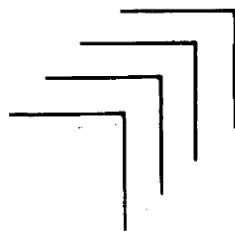




# DEREK BEAULIEU

① derekbeaulieu.wordpress.com/



Interview conducted September, 2010

canadian poet, publisher & anthologist  
**derek beaulieu** is a writer obsessed  
w/ the upscaling of lowercase gestures

beaulieu, who lives in Calgary, ran **housepress** — a micropublishing imprint dedicated to experimental and unusual forms of poetry and prose — from 1997-2004, editing and distributing nearly 300 pamphlets, broadsheets, chapbooks, books and boxed editions in that time. Print runs were usually between 40 and 100 copies, serving first and foremost as a vehicle for creating a dialogue between participants of the experimental minority, while simultaneously striving to occasionally expose more mainstream readers “to work which might be outside of their normal reading patterns”.

In 2005, beaulieu took the idea of documenting the small press scene further, co-editing (with Jason Christie and a. rawlings) *Shift & Switch: New Canadian Poetry*, an anthology for The Mercury Press. This perfect-bound snapshot of new poetry from across the country focused on presenting work from writers experimenting with the boundaries of poetry while working in various avant-garde traditions.

Meanwhile, with his own work, beaulieu released several books of poetry — *with wax* (Coach House, 2003); *Fragments from the Frag Pool* (Mercury Press, 2005) — and visual poetry — *fractal economies* (Talonbooks, 2006) — along with dozens of harder-to-find, small press appearances.

In recent years, beaulieu has shifted his focus towards “conceptual fiction”, experimenting with visual translations/rewritings of pre-existing texts. His book *Flatland*, for example, consists of visual patterns based on the typography of Edwin Abbott Abbott’s classic novel *Flatland*. His latest book, *How to Write* (recently released by Talonbooks), is a collection of words and sentences borrowed from other authors and strung together to create a brand new narrative. With *How to Write*, beaulieu gleefully illustrates Picasso’s dictum that “Good artists copy. Great artists steal.”

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**To open, I’d like to resample a bit of text you recently appropriated into one of your works: “Does the author guide his pen or does his pen guide him?” What are your thoughts on this chicken or egg dilemma?**

I know that in my case it’s a combination of the two; it’s a give-and-take of intentional and aleatory writing. That is, I rarely start a poem with a final product in mind, I allow for the text itself to propose new directions in both narrative and form.

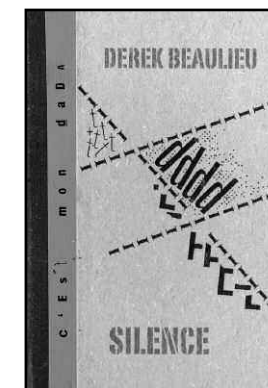
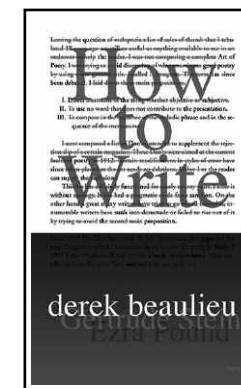
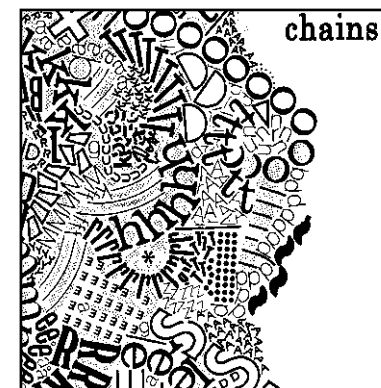
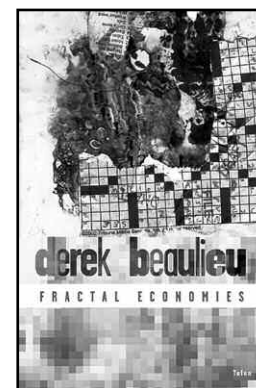
