kind of feedback loop in which poet/audience dynamics shaped the course of the overall event. The most significant moment of audience input in the Koch/Ginsberg performance occurs during the improvisation of a spoken blues lyric. A short way into the poem Ginsberg comes up with the phrase: “Well, I guess we’ll have to settle for cunt, that’s about all there is” (12). This obscenity draws hisses of disapproval from the audience and provokes the following exchange between the two poets:

*KK*: Allen, you told me you weren’t going to get dirty tonight. Allen Ginsberg made me a solemn promise he wasn’t going to get dirty tonight.

*AG*: I forgot. Here I am being hissed like the villain.

*KK*: The wheel has come full circle, Allen. Your free ideas about sexuality are going to do you in.
AG: Yes, the wheel has come full circle Allen, your free ideas about sexuality are going to do you in.

KK: I think you’re just going to have to go back to heterosexuality and gin. (12)

This expression of audience disapproval provokes a humorous and self-reflexive exchange between Koch and Ginsberg. The focus of the poem is suddenly shifted away from free improvisation to become a humorous commentary on Ginsberg’s well-established persona as outspoken iconoclast. Ginsberg himself plays into this commentary, repeating Koch’s line “the wheel has come full circle, Allen” back to him in a way that incorporates it into the ludic blues format while acknowledging that he himself—or at least his public persona—has become an object of play in the larger context of the performance.

Koch’s tendencies towards the facilitation or design of play also emerge in his interactions with Ginsberg. Near the beginning of the evening, Koch and Ginsberg decide to compose a ballad on a theme suggested by Padgett: “William Blake and Popeye have a disagreement and fight to the death.” Ginsberg improvises the first line, but is corrected by Koch who admonishes him for his incorrect application of meter:

AG: Popeye, you represent for us only the body there; only the meat.

KK: Hey, hey, Allen. This is a ballad. You know, like:

“I walked across the country grey
And saw a little girl”

AG: Popeye . . . here you are everybody. Here you are in me. No, that’s a four-beat line. Popeye’s in his body, Popeye’s in his meat.

KK: That’s an alexandrine.

AG: Could that be considered a ballad meter, is there any expert here?

KK: Well, actually it would be like . . .

AG: Popeye sat upon his chair

KK: That’s it. (15; ellipsis in original)

This exchange is noteworthy for the authoritarian role Koch takes in guiding Ginsberg to the correct ballad meter. Making It Up presents the dialogue as a preamble to the poem that follows. Yet the dialogue does in fact constitute a kind of mini-game within the larger
context of the performance. Koch is both player and adjudicator, countering each of Ginsberg’s moves with correction or approval until the ludic conventions of the moment are adhered to and the desired goal is reached. In this case, the goal is the production of ballad meter; Ginsberg does not quite achieve this, but satisfies Koch with a close substitute. The incident is especially telling in that Koch effectively usurps Padgett’s role as master of ceremonies by providing a structured ludic framework for himself and Ginsberg to play within. This self-delegated role of game designer is also at work, of course, in *The End of the Evening* board game. Koch’s role as editor of the second issue of *Locus Solus* can be viewed in a similar light, especially in his attempts, in his introductory essay, to summarise the various ways collaborative writing can work. A thin line exists between such descriptive and normative categorisations: in listing types of collaboration he sees in history, Koch is simultaneously creating a list of prescriptive models for others to follow.

Both *The End of the Evening* and *Making It Up* illustrate how it is not enough for Koch simply to be engaged with another individual in the act of creation. The imposition of rules—specifically the kind of “arbitrary, imperative, and purposely tedious conventions” which Caillois has characterised as being typical of games (16)—is of vital importance to his poetics, to the extent that even when not engaging in active collaboration himself, he designs ludic structures for others to work within. Yet even while these structures set out rules for others to follow, they also contain within themselves the means of their own subversion.

An example of the ways in which Koch does this can be found in an unpublished stage piece entitled “The Road to Mexico.” While consisting of only one manuscript page of text, this play was intended to take over an hour to perform. Koch’s script consists simply of a set of instructions: specifically, that the actors should verbally improvise—talking over each other and without paying attention to each other’s monologues— for over an hour. Instructions for a similar performance piece, “The Gold Standard,” run in their entirety: A Mountain Shrine, in China. Two monks enter and try, without the slightest success, to explain the gold standard to each other, for four hours. There should be
nothing comical whatsoever in anything they say. The drama should be allowed as a “field day” for the lighting technician, who should be allowed, and even encouraged, to make as many changes of lighting to show time of day, season, atmosphere, and mood as he deems fitting so as to make the play as beautiful and as meaningful as it possibly can be. The play should end with a snowfall and with the exit of the monks.

*(A Change of Hearts 165)*

By breaking away from the traditional writer-actor relationship, in which the writer dictates the exact course of the dramatic narrative with precise dialogue instructions, Koch encourages a mode of play that exceeds the boundaries of the game itself. There is immense freedom of movement in “The Gold Standard”—not only for the actors, but also for the lighting technician. As in *The End of the Evening* and Koch’s collaborations with artists, the boundaries between individuals—artists, designers, players, audience members—are simultaneously broken down and enriched through their positioning in the collaborative exchange. The end results of such plays are unpredictable. What remains of primary importance is the process of playing itself.

Ultimately, *The End of the Evening*, the paintings Koch produced in collaboration with artists, and *Making It Up* are the end results of the poetics of process so integral to the New York School. Yet Koch’s interest in collaboration goes beyond simply an orientation towards process. In setting himself in cooperative opposition with the texts and art of others, Koch engages in a form of play that exists within a larger field of interpersonal and intertextual poetic exchange and inspiration. The immediacy of the collaborative act—its grounding in the moment of composition and in the interaction between individuals in that moment—can so diminish the value of the resultant texts that their publication seems almost an afterthought. The published text can seem the lifeless remnants of the living act that gave it being, an artifact important more as a historical record or curiosity than as a literary text. Yet Koch’s experiments with the form demonstrate how the collaborative text or artwork exists not as a dead object, but rather as the starting point for further play. Like the notes, sketches, and descriptions that are all that remain of the *End of the Evening* board game, Koch’s collaborative works are incomplete in themselves yet provide the
The End of the Evening exemplifies how Koch’s construction of ludic structures for others to play within is itself a form of play, yet this same dynamic can be observed—albeit at a submerged level—in all of his engagements with others. His play does not exist solely in its own moment, but is also directed forward, into the networks of potential connectivity that open up between individual and individual, individual and play script, individual and game. At times these networks open onto the space of the page, the sketchbook, or the canvas; at others they incorporate the physical spaces that separate and connect individuals, spaces like the stage in the St. Mark’s Poetry Project upon which Koch and Ginsberg came together in playful opposition. Koch thus brings to his work a sense of communicative transmission that is of vital importance in understanding another significant element of his legacy: his groundbreaking and highly influential work in pedagogy.
Chapter Four
Games of Pedagogy: Conceptual Play and
Antiauthoritarian Didacticism

Pedagogy—the transmission of poetic values, techniques, and concepts—is integral to avant-garde poetry. Golding has mapped this impulse in his description of how, historically, avant-garde movements are didactic in their “production of manifestos, their strong elements of social critique, and their claims on the art of the future,” seeking to disseminate their poetic and political values while establishing for themselves a significant place in literary history (“From Pound to Olson” 64). Yet there is a fundamental tension at the heart of this pedagogic impulse. While groups such as the New York School have traditionally been iconoclastic, subverting and resisting the authoritarian pressures exerted by the perceived political and aesthetic mainstream, they simultaneously exert their own authority through their implicit (or explicit) didacticism.

This tension is highly relevant to the dynamics of play. The undisciplined energies of paidia, constantly threatened as they are by the danger of exhaustion, are driven to perpetuate themselves through the transmission and transformation of play itself. Ludic conventions—the structures of rules that make such transmission possible—are by definition authoritarian. Herd has identified this didactic drive in his discussion of what he terms the poetics of “enthusiasm” traceable back through poets such as O’Hara and Schuyler to its origins in Ralph Waldo Emerson (Enthusiast! 3). Poets driven by enthusiasm, as Herd points out, are not content to exist in isolation: the very “dynamic nature” that energises their poetry motivates them to attempt to transmit these energies beyond themselves and inspire others to write (19). Timothy Clark also recognises the infectious nature of such energy: as he puts it, “to be inspired is, necessarily, to inspire others” (3), to pass new ideas and concepts from one individual to another. There is also the impulse—identified by Herd in the pedagogic enterprises of Ezra Pound—to “create a readership or audience” for texts that otherwise might alienate audiences through their radical nature (89).
Such didacticism is complicated by the tension that exists between what Golding terms the “(public) didactic impulse and the (private) impulse towards preservation of coterie” inherent in avant-garde groups (“From Pound to Olson” 102). The act of dissemination opens up the group to the possibility of dissipation, when its ranks are infiltrated by new members and its values are appropriated and compromised by the very mainstream it defines itself in opposition to. As a result, the communicative drive can “tip over into authoritarianism,” a phenomenon observable throughout twentieth century from the fascistic beliefs of Ezra Pound to the authoritarian didacticism of Charles Olson (Herd 79). The result is, as Perloff puts it, an “avant-garde in which a congerie of disciples and acolytes gathers around a central charismatic figure” (“Avant-Garde Community” 120).

The threat of dissipation causes dynamism to fold in on itself: the fluid medium of poetic transmission solidifies into the rigidity of dogma.

It is here that play becomes relevant to pedagogy. Play has long been associated with education, its ludic structures used as the scaffolding within which students can be familiarised with unfamiliar concepts and techniques. While many educators have taken a strictly pragmatic approach to such ludic teaching devices, there has also been an overlap between the avant-garde and mainstream pedagogy. Indeed, in France the ludic techniques of the Oulipo have found their way into the school classroom: Jacques Roubaud’s book of poems *Animaux de tout le monde* (2004) has been included on the national syllabus and Dominic Moncond’huy has edited a collection of Oulipian exercises (*Practiques Oulipiennes* 2004) aimed at students of all ages (Poucel).

Here, once again, Koch’s emphasis on spontaneity and group play brings an energising destability to such ludic didacticism In this chapter, I examine how Koch uses his self-subverting methods of play to engage with pedagogic authoritarianism and solidification on both textual and social levels. I begin by examining Koch’s teaching techniques at grade school level, using *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* (1970) and *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red* (1990), to demonstrate how he teaches his students to use the same ludic techniques he utilises in his own poetry. I go on to demonstrate how these techniques lend themselves to a mode of teaching that attempts to move away from authoritarian
didacticism to a more open egalitarian system. Vital to this system is the idea that the rules passed down from student to teacher are not dogmatic but rather concepts actively in play, open to the improvisation and transformation of those who adopt them. I use Talking to the Sun (1985), an anthology of poems for children edited by Koch and Kate Farrell, to demonstrate how Koch generates this sense of poetry as an egalitarian system even while using his pedagogic authority to promote his own poetic values.

The rule-based nature of play means, however, that such freedom is inevitably conditional. Students must always submit themselves in some degree to the constraints of the games transmitted to them by their teachers. Otherwise, the game dissolves and their play ceases. Koch’s response to the conformist aspects of play and his own position of authority within pedagogy is to perform a doubled game of didacticism. I examine how he plays this game in two texts: the ostensibly didactic poems “The Art of Love” and “The Art of Poetry” (both from The Art of Love, 1975) in which Koch subverts his own status as a conveyor of poetic values and techniques. Through this subversion, he demonstrates how the roles of teacher and student are not fixed subject positions, but are dynamic elements in the ongoing process of creative transmission and transformation.

1. Conceptual Play in Koch’s Pedagogic Work

John Shoptaw has claimed that, unlike the contemporaneous avant-garde movement the Black Mountain poets, “the New York school had no campus or lessons or poetics, other than an absence of a poetics” (48). It is certainly true that the New York School lacked a formal pedagogic structure. While the poetics of the Black Mountain group—developed and disseminated by Charles Olson, Robert Creeley, and others—radiated out from the hub of the experimental Black Mountain College in North Carolina, the New York School had no campus other than the social settings of New York City and the pages of literary journals like Locus Solus. This is unsurprising: unlike the Black Mountain movement, the members of the New York School never conceived of it as an actual pedagogic project. In fact, co-founder of the Tibor de Nagy Gallery and small-press publisher John Myers bestowed the nomenclature school upon it in as a marketing strategy, thereby connecting
the poets he published with the famous New York School of abstract impressionism (Diggory 384; Silverberg 2–3).

Yet while Shoptaw is technically correct, he overlooks the integral importance of pedagogical elements to the workings of avant-garde movements in general. Not only did Koch and his fellow poets share an overlapping poetics of humour and playful experimentation, they also promoted and transmitted this poetics to others both within and outside their immediate social circles. Shaw has pointed out that while O’Hara, for example, “is typically characterized as a kind of antiteacher,” he did in fact act as a conveyor of poetic values through his art criticism and his patronage of younger poets such as Berrigan (37–39). Herd has also noted the monumental influence of Ashbery on subsequent generations of U.S. poets (Ashbery 180), an influence perpetuated on a multiplicity of levels: via the example of his poetry, the popularity of his work amongst literary critics, and (to a lesser extent) through his editorship of journals such as Locus Solus (1960–62), the Partisan Review (1976–80), and the first volume of the Best American Poetry anthology (1989).

Koch’s involvement in academia and pedagogy places him at the centre of such didacticism. Lehman has described how Koch, through his poetry writing classes at Columbia University, the New School, and other tertiary institutions in the New York area, “did more than anyone to promulgate the group aesthetic of the New York School” (Last Avant-Garde 74). A variety of poets including Berrigan, David Shapiro, Padgett, Anne Waldman, and Jordan Davis—as well as Lehman himself—have cited Koch’s tutelage as a formative influence on their writing. His books on teaching poetry to school children (Wishes, Lies and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry and Rose, Where Did You Get That Red) stand alongside this college-level work as testament to his innovative and enthusiastic approach to teaching. His achievements in the pedagogic field have, in fact, overshadowed his legacy as a poet to a significant degree. Koch himself, late in life, felt some resentment that his books on teaching should have received more critical attention than his own poetic works (Karen Koch, interview with the author).

The fact is that Koch’s pedagogic endeavours are closely linked to his playful
approach to poetry. In teaching the writing of poetry, Koch does more than simply teach individuals how to play the same kind of games he himself specialises in. Understanding the dynamics of play that drive both his own writing and his collaborative activity enables us to see that, for Koch, teaching is itself a form of play: a space in which interactions between student and teacher leave their trace not only on the pages of the exercise book, but in networks of interpersonal and textual engagement that expand beyond the classroom environment. Through his approach, Koch moves towards an ideal of avant-garde pedagogy oriented against what “Guy Debord defined as spectacle: the repetitions of habit, the maintenance of the status quo, the representational and reproductive . . . and most important all those social relations between people that lead to authoritarian and apodictic communication” (Dworkin 604). Yet in his movement towards this ideal, Koch encounters the same kind of problems that occupy his own writing: the tendency for freeplay to exhaust itself and for the centrifugal energies of play to collapse into dead formalism and closed texts.

Lev Vygotsky has described this problem, in the context of the transmission of game conventions, as the “paradox of play”: the imperative that the player submit to the “rules and renunciation of impulsive action” (99). Freeplay is thus curtailed by the conventions of ludus, raising over the classroom that spectre of stagnation so central to Koch’s own poetry and threatening to turn the open-ended transmission of inspiration and technique into authoritarianism and dogma. It is here that Koch’s particular approach to play—his ability to play doubled games that subvert dominant binaries and polarities, as well as his facility in creating open ludic structures of collaborative interaction—comes into its own. By emphasising the ludic nature of poetry, Koch demystifies technique and demonstrates to his students the arbitrary and malleable nature of poetic convention. This approach is exemplified in his work teaching poetry to children.

Koch’s popularity in the classroom is unsurprising. He himself, in his introduction to *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, claimed, “children have a natural talent for writing poetry” (25). It might be more accurate to say, however, that Koch’s own approach to poetry has much in common with a childish aptitude for creative play. Ellen Dissanayake has described art
in general as “a derivative of play, a kind of adult play behaviour” (75); Koch’s playful approach to creativity emphasises this connection, making him an ideal translator of such “adult play behaviour” back into the play of children. From 1968 to 1969, Koch taught poetry writing to classes of children at P. S. 61, a public school on New York’s Lower East Side. He taught as part of the fledging nationwide “Poets in the Schools” project, a project initiated by poet Joel Oppenheimer (Diggory 361) and sponsored first by the Academy of American Poets and later by the Teachers and Writers Collaborative (Wishes, Lies, and Dreams 1–2). The classes were popular with students and school administrators considered them highly successful (Robert DiYanni 38). The project would go on to have widespread national success. Koch’s work at P. S. 61 was continued by his ex-Wagner College student Padgett. Koch himself would attempt similar classes as a visiting teacher to schools in France, Italy, Haiti, and China.

In Wishes, Lies and Dreams, Koch explains how his teaching was based on one simple yet highly adaptable technique: the application of basic rule systems to poetic composition. Koch discovered this technique at the beginning of the course, during the writing of a collaborative class-poem intended to ease the students into the composition of poetry:

I asked the class to write a poem together, everybody contributing one line. The way I conceived of the poem, it was easy to write, had rules like a game, and included the pleasures [of writing] without the anxiety of competitiveness. No one had to worry about failing to write a good poem because everyone was only writing one line; and I specifically asked the children not to put their names on the line . . . I suggested we make some rules about what should be in every line; this would help give the final poem unity, and it would help the children find something to say. I gave an example, putting a color into every line, then asked them for others. We ended up with the regulations that every line should contain a color, a comic-strip character, and a city or country; also the line should being with the words “I wish.” (4)

Koch can here be seen as fulfilling the same kind of role he takes on in his designing of The End of the Evening board game and (to a lesser extent) in his live performance with
Ginsberg at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project. Here he is essentially a facilitator of the play of others, entering into a relationship with his pupils not as an authoritarian figure but as a collaborator in the creative process. This collaborative relationship is not, of course, truly egalitarian. Within the elementary school classroom environment, Koch implicitly assumes a role superior to the children—an authority that, even if not enforced by Koch himself, would be maintained by the regular teachers in the school. Yet Koch’s rhetoric in this passage reveals how he at least aspires towards the creation of such a level playing field. He did not tell the class to write a poem: he “asked.” He did not instruct them in how they should write it: he “suggested [they] make some rules” together. I will return to this idea of egalitarian didacticism in my next section. First, it is necessary to investigate in more detail how Koch opens the way for such didacticism by attempting to demystify the writing of poetry.

Koch goes on to quote several lines from the poem written in this introductory exercise: “I wish I was Dick Tracy in a black suit in England / I wish that I were a Supergirl with a red cape; the city of Mexico will be where I live. / I wish that I were Veronica in South America. I wish that I could see the blue sky. . .” (6; ellipsis in original). While the text was not, in Koch’s opinion, “a great poem,” the exercise filled the children with excitement and gave them the confidence required for solo composition (6). This first experiment provided the basic template for all of Koch’s work with children. He would first present a simple conceptual device or “poetry idea” (6)—a pattern of questions and answers, for example, or a phrase depicting the difference between a past and a present state—to the students. He would then demonstrate how to engage with the idea, giving examples of sentences generated according to the pattern. The students would next be encouraged to experiment with the given form, repeating variations on the provided pattern while giving little thought to the finished poetic product.

Many of these conceptual devices consist of a sentence fragment within which the students are able to improvise simply by adding words to the existing structure. These exercises are analogous to Oulipian substitution-based constraints such as “N+7” (in which every noun in a text is replaced with whatever noun happens to be positioned seven entries
beyond it in a dictionary); the bulk of the text remains the same, but the meaning is radically altered. The difference between such constraints and Koch’s exercises is that the substitution is not carried out mechanically but left up to the student’s own ingenuity. As in Koch’s own poetry, this shifts the location of play away from the purely conceptual and into the moment of poetic composition: the ludic elements do not so much define the text as they provide a framework within which the student positions their own unstable and unrefined energies. One third-grade exercise, for example, involves a line beginning with the phrase “I would like to have” followed by a simple metaphor (148). Koch introduces the concept of metaphor to the children by mapping it out in the form of another sentence fragment. By inserting nouns into the pattern “a ___ of ___,” he taught, they would combine two ideas or things into the unity of a metaphor. To complete this exercise the students need only contribute two words per line, repeating the process to produce the following kind of poem:

I would like to have a door of hearts
I would like to have a room of roses
I would like to have a window of flowers
I would like to have a book of stripes (Wishes, Lies, and Dreams 148)

This process is explicitly game-like through its use of ludic structure. Koch presents his students with a simple set of rules—a generative device—analogous to the ottava rima of his own Ko or the generic conventions of The Red Robins and Hotel Lambosa. The students can then channel their creative freeplay through this rudimentary framework. The lines that result might be mundane—a “room of roses” or “book of stripes” can, after all, be taken quite literally to represent a room full of roses or a striped page in a notebook—or might be fantastical or surreal. The constraints inherent in the form, however, frequently provoke students to experiment with unexpected linguistic combinations. Another exercise, this one involving the instruction to “begin every odd line with ‘I used to’ and every even line with ‘But now’” (174) produces the couplet “I used to be a fish / But now I am a nurse” (156), a phrase that would not be out of place in a poem by Breton or Eluard. Again, in this exercise the student provides only two words out of a total of twelve. Yet the
possibilities for variation within this structure are enormous. Students are free to manipulate a few simple elements into a vast number of surprising combinations. The rules with which they engage enable an open-ended system of creative play.

Yet despite their popularity amongst both students and educators, Koch’s teaching practices as outlined here have also received negative criticism. Soon after the publication of *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams*, children’s poet Myra Cohn Livingston wrote a series of articles condemning Koch’s teaching practices. Livingston’s criticisms are significant in that they pinpoint two vitally important aspects of Koch’s pedagogic approach: his obsession with the possibilities of freeplay within the constraints of ludus, and his complex approach to issues of authority and egalitarianism in interpersonal relationships. Livingston states from the outset that she does not “accept what Kenneth Koch’s children write as poetry . . . but rather as a sort of creative expression which, too often, is no more than a variation on the ‘fill-in’ method” (“But Is It Poetry?” part 2, 2). For Livingston, real poetry is traditional formal poetry, and she disparages Koch’s lack of attention to what she terms “the craft and tools of poetry—if not rhyme, at least meter and form” (2). This avoidance of form leads, in her estimation, to a lack of technical discipline amongst Koch’s students. She contrasts their writing with the disciplined craftsmanship of the (hypothetical) ideal adult poet, who “controls” her or his “fantasies” so that the reader is not “cast adrift by clusters of incoherent images” (“But Is It Poetry?” part 1, 308). The careful and mature crafting of verse is replaced, in her estimation, with a spontaneous and ultimately infantile chaos of language. In 1981, X. J. Kennedy added to these criticisms by arguing that Koch’s machine-like methods of composition resulted in a lack of distinctive voice amongst the students. According to Kennedy, the students’ individuality was subsumed into the mechanics of Koch’s exercises (quoted in DiYanni 39).

It is tempting to dismiss such criticisms as a reactionary return to romantic and New Critical ideals of individual creativity and poetic craftsmanship from which not only Koch and the New York School, but other contemporaneous groups such as the Language poetry movements, had already distanced themselves. More sympathetic critics have, however, expressed similar reservations. DiYanni, responding to Livingston and Kennedy and
defending the way Koch provides children “access to the pleasures of poetry,” concedes that the students’ poems “lack formal tightness” and “do not probe deeply in thought or range widely in feeling” (39). These comments also recall Halliday’s criticism of Koch’s early work as “narrow” and incapable of provoking deep thought or emotional response, as well as Ward’s claim that those same poems provide little for the reader to engage with on any substantial level (Halliday 141; Ward 8). Such criticisms also echo Harry Roskolenko’s early critique of Koch’s poetry, in which Roskolenko attacks Koch’s work on the grounds that “it is difficult to call any of his word combination the bric-a-brac of poetry. He is precious and puerile when he is not merely futile and noisy, seldom if ever writing two lines that can . . . be called even lazy verse” (quoted in Silverberg 32; italics in original).

Both Livingston and Roskolenko emphasise the apparently random, disconnected nature of the poetry they are critiquing. For Livingston, the poetry of Koch’s young students is formless, comprising “clusters” of unconnected images scattered across the page. For Roskolenko, Koch’s own writing constitutes “word combination,” by which Roskolenko means to suggest a mechanical kind of linguistic construction rather than a conscious manipulation of elements directed at holistic unity. The result of this supposedly disordered approach to writing is, for both Livingson and Roskolenko, a collapse of meaning. For Livingston, Koch’s students’ images are “incoherent,” while for Roskolenko, Koch’s poetry is “puerile” and “noisy.” Instead of attaining what Livingston defines as “real” poetry—that which creates a “new view of the world built upon symbols that are universally understood” (Part 2, 22)—the page is filled with what formalist poet John Ciardi would characterise as “a sort of untutored spillage of raw emotion” (quoted in Livingston, part 2, 42).

Yet such incoherence and “raw emotion” are, in fact, noticeably absent from these student poems. The frameworks provided by Koch are more likely to result in a student embarking upon a poetic flight of fancy—imagining his or her metamorphosis from fish to nurse, for example—than emotional disclosure. Similarly, the rule-based nature of the poetry, far from resulting in an absence of meaning or cohesion, generates its own kind of
poetic cohesion. This idea of meaning emerging from form, as opposed to form as a conduit of meaning, is encapsulated in Perloff’s use of the Russian avant-garde term “constructivism” to describe an “understanding of poetry in its classical Greek meaning as *poiesis* or *making*, with the specific understanding that language, far from being a *vehicle* or conduit for thought and feelings, outside and prior to it, is itself the site of meaning-making” (*21st-Century Modernism* 9; italics in original). Koch does not instruct his students to write a poem on a given subject using a tool-kit of poetic techniques to shape and refine their ideas. Instead, he provides his students with the tool-kit and then invites them to form their subject out of those tools. Thematic content itself, in fact, becomes synonymous with form. The phrases “I would like” or “I wish” cease to be the means through which personal desires are expressed and become the open-ended frameworks within which creative play can be channelled.

Livingston, Kennedy, and Roskolenko are correct in claiming that Koch’s mode of writing is something quite distinct from mainstream conceptions of poetry as primarily lyrical or expressive. Koch’s approach is closer to what Perloff, writing of Vito Acconci’s “constraint-based lists, dictionary games, performance scores, [and] parodic translations,” describes as “complex language games” (“Conceptualisms, Old and New”). Such approaches to poetry do not reject poetic form, but rather make explicit the ludic nature of form itself. Koch is clearly not antagonistic towards traditional prosody: his own poem *Ko* bears testimony to that. Koch himself explains that he excluded rhyme and metre from his classrooms simply because it tended to result in a focus on musicality to the detriment of anything else. For the students in P. S. 61 metrical verse was also a form already familiar to them from nursery rhymes and song lyrics. As such, it was a form that could be easily copied, but was not so easy to subvert or enlarge upon. Lines would slip into familiar patterns, and thematic content would be reduced to cliché and platitudes that served as little more than decoration for the dominant structure of the text (*Wishes, Lies and Dreams* 8). The act of writing itself ceases to provide surprise and excitement for the students, and their interest in composition correspondingly lessens. Koch concluded that avoiding such considerations of musicality and focusing instead on conceptual devices—“poetry ideas,“
as he puts it—resulted in children being awakened to the transformative and estranging potentiality of language.

This ludic approach to writing does not exclude lyrical or expressionist content from poetry. It does, however, reveal how such thematic content is inextricably bound up with form. Kenneth Goldsmith has argued that “what we term creative is nothing more than repetitious formulas, spun over and over” (quoted in Perloff, “Moving Information”). Goldsmith is referring specifically to thematic elements involving narrative or lyric, yet his statement is equally applicable to the formulaic nature of prosody, with its patterns of stress, syllables, and phonics. When Livingston praises how a hypothetical poet’s “imagination, unleashed but controlled by his [sic] logic, allows the reader to understand what youth is about,” she is positing a range of subject matter—“youth”—that is necessarily defined by conceptual preconceptions that limit the ways in which that subject matter can be depicted. As Srikanth Reddy, himself a teacher of creative writing, has pointed out, “anybody can learn to write a passable sonnet, just as anybody can learn how to construct a conceptual poem” (8). Similarly, it can be argued that anyone can learn how to write the kind of poem that Livingston believes Koch’s students should aspire to. All that is required is that they familiarise themselves with the rhetorical and representational conventions applicable to that subject, and constrain their own creative free play within that framework. The framework might take a form different from Koch’s sentence patterns, but in both cases the writer’s engagement with that framework is a variation on that “fill in” method that Livingston so despises. The difference between these poems and those valourised by critics such as Livingston and Rosklenko is that this cohesion works on a conceptual level as opposed to a purely thematic one.

This model of conceptual cohesion is exemplified by “Eight Trillion Green Years Away,” a poem on the subject of colours by Koch’s fifth grade student Jeff Morley. The poem reads in full:

Green is the color of the universe.
A steeple of stars all green
Towers over the world
The stars look like emeralds
Scattered through the greenish hue
Of the universe so green.
On a dark green planet
Eight trillion green years away
A frog sits in the green night
All you can see is a shimmer of green
On the skin of green algae
In that green planet
Eight trillion green miles away
Through endless miles of green void.
Galorp, galorp, burble, gurble
The frog disappears in the dark green night.
In that green world an animal lives on green oranges
He wanders through the green endlessness of the universe.
Through the emerald green spire
To that small green planet
Eight trillion green years away. (211)

There is nothing random or incoherent about Morley’s poem. On one level, it is a straightforward description of otherworldly landscape, flora, and fauna. His cosmic images of stars and voids segue into descriptions of an alien world occupied by curiously familiar objects: frogs, algae, and oranges. Yet Morley subjects every facet of his description to the governing principle of the entire piece: the exclusive use of the adjective “green” to describe the colours of things. This results in a number of unconventional descriptions. For example, the stars, the night, and the entire universe are all depicted as being green. The system even allows for what is, strictly speaking, a contradiction in terms—“green oranges.” This emerges from the mechanics of the poem itself: once the poet has decided that everything in the poem will be green, all elements that come into play are transformed accordingly. Ironically, one of the few things in the poem that is not described as green is
the frog. The cohesion of the poem is such, however, that few readers are likely to imagine it as any other colour.

It is possible, in theory, for students to respond incorrectly to Koch’s exercises—to lose the game, as it were. Inserting grammatically incorrect words into the structure provided—verbs where nouns are required, for example—might be considered such a failure. Yet despite their ludic nature, Koch’s instructions allow for a significant degree of free play. The poems produced by the children of P. S. 61 are fundamentally experimental poems, experiments with word combination and juxtaposition. Just as there is no single correct way to respond to Koch’s exercises, there is no incorrect way to respond—provided, that is, that a response is made. As in The End of the Evening, Koch’s instructions are oriented not towards the production of finished poetry, but rather are a means to stimulate creative activity amongst individual players. Koch cites, for example, an occasion in which a child attempted to write the phrase “swarm of bees” but misspelled “swarm” as “swan.” The resultant phrase “swan of bees” was praised by Koch as “interesting and even exciting” and led to a series of further exercises exploring unexpected or nonsensical word combinations (155).

The similarities between these classroom exercises and Koch’s own poetic practice are obvious. Where in early works such as Sun Out and When the Sun Tries to Go On Koch delights in his misuse of the French language, in his teaching he presents error as an opportunity for poetic innovation. In this context, the teacher becomes foremost an enabler of freedom and experimentation. Instructions are handed down from teacher to student not as dogma to be strictly adhered to, but as the arbitrary and ultimately malleable raw material of play. Just as Koch appropriates and subverts formal devices in poems such as Ko, here he encourages a similar attitude towards poetry in his students. In setting rules for his students to follow, he provides ludic frameworks that can be engaged with in multiple ways. Even if they are followed to the letter, there is immense space for improvisation and creativity. Yet if they are bent or subverted, other modes of expression become possible. It is in the moment that a student’s free creative play overflows the boundaries of the ludic system that the authoritarian relationship between student and teacher is destabilised. The
pedagogic process ceases to be one of movement upwards along paths set by the teacher, and becomes one of move and countermove, subversion and revision.

Such examples demonstrate how Koch, far from attempting to drive a wedge between traditional prosody and avant-garde experimental poetries, ultimately saw all these differing forms as constituting modes of gameplay. His teaching reveals how writing itself is intrinsically ludic. The writer—be she or he avant-gardist or traditionalist—must manipulate a necessarily limited range of linguistic elements within the constraining parameters of theme and style. Koch’s decision to exclude certain constraints from his classes is ultimately not a value judgement upon those constraints, but rather a recognition that ludic structures are engaged with most fruitfully when they are recognised as manipulatable rather than fixed. By making the ludic aspects of poetry composition explicit, Koch enabled his students to play with poetry, taking up their own positions within the space of possibilities presented by the art form.

2. The Egalitarian Poetry Classroom

Koch himself cites Katherine Lappa, his English teacher in high school, as an important influence on his inclusive and anti-authoritarian approach to teaching. As he describes it, Lappa’s influence on him as a writer was not that of an authoritarian figure schooling him in the ways of poetry. Instead, Koch describes her as having simply “encouraged me to be free and deep and extravagant in what I wrote, so that I could find what was hidden in me that I had to say” (Wishes, Lies, and Dreams v). In his dealings with the children of P. S. 61, Koch casts himself in a similar role. His stated intention in these classes was to act as “reader, admirer, and furnisher of additional ideas,” rather than as an instructor or adjudicator (29). Speaking of his students, he goes on: “I felt the main thing I had to do was to get them started writing, writing anything, in a way that would be pleasant and exciting for them” (5). In Koch’s classroom the goal of the teacher was simply to encourage the student to write in new and imaginative ways—to transform everyday language and grammar into a playground that the fledgling poet was free to explore at will.

Such an approach to teaching is by no means unique to Koch or Lappa. Koch’s
attempt to make the creation of poetry an accommodating, process-oriented practice has its precursor in John Dewey’s desire to break down the barriers between pedagogic practice and “the everyday life of students” (40). Against such an open-ended model of pedagogy is the utilitarian, ends-oriented attitude expressed succinctly by Henry Ellington, Monica Gordon, and Joannie Fowlie in their book *Using Games and Simulations in the Classroom*. They describe play and games as a highly effective way of teaching “transferable process skills,” a method that is “particularly well suited for developing decision-making, problem-solving, interpersonal and communication skills—the sorts of skills that employers are increasingly coming to expect in the products of our education system” (6–7; italics in original). This characterisation of play as an effective means to an end is a persuasive one. Brian Sutton-Smith has pointed out that the “dominant rhetoric” in contemporary culture is that of play as “progress” (519). In this rhetoric, play is presented as an activity that is not valuable in itself, but which becomes valuable if viewed as part of a process leading to a higher goal (519). Fraser Brown and Brian Cheesman have made similar observations, writing of

the hegemony of economic rationalism, which demands that humans must be productive; that this requires seriousness and diligence; and that the task of any child is to become a productive adult. The child’s world is constructed around the idea of play being a preparation for the rigours of adult life . . . Children are not encouraged to run because it is joyful and stimulating, but rather so that they will run faster than their peers, and win races against them. (2)

Koch is explicit in his opposition to such authoritarian and utilitarian models of education. In the introduction to *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red* (a book in which he moves from teaching children how to write poetry to teaching them how to read it), he places his own teaching methods in opposition to pedagogic norms. Claiming that “there is a condescension toward children’s minds and abilities in regard to poetry in almost every elementary text I’ve ever seen” (xxv), he argues “the problem in teaching adult poetry to children is that for them it often seems difficult and remote” (xxii). For Koch, the key to engaging children with poetry lies in the breaking down of the hierarchical structures that
place the child poet or reader on a lower evolutionary rung than the adult poet. The student must be made to feel that they exist in the same space as the adult poet: that “adult poetry” is to “some degree part of an activity of their own” (xxii). This attitude seems, at first, to be symptomatic of what Joseph Harrington has termed the “populist” view “that poetry is (or ought to be) a popular art form—either in terms of the number of readers or by way of some inherent connection to ‘the people’” (13). Yet Koch does not attempt to refashion poetry so that it fits the understanding of his child students. Instead, he brings them into contact with a wide range of adult—and frequently avant-garde—poetry, thus refusing to accept the hierarchical dichotomy between children’s and adults’ literature.

_Talking to the Sun_, an illustrated anthology of poetry for children co-authored with Kate Farrell, exemplifies this shuffling of subject positions. Rather than selecting poetry that might be thought appropriate to the concerns and reading levels of his pupils, Koch presents the children with a wide range of texts written for sophisticated adult audiences. Canonical poets such as Shakespeare, Dante, and Shelley sit alongside anonymous Ancient Egyptian and Navajo poems. These disparate poems are arranged together not by style or difficulty level, but simply in terms of their thematic content. Thus Robert Frost’s “Stopping by Woods on a Snowy Evening” shares a page with Arthur Rimbaud’s pastoral “Sensation” (76), and Pablo Neruda’s ode to an elephant appears on the same page as a Yoruba elephant song (69). The vocabulary levels of the poems are frequently higher than the readers of the book might be expected to possess, as Neruda’s “Elephant” demonstrates:

blessed beast
of the perduring forests,
bulk of our palpable world
in its counterpoise,

.............
horn virtuoso
and bugling
propinquity (69)
Words such as “perduring” or “propinquity” might give many adult readers pause, yet no definitions are given for them in the text. Koch does not expect his child-readers to comprehend them fully. These poems are presented not, as Charles Bernstein puts it in his critique of the academic study of literature, as “puzzles resolvable by checking off the boxes on the ‘Understanding Poetry’ worksheet,” but as texts that provoke “response, questions, disorientation, interaction, more poems” (361).

_Talking to the Sun_ is clearly constructed in this spirit and intended to provoke readerly engagement. In the anthology, Koch and Farrell present poems not as objects for passive consumption, but rather as models of how children might write poetry of their own. In her introduction, Farrell reassures her readers that “you don’t have to be a poet to write poetry any more than you have to be a painter to paint a picture . . . if this book inspires you to begin writing poetry or painting, so much the better” (7). Her invitation opens the world of poetry presented in the anthology to the active involvement of the reader. The word “poet” no longer designates a position attainable only after a long process of learning and development, but instead refers to a role playable through the simple performative act of writing poetry. The student takes his or her place—in spirit, if not in fact—on the page alongside the texts that initially motivated him or her to write.

In this context, it is significant that Koch incorporates texts by his fellow New York School poets into his teaching practice. Poems by Ashbery, O’Hara, and Schuyler all feature in the lesson examples in _Wishes, Lies and Dreams_ and the _Talking to the Sun_ anthology. (The title _Talking to the Sun_ is itself a reference to O’Hara’s poem “A True Account of Talking to the Sun at Fire Island.”) Second Generation writers and others on the periphery of the group including Amiri Baraka, Berrigan, Joseph Ceravolo, Padgett, Anne Porter, and Shapiro also feature in the anthology. All the illustrations in the anthology are sourced from the Metropolitan Museum of Art, a move that further associates the book with a specifically New York milieu (7).

On one level, this inclusion could be understood as an attempt by Koch to elevate and promote the work of his fellow poets. Yet there is more than just self-promotion going on in these selections. The inclusion of his friends and associates into literary history has a
levelling effect that weakens both the authoritarian status of canonical figures and the unity of Koch’s own social group. In order to encompass such a diversity of poets from vastly different historical moments and literary movements, the insular nature of Koch’s group must open up and become inclusive rather than exclusive. While this inclusiveness is never fully realised—Talking to the Sun exhibits a pronounced gender bias, including only five female authors (Elizabeth Bishop, Emily Dickinson, Christina Rossetti, Gertrude Stein, and Dorothy Wordsworth)—the implication here is that the outsider, the student in the classroom or the reader of the anthology, is being invited into the circle of sociality and mutual poetic interaction. The distinction between teacher and student is, for a moment, occluded: both individuals become collaborators in the broader game of poetry.

In Talking to the Sun this invitation to engage in the larger game of poetry takes place on the printed page. Yet Koch also made this invitation in the space of the college-level poetry classroom. Koch started teaching at Columbia University in the mid 1950s. There he taught creative writing and literature papers that presented literary history as a field within which the student could position her or his own creative activity. Tony Towle, one of the college students who studied poetry writing under Koch, recalls that he “understood that [Koch] was giving these workshops [at the New School] to engage the interest, one might say, of poets who weren’t taking the undergraduate curriculum at Columbia” (quoted in Shaw 247; italics in original). Elements of Koch’s teaching at this level resemble his work with school children. Again, in these classes he focused extensively upon formal structures, encouraging his students to engage with a variety of different styles and formats. Ex-student Lehman provides details of this practice in his personal recollection of the courses at Columbia:

Koch gave specific and highly detailed assignments and he spent hours explaining what he wanted. Off the top of his head he would demonstrate blank verse (“before I go to sleep I think of you”) or do an instant and pretty fair imitation of William Carlos Williams on the blackboard. The assignments he gave us were inventive and sometimes bizarre. Rewrite the first scene in Hamlet without rereading it first. Purchase a comic book, do not read it, tape white paper all over the dialogue
balloons, then fill in your own dialogue. Write a story about a sports event in which the contestants are the members of your own family disguised. (Last Avant-Garde 233–34)

As in his classes for children, Koch here focuses on the importance of lucid rule systems in the composition of poetry. Thematic material, where it is specified at all, is transformed at the conceptual level. Family members, in the above instance, fulfill the same basic role as the colour green does in Jeff Morley’s poem. As Lehman goes on to recount, Koch’s students were also expected to immerse themselves in a wide variety of literature: “Koch’s reading lists were eye-openers. We read and imitated William Carlos Williams, Wallace Stevens, John Donne, Gertrude Stein, Jorge Luis Borges, Boris Pasternak, and the nineteenth century Brazilian novelist Machado de Assis” (234–35). Koch presented these literary icons in ways that demonstrated the malleability of their legacies: Lehman has recounted how Koch taught a paper on comedy that included Borges’s Ficciones and Joyce’s Ulysses as comedic works (“Seasons on Earth” 186). Positioning these writers in such idiosyncratic frames of reference has the same levelling effect as Koch achieves in Talking with the Sun. The iconic status of the literary text is demystified and revealed to be, instead, something open to the creative play of both the teacher and the student poet.

The practice of textually engaging with past authors through imitation or revision is, of course, a familiar Koch technique. Its most famous example is his “Variations on a Theme by William Carlos Williams,” first published in Thank You and Other Poems in 1962. The poem reads, in full:

1.

I chopped down the house that you had been saving to live in next summer.
I am sorry, but it was morning, and I had nothing to do
and its wooden beams were so inviting

2.

We laughed at the hollyhocks together
and then I sprayed them with lye.
Forgive me. I simply do not know what I am doing.

3.
I gave away the money that you had been saving to live on for the next ten years. The man who asked for it was shabby and the firm March wind on the porch was so juicy and cold.

4.
Last evening I went dancing and I broke your leg. Forgive me, I was clumsy, and I wanted you here in the wards, where I am the doctor! (Collected Poems 135)

Koch’s technique in this piece transcends straightforward imitation. If these lines are compared to the original, in fact, it is obvious that they have little stylistically in common with Williams’s minimalist verse:

I have eaten the plums that were in the icebox and which you were probably saving for breakfast

Forgive me they were delicious so sweet and so cold (Collected Poems 372)

Williams’s sentences are unpunctuated, broken up instead into extremely short lines (the
shortest comprises a single word, while the longest stretches to three). Koch’s lines by contrast stretch out to approach, at times, the right hand margin of the page. Koch also uses conventional punctuation including, in his final line, a characteristically exuberant exclamation mark. Williams’s final stanza achieves a subdued intensity through the slow build up of the lines that precede it. The final single beat of the word “cold” breaks the flow of two syllable words—“icebox,” “breakfast”—that end each preceding stanza, giving the poem a satisfying sense of closure as its verbal momentum folds into itself. Koch’s ending has little in common with this: a moment of dramatic exclamation, its primary effect is to emphasise the difference in style between Koch’s boisterous comedy and Williams’s controlled intensity.

Yet at the same time, Koch draws the reader’s attention back again and again to the features that connect his poem with Williams’s iconic work. His title, while it makes these connections explicit, is only one of many such moments. Koch redeployes tonal and syntactic elements from “This is Just to Say” to suit his own stylistic purposes. The causal equivocation of Williams’s “you were probably / saving / for breakfast” is transformed into the bluntness and hyperbolae of “you had been saving to live in next summer” and “you had been saving to live on for the next ten years.” The language of Williams’s sensuous sweet cold plums is reconfigured into the absurdity of a “shabby” man and a “juicy” cold wind. The canonical figure of Williams and his equally canonical text are thus imitated, parodied and subverted in a way that opens the text up to further responses. As Herd has pointed out, such an approach constitutes an “opening of the work to other writers, speakers and their words,” connecting the contemporary poet to literary history in a way that unsettles established hierarchies (18).

Shaw has described this avant-garde preoccupation with “experimental models of kinship, both social and literary” that seek to redefine the relationships both among contemporaneous poets and between these poets and their predecessors (37). On the surface, such redefinitions seem subversive. Established literary figures are removed from their historical contexts and placed on the same level as the emergent poet. The texts of writers such as Williams, Stein, or Shakespeare become incorporated into an ongoing
process of poetic creation. Yet the situation is somewhat more complex. Even while Koch subverts the mythology of Williams and his texts, he also integrates Williams into his own poetic practice, making him a kind of New York School poet by proxy in a collaboration in which the distinctive styles of both poets are able to co-exist.

Yet while such intergenerational interaction ideally plays out in an egalitarian manner, the authoritarian pressures of influence persist. Kane has observed how second-generation New York School poets such as Alice Notley, Berrigan, and Padgett formed their own identities by referring back to the first generation. As he points out, their work was marked by “consistent intertextual references . . . to poems written by First-Generation poets” (*All Poets Welcome* 113). Writing of the second-generation journal *Angel Hair*, Kane points out that the “presence of Schuyler, Koch and O’Hara” lent “an authoritative note” to the “overall party of the issue, as if one’s ‘cool’ parents were there, legitimizing the goings-on” (“*Angel Hair Magazine*” 336). While on the one hand these early poets can be seen as liberators, opening up new modes of expression for younger poets to explore, on the other hand they become figures of authority. Having chosen to take part in the poetic games initiated by Koch and his peers, their prodigies find themselves obliged to follow rules and conventions already set in place. Vygotsky has pointed out, in his study of children’s play, that in “one sense a child at play is free to determine his own actions,” and that the possibilities for improvisation are increased by the enabling ludic systems they engage with (103). “But in another sense,” he goes on, “this is an illusory freedom, for [the child’s] actions are in fact subordinated to the meaning of things [within the social system], and he acts accordingly” (103). This dynamic holds equally true in the social and poetic play of adults: play is necessarily restricted by parameters set by both the maker of the game and the community of players. The open field of literature is thus revealed to be one that is in fact sectioned off into spaces of limited creative freedom defined by mentors and fellow poets.

A striking example of resistance to such perceived authoritarian oppression can be found in the mock assassination of Koch that took place on January 10, 1968. Koch was giving a solo reading at the St. Mark’s Poetry Project. During the reading of a poem titled
“To My Audience” (a poem that remains uncollected to this day), Allen van Newkirk—a poet, activist, and member of the anti-art group “Up Against the Wall Motherfuckers”—approached the stage and fired several shots at Koch from an automatic pistol. As audience member Ron Padgett would later recount, this was followed by a moment of stunned silence broken by the realization that the rounds had been blanks. According to Padgett, Koch recovered quickly and, as he puts it, “took control of the shooting [and] turned it into a comic event.” The audio tape of the reading records how Koch joked to the audience that this “was a benefit shooting”—a reference to the political benefit readings common at the Poetry Project—and responded to Van Newkirk’s muffled shouts with “why don’t you stop interrupting the reading” and injunctions to “scram” and “grow up.”

Ben Morea, another member of “Up Against the Wall,” would later give a different account of the shooting, claiming in an online interview that after Van Newkirk fired “Koch fainted and everyone in the audience assumed he was dead and started screaming.” This description is problematic in that it goes against the evidence of the audio tape, but what is more revealing is Morea’s justification for the mock-assassination. For Morea, Newkirk, and the other members of the group, Koch “was a symbol . . . of this totally bourgeois, dandy world.” In an ultimate irony, Koch—the poet of “The Brassiere Factory,” the chaotic Sun Out and the exuberant rhetoric of “Fresh Air”—found himself cast in the role of authoritarian, mainstream figurehead. Perhaps in response to his growing awareness of his new position within the New York avant-garde community, Koch would increasingly turn the self-subverting energies of play onto his own persona of didactic authority.

3. Didactic Self-Subversion in “The Art of Love” and “The Art of Poetry”

During the 1970s, as he increasingly fulfilled the role of teacher and mentor within the ostensibly iconoclastic and anti-authoritarian environment of avant-garde poetry, Koch also sought to subvert his new-found authority through the adoption of a pseudo-didactic poetic style. One of the most overt examples of this style can be found in “The Art of Poetry.” The poem was originally published in the 1975 collection The Art of Love—a title that resonates with such well-known instructional titles as Irma S. Rombauer’s The Joy of
Cooking (1931) and Alex Comfort’s The Joy of Sex (1972). Like such instructional texts directed towards the popular market, Koch’s poem initially presents itself as a straightforward discussion of the process of poetic composition.

Just as Koch’s earlier mock-manifesto “Fresh Air” only reveals its ambiguities under close examination, it is not at first clear to the reader whether “The Art of Poetry” is intended as a parody of didactic poetry or as a genuine guide to poetic composition. Indeed, if Koch’s reputation as a teacher of poetry, established in Wishes, Lies, and Dreams, is taken into account, the later interpretation is a reasonable one. Koch himself has commented that “The Art of Poetry” contains “things that I believe are true” (interview with David Kennedy). Indeed, statements such as the following appear to correlate with Koch’s poetic practice:

it is a good idea to have some
Friends who write as well as you do, who know what you are doing,
And know when you are doing something wrong.
They should have qualities that you can never have,
To keep you continually striving up an impossible hill.
These friends should supply such competition as will make you, at times, very uncomfortable. (Collected Poems 255)

Koch has frequently discussed how his friendly rivalry with fellow New York School poets motivated him in just this way. The reading transcribed as Making It Up exemplifies such cooperatively competitive interactivity, as does Koch’s playful 1965 interview with Ashbery. In “The Art of Poetry” these resonances with Koch’s established persona and personal history tempt the reader to read the poem at its face value of instructional text. Other features of the text, however, complicate such readings.

Like most of Koch’s poems, “The Art of Poetry” is heavily laced with humour. Yet this humour is for the most part subordinate to its apparently didactic content. The poet, for example, cautions against the use of alcohol, marijuana, and other drugs in the writing of poetry, concluding with the pronouncement that “one does not write well in one’s sleep” (255). Unlike the layered ironies of “Fresh Air” or Hotel Lambosa, this final wry
observation does not destabilise the statements that surround it. Instead, it functions as little more than a moment of whimsy: a joking observation that does not even fully succeed at being a joke. It comes across, in fact, as a throwaway comment by a somewhat weary professor to an audience of students whose laughter is expected but not required. In keeping with this tone of mannered exhaustion, many of the instructions found in the poem are pedantically detailed:

One thing a poem needs is to be complete
In itself and not need others to complement it.
Therefore this poem about writing should be complete
With information about everything concerned in the act
Of creating a poem. A work should also not be too long.
Each line should give a gathered new sensation
Of “Oh, now I know that, and want to go on!”
“Measure,” which decides how long a poem should be.
Is difficult, because possible elaboration is endless.
As endless as the desire to write, so the decision to end
A poem is generally arbitrary yet must be made
Except in the following two cases . . . (260–61)

On the surface, the instructions Koch gives here are quite reasonable. They conform to a widespread notion of poetry, inherited from the New Critics, that a poem should be a carefully crafted whole, complete in itself and stripped of any material not pertinent to its single topic. This is not, of course, a type of poetry that Koch himself is known for writing. Koch ironically acknowledges this through the self-referential lines that immediately follow—the statement that “The Art of Poetry” itself should fulfil the same requirements as the ideal text it describes. This draws the reader’s attention to the fact that the poem is fundamentally at odds with its own injunctions. With its lengthy sections of exhaustive exposition, the poem certainly does not provide a “new sensation” in each line. The requirement that a poem should not be “too long” is similarly made problematic by the poem’s own extreme length. Indeed, there is a contradiction even in the brief section
quoted: the statement that a poem should be “complete” in itself” is set at odds with the observation that “elaboration is endless.” If elaboration is potentially endless, a poem can never be said to be fully complete: any end point the poet may decide on is ultimately arbitrary. Through subversions such as these every stylistic component of Koch’s poem is set to work against its didactic content. Its lines of verse run on in long, loosely organised sentences that undermine the poet’s message of control and constraint. Each moment of apparent resolution is quickly unsettled by digression or pedantic explication. If the instructions given in the poem are contrasted with Koch’s other work, its value as an instructional poem is compromised even further. His lengthy, open-ended poems like Ko and When the Sun Tries to Go On render the injunction that poems should not be “too long” meaningless. The exhaustive digressions Koch practices in these works, along with his resistance to single meaning and closure evidenced throughout his many experiments with garbled syntax and open-ended serial form, similarly undermine the very poetics he espouses here.

While initially “The Art of Poetry” appears to offer a wealth of advice on the writing of poetry—and could in fact be used as a classroom template for poetic creation—its deeper message is very different. In writing a poem that, ironically, would not have been written in this form if the author had followed his own advice, Koch engenders in the attentive reader skepticism about didactic communication. Koch subverts his own authority, exposing his status as conveyer of technical wisdom as unreliable. The idea that any one definitive template for poetry exists is thus similarly subverted.

Once readers reject the didactic stability of “The Art of Poetry,” they can cease to read the poem as an instructional text and begin to read it as the playful and open-ended kind of text characteristic of Koch’s earlier work. The title of the poem itself shifts context: it can be read as no longer referring to the poem’s subject matter, but instead to its status as a space in which thematic content—in this case, didacticism—becomes a conceptual device around and within which the poet can play. Ultimately, the poem is yet another variation on the “fill in” model that Koch presented to the students in P. S. 61: in this case, the model sentence comprises variations on “a poem is” and “a poem should be.”
“The Art of Love,” the title poem in the same collection in which “The Art of Poetry” appears, takes this technique of self-subversion to another level. The similar titles of the two poems suggest a thematic relationship: whereas the former imparts wisdom concerning poetry, the reader can assume that the latter does the same concerning the subject of love. Both poems begin in much the same way, imparting advice so banal as to be redundant. “The Art of Poetry” begins: “To write a poem, perfect physical condition / Is desirable but not necessary” (254). “The Art of Love” begins:

To win the love of women one should first discover
What sort of thing is likely to move them, what feelings
They are most delighted with their lives to have; then
One should find these things and cause these feelings. (276)

The former phrase gives advice that is simultaneously dubious—just what is “perfect physical condition,” and how many poets throughout history have written in such a state?—and rendered ineffectual by Koch’s qualification that it is, after all, “desirable but not necessary.” The phrase on how to “win the love of women” is similarly self-negating, paraphrasable as a tautology: “in order to achieve something, one must do that which will achieve it.” Where “The Art of Love” differs from “The Art of Poetry,” however, is in the far-fetched nature of the advice it subsequently imparts.

Much of “The Art of Love” is taken up with sadomasochist fantasies of bondage and bodily transformation. Some of these are physically possible, as when the poet suggests that his reader “tie your girl’s hands behind her back and encourage her to get loose.” Others stretch the boundaries of reality, as when the writer gives instructions on how to “make your girl into an airplane”:

ask her to lie down on a large piece of canvas
Which you have stretched out and nailed to a thin sheet of aluminum, or, if you are economizing, of balsa wood.
When she has lain down, wrap the stuff she is lying on around her
And ask her to stretch out her arms, for these will be the wings
Of the plane (she should be lying on her stomach), with her neck stretched taut,
Resting on the canvas (her head should be the “nose” of the plane); her legs and feet should be
Close together (tied or strapped, if you like). Now, once she is in the airplane position,
Wrap the aluminum or balsa-coated canvas more closely around her and fasten it at the edges
With staples, glue, or rivets. Carry her to the airport, or to any convenient field,
And put her on the ground. Ask her to “take off!” If she does, you have lost a good mistress. (294)
The instructions given here are just as detailed as those in “The Art of Poetry,” but in this poem they are directed towards ends that strain the laws of anatomy and physics. Maggie Nelson has observed that the sexualised violence inherent in these parts of the poem has been largely glossed over by critics (247). As she points out, Koch’s own defence (as given to “an outraged female acquaintance”) that the poem was simply “supposed to be funny” is taken by critics such as Lehman as sufficient reason to forgo further analysis (247). David Spurr has claimed that the sadomasochistic elements in “The Art of Love” constitute a parody of parody itself, the poem’s subject matter pushed “beyond mere exaggeration or distortion in order to create an independent form of expression” (353). The subversively parodic qualities of the poem are, nonetheless, paramount. Where “The Art of Poetry” undermines the didactic authority of Koch the poet, “The Art of Love” is directed outwards to target the implied audience of such didacticism, effectively demolishing that audience through its own absurdly misogynistic stance.

Just as “The Art of Poetry” mocks the authoritarian figure of the academic or established poet, “The Art of Love” addresses what Davidson describes as one of the “new, nontraditional masculine identities” that arose in the 1950s: that of the “Playboy swinging bachelor” in the context of which women are “treated as little more than sex toys” (Guys Like Us 31). “The Art of Love” is certainly couched in terms that suggest such a figure. Its long lines stress authority by combining a tone of affected relaxation with casual formality.
Sentences ramble on unhurriedly, padded out with parentheses and extended through chains of semicolons. Yet at the same time, the diction here is relatively formal, without contractions or slang. The reference to the female subject as a “mistress” further suggests an authoritarian male speaker who seeks to possess a woman more as an accessory than as a partner. Just as the speaker of the poem constitutes a certain kind of male subject, its implied reader occupies a similar role. “The Art of Love” is clearly addressed to a heterosexual male audience. Women feature in the poem only as objects to be pursued; homosexuality is absent. Significantly, the very poets closest to Koch in the New York School—Ashbery, Schuyler, and the already deceased O’Hara—were openly homosexual. While it could be argued that in “The Art of Love” Koch is asserting his own heterosexuality in the face of his peers’ sexual orientation, it can also be argued that he is in fact performing a parody of straightness.

While on the one hand the poem appears to create what Davidson has termed a homosocial or “homo-textual” atmosphere (Guys Like Us 14)—writer and reader bound together in a common sex and sexuality—the very narrowness of its mode of address disperses this atmosphere. Koch creates a sense of predatory masculine community only to collapse this communality through the affected tone of his text, the increasingly ludicrous nature of the advice given, and the ultimate lack of any appropriate audience. At the climax of a fantasy in which a woman is transformed into a wheel, the poet concludes: “I suggest ending by wheeling her out an opened door / Which you then close and stab yourself to death” (280). The poem thus effectively eliminates its own audience. The poet’s instructions are issued into a void in which its didactic authority weakens and disperses.

On another level, of course, the audience of the poem remains. “The Art of Love” is not actually intended for an audience of misogynistic playboys: it is intended for the same audience of friends, colleagues, and students that any avant-garde poet might expect for her or his work. Yet by performing the elimination of its fictional audience, Koch draws attention to the problematic nature of the didactic relationship itself. Considered together, “The Art of Poetry” and “The Art of Love” remove both teacher and student from their respective positions of authority and subordination. The process of instruction is thus
revealed to be one fraught with instabilities and contradictions that, if recognised, can be used to negotiate the constraining yet necessarily rule-governed nature of play. Koch here replaces straightforward didactic communication with a mode of transmission that doubles back upon itself: a doubling in which authoritarian pronouncements demolish the very authority they ostensibly assert. His poems thus demonstrate how the role of the teacher—be it a teacher of creative writing, literary history, or love—is just that, a role: a position that plays its own part in the game of poetry, but that is ultimately open to repositioning and transformation.

It would be a mistake to assume that in enacting his self-subversions of “The Art of Poetry” and “The Art of Love” Koch is calling for didacticism and rule systems to be demolished. Koch’s own doubled play in Ko and his multi-leveled games in Hotel Lambosa and The Art of the Possible demonstrate how essential rules—be they of form, genre, or narrative—are to poetic play. Similarly, his collaborative projects reveal his own awareness of the necessity of rule systems. The instructions to The End of the Evening board game and the guided improvisation of Making it Up provide the ludic structures within which individual players come together in acts of collaborative creation. Koch’s own life-long engagement with pedagogic systems—from his early days as a student at Harvard and Columbia to his career as a professor at Columbia and the New School—are further testament to his commitment to the necessary constraints of academic literary study. In many ways, Koch’s involvement with the academy parallels what Golding terms the “significant shift in the closeness of the avant-garde’s relation to the academy” (“Experimental Poetics” 64) characteristic of twentieth century poetry. As the legacies of the New York School poets—in particular Ashbery—attest, academic discourse provides an expansion of coterie into a field that, potentially, facilitates the kind of interpersonal and intertextual interactions through which the avant-garde is sustained. The academic study of literature effectively carries on the process of dissemination started by the poets themselves: teachers present poems and theories of poetics to students for explication and analysis, while critics engage with texts, authors, and other critics within the sphere of scholarly discussion.
Yet as with any such pedagogic enterprise, there are dangers inherent in this situation. Herd has contrasted academia’s potential for experimental and enthusiastic interaction with poetry to the contemporary reality of bureaucratic stagnation and closed authoritarian approaches to teaching. As he points out, such elements of academia serve as “blockages,” preventing “the circulation of works and values that enthusiasm sets in motion” (105). Play comes to a close, paidia departs, and the structures of ludus solidify into dogma. This situation results in academic discourse becoming alienated from the very poetry it studies.

It is just such a situation of stagnation and alienation that Koch targets in his early poem “Fresh Air.” As I have discussed in chapter 2, this poem presents the world of poetry as a battlefield between innovative, inspired young poets and caricatures of the academically entrenched New Critics. Yet as the internal self-subversions of “Fresh Air” ultimately work against such polarised binaries, so Koch’s later work demonstrates how there might be a way to engage with both poetry and academia without rejecting either the strictures of academia or the living practice of poetry. Koch’s approach to didacticism does not eliminate authority and constraint from these interpersonal and intertextual relationships. These centripetal forces remain vital to the perpetuation of poetry. His ongoing engagement with the transformative process of play does, however, demonstrate how final closure can be perpetually deferred. This engagement with poetry demands a constant understanding of the underlying power structures of both the dissemination of poetic technique and the social interactions of poets. In treating these areas and the interactions that take place within them as sites of play, Koch is able to make these power relations explicit. Just as Koch reduces the formal and thematic components of a poem to a conceptual framework that is both restrictive and empowering, so he presents the didactic relationship between teacher and student as involving a range of conventions that can be opened up to change through subversion and parody. Similarly, Koch treats the works of established poets both past and present not as ideals to which the contemporary poet should aspire, but rather as components in an expanding game of language out of which new poetry can arise. Understanding the intertextual nature of such play enables us to position
Koch’s own writing in a new context. He leaves behind a legacy of texts and techniques for other players to incorporate into their own creativity, producing new games—and new texts—as they play.
Endgames

Understanding how play functions in poetry is vitally important to understanding Kenneth Koch’s legacy. It is play that connects his poetry to its social contexts, and it is via play that Koch is able to negotiate the binaries of freedom and constraint on both textual and social levels. Throughout this thesis I have examined just how Koch does this by positioning his work within my own framework of play poetics. I have described how the interaction of the energies of paidia and the conventions of ludus in Sun Out, When the Sun Tries to Go On, Ko, and The Red Robins allow for a variety of games to be played out between poet, text, and reader. I have demonstrated how these games provided Koch with the means both to engage with and disengage from the social and political realities of his time. In examining “Fresh Air,” “The Artist,” Hotel Lambosa, and The Art of the Possible, I have shown how Koch harnessed the unstable energies of these games to explore and exploit the constraints of oppositional poetics, formal experimentation, and narrative convention. Understanding these texts as part of larger networks of play has also enabled me to explore the importance of social poetics in Koch’s work. My analysis of The End of the Evening and Making It Up shows how Koch positioned himself both inside and outside his own games. In these projects, as well as in his work teaching creative writing, he acted as both player and facilitator of play, guiding the activity of others even as he attempted—as the self-subversions of “The Art of Poetry” and “The Art of Love” show—to avoid the stagnation of authoritarian didacticism and mechanical formalism.

The implications of this thesis do not end with Koch. In reassessing his work, I have also shown the utility of a play framework for engaging with issues vitally important to both Cold War–era U.S. literary history and our own contemporary moment. The ostensibly rigid binaries of oppositional poetry that marked the latter half of the twentieth
century have, since the turn of the twenty-first century, become increasingly unsustainable. Cole Swenson and David St. John, writing in their introduction to the 2009 anthology *American Hybrid: A Norton Anthology of New Poetry*, claim that such binary categorisations are outdated and that “the contemporary moment is dominated by rich writings that cannot be categorized and that hybridize core attributes of previous ‘camps’ in diverse and unprecedented ways” (xvii). Ann Keniston reiterates this point, arguing that the poetry of the first decade of the twenty-first century is “splintered, heterodox, and hybrid” (658), while Davidson has claimed that it is “centrifugal in its dispersion and distraction” (“American Poetry” 598). The apparent heterogeneity of contemporary poetry has, however, resulted in the rise of new orthodoxies. It is in recognising and navigating these orthodoxies that Koch’s use of the subversive energies of paidia continues to be relevant.

Jed Rasula, writing in 1997, describes a literary landscape still dominated by the idea of poetry as “formally conservative” lyricism—what he terms “self-expressive, family snapshot verse” (392). Since the turn of the current century, however, this paradigm has undergone a significant change. Brian Reed has described how recent English-language poetry has been marked by a widespread focus on “redirected language” in which poets consciously “limit the range of their vocabulary and the variability of their stylistic level” (“In Other Words” 759). Just as Koch constructed open-ended ludic systems for himself and others to play with, a variety of poets now creatively navigate, in Reed’s words, “complex situations involving both immutable systemic rules (formal constraints) and chaotic freedom (permission to fill in the blanks however desired)” (*Phenomenal Reading* 193). As I have shown in this thesis, such rule-driven poetics have long been a feature of avant-garde poetry. As well as Koch and his New York School peers, poets associated with Language poetry, such as Charles Bernstein, Lyn Hejinian, and Ron Silliman, have
extensively practiced rule-based formal experimentation. Yet just as Koch’s ludic teaching techniques described in *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams* achieved considerable success in mainstream education, these avant-garde practices have come to be accepted—and, to a degree, assimilated—into the mainstream of university poetry workshops and prestigious awards committees. Reed cites the example of Natasha Trethewey’s Pulitzer Prize winning *Native Guard* (2006), which includes free verse sonnets, a villanelle, a ghazal, a pantoum, and a palindromic poem, as an example of a non-avant-garde poet using such techniques to significant critical acclaim (*Phenomenal Reading* 192). Trethewey’s subsequent appointment as the 2012 United States Poet Laureate emphasises her stable position within the mainstream. The case of Canadian avant-garde poet Christian Bök’s *Eunoia* (2001) is even more striking. The book is made up of five chapters, each utilising only a single vowel: an “immutable rule system,” as Reed puts it, within which Bök enjoys the “chaotic freedom” of being able to “fill in the blanks” as he so desires (193). *Eunoia*, which Bok himself describes as being “directly inspired by the exploits of the Oulipo,” won the Griffin Poetry Prize in 2002 and was a bestseller in the U.K (193). These successes are evidence of a significant shift in the status of such explicitly ludic poetry.

There are both positive and cautionary aspects to this widespread acceptance of poetic gameplay. Filreis interprets recent interest in experimental formalism as a response to dominant normative views of political and linguistic reality. As he puts it, “many American poets, after the demise of communism and the diminished relevance of anticommunism, continue to seek in poetry today an alternative” to officially sanctioned rhetoric (322). Just as Koch used play to undermine the binaries of the Cold War era, so these poets attempt to transform rule systems from instruments of oppression into the malleable scaffolding of liberatory improvisation. In this way both avant-garde poets and more traditional lyric-oriented poets attempt to form for themselves “a new kind of subject
position that mimics the knowledge industry’s flexibility without becoming one of its bolsters” (605). The unfortunate side effect of such poetry’s popularity, however, is that the subversive energies of experimentalism risk being co-opted into what Reed terms “the service of a chastened, qualified humanism” (*Phenomenal Reading* 194). Reed’s observations mirror Perloff’s analysis, made in 2005, of how “the absorption of Language poetry into the academy inevitably meant that the application of its principles would be codified, watered down, and misunderstood” (“Avant-Garde Community” 131). In this way, potentially transformative and destabilising poetic practices have been corralled within the tidy boundaries of literary acceptance.

Equally significant is the continuing tendency of the ludic structures of poetic play to solidify into rigid convention. Bök himself, in discussing *Eunoia*, describes how he took care to avoid what he terms the Oulipian tendency for the “fulfilment of the constraint” to “take precedence over all other literary concerns.” In such cases the finished texts comes to resemble, as he puts it, “the completion of a rote exercise.” To avoid such mechanical textual outcomes, Bök describes how he attempts to sustain conventional “meaning” and thematic coherence throughout the text. Ultimately, of course, the requirement to address these “other literary concerns” is itself a form of constraint. Bök’s solution to the mechanical tendencies of ludus, then, is to add additional less overt ludic elements that work on thematic and aesthetic levels. The overlapping of these different elements creates, in *Eunoia*, something that blurs the boundaries between Oulipian play-text and so-called conventional literature.

Koch’s negotiation of the polarities of his own era offers an alternative model for how we might navigate contemporary problems of normalisation and formal stagnation. In all his work, Koch fights against stagnation and dogmatism through neither an outright rejection of form nor the adoption of additional forms of constraint. Instead, he
counterbalances the stability of ludus against the instabilities of paidia. His subversions and transformations of ludic systems, both on the page and in social contexts, demonstrate how the productive qualities of constraint are interdependent with the chaotic energies of paidia. Without ludus, paidia is exhausted: but without paidia, ludus solidifies into dead formalism. It is by recognising the dynamic and mutually transformative nature of this relationship that the normative tendencies of poetic fashion can be subverted.

Contemporary poetry thus escapes what Rasula has termed the “sanctuary space of the museum” in which poems and poetics are fixed in position (4), becoming recognisable instead as a shifting field of interpersonal and intertextual relationships that exist both within and without officially sanctioned boundaries.

Koch continues to occupy a significant position in this changing field. Shortly after his death in 2002, the online poetry journal Jacket hosted a tribute to him featuring poetry and prose from twenty-one contributors including editor John Tranter, Robert Creeley, and fellow New York School poet Barbara Guest. Many of the texts are elegiac, with Koch incorporated into the poem as an object of reminiscence and mourning. Yet pervading these texts there is also the sense that Koch is not merely the subject of the poetry but a collaborator in its production. Poet Nicole Mauro introduces her poem with the following statement:

I have written an ode to Kenneth Koch using—what else—Kenneth Koch. Certain lines from those familiar, collective addresses have been mixed with my own. O to have the peculiar resonance of being, for the time being, part of this poem.

Poet Mark Statman, writing in his own blog post of a subsequent commemoratory reading hosted by Charles North at Pace University, describes how one of his students at the event “noted that, ten years after his death, she felt she too was a student of Kenneth’s.” It is this sense of interactive connectivity—in which the poet is incorporated into a system that
exists outside conventional temporality—that is key to Koch’s continuing significance in contemporary poetry.

Such connections are not restricted to the United States. They also extend beyond national boundaries to engage other poets in games that are further transformed due to the new contexts in which they arise. In 2010 New Zealand poet Sue Wootton, an established and respected figure in mainstream New Zealand poetry, published a poem titled “Variations on a Theme by Kenneth Koch” on the online poetry journal Blackmail Press. While the title of the poem evokes comparisons with Koch’s own parodic “Variation on a Theme by William Carlos Williams,” the body of the poem connects to Koch’s “Alive for an Instant” (first published in 1975 in The Art of Love). Koch’s poem begins:

I have a bird in my head and a pig in my stomach
And a flower in my genitals and a tiger in my genitals
And a lion in my genitals and I am after you but I have a song in my heart
And my song is a dove (Collected Poems 247)

In her poem, Wootton mimics and builds upon these lines:

I have bird seed in my head and a guinea pig in my stomach
and my genitals are blooming and possum-full of audacity even purring
With cat-like agility and I am after you but I am before you
And I have a song in my heart
And my song is an ostrich

In her very first line, Wootton plays a game of addition with elements of Koch’s original text: “bird” is expanded into “bird seed,” “pig” into “guinea pig.” In the lines that follow this game changes into a game of substitution. Wootton replaces Koch’s images with images distinctively her own; Koch’s graceful dove becomes an ungainly ostrich, while his lions and tigers are replaced with a specifically Australasian animal, the possum. Possums,
widespread throughout New Zealand since their colonial-era introduction from Australia, are considered a pest due to the damage they cause native plants and birdlife. Wootton’s poem, however, casts the introduction of such “foreign” elements in a more positive light. Just as her poem is open to invasion by a variety of fauna—possums, ostriches, guinea pigs, and the like—it also demonstrates how Koch’s influence can be taken up by another poet without weakening the distinctive individuality of either poetic voice. She goes on:

And every time I open my Glottis an erratum falls to the floor

It’s a Landfall but who is it that I wish to astonish?

I am Neil Finn I am Greg Johnson I am Dave Dobbyn

But how can this male strum be appealing? Do you like Manhire? My god

Most people want a man for keeps! So here I am

I have a takahe in my rejections I have a goshawk in my hair

Here Koch’s references to Lord Byron, Percy Shelley, and Aristo are replaced with New Zealand cultural referents: pop singers Finn, Johnson and Dobbyn, poet and academic Bill Manhire, and literary journals Landfall, Glottis, and Takahe become elements in Wootton’s own poetic game. Wootton thus takes up her own position within the open-ended network

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6 Manhire, head of the influential creative writing course at New Zealand’s Victoria University, has himself been responsible for a poem entitled “Homage to Kenneth Koch,” this one a collaborative poem written by his students using the techniques Koch outlined in Wishes, Lies, and Dreams:

I used to tear, but now I crumble.

I used to dream about clouds

but now I live inside them.

I used to care for what they say
of creativity initiated by Koch. Within this network, play is located at no one specific point, but is dispersed across the full range of poetic activity. The composition of a poem by a single poet is one specific instance of play, a game played by the poet in isolation, working within and without the conventions of poetry they choose to engage with. This same act of creativity becomes a game of creation and reception as the reader interprets—or attempts to interpret—the text laid down by the writer. Next, the reader takes up the role of writer, adopting and adapting the poems, styles, and themes that they have inherited and recasting them into new forms. The individual is, to play with Wootton’s formulation, not “after” Koch or “before” him, but alongside him in the moment of creative and collaborative interaction.

In *On the Edge*, a long poem recounting his travels in Africa in the 1980s, Koch himself provides an image emblematic of this relationship. Like many of his late poems—“The Art of Poetry” and “The Art of Love” among them—*On the Edge* handles its subject matter in a relatively straightforward way. In the poem Koch’s playfulness does not manifest itself through exuberant wordplay or formal experimentation, but as more subtle explorations of narrative and autobiography. At one point in the text Koch describes his conversation with a member of the audience after a public reading:

> “You have made me,” the man in the beard said, “vibrate! I once wrote poems, then I stopped. To hear These poems you read,” he said, “though, made me vibrate Again and I wished to write again, which I may, and vibrate” (*On the Edge: Collected Long Poems* 325)

It is this vibratory transmission of energies that is, more than any specific poetic technique
or conceptual constraint, Koch’s fundamental legacy. Throughout his life he enmeshed himself in networks of creativity, collaborating with, guiding, and inspiring others in a wide variety of different poetic games. After his death his poetry remains actively in play, triggering responses from others and being transformed and transmitted onward by them in turn. In this thesis I have demonstrated how this play cannot be located in any one moment of writing or reading—how it exists, rather, in the ongoing interaction of poet with text, text with poet. Understanding Koch and his legacy in this way enables us to understand the shifting networks of interconnectivity through which contemporary poetry—and contemporary criticism—continue to move.
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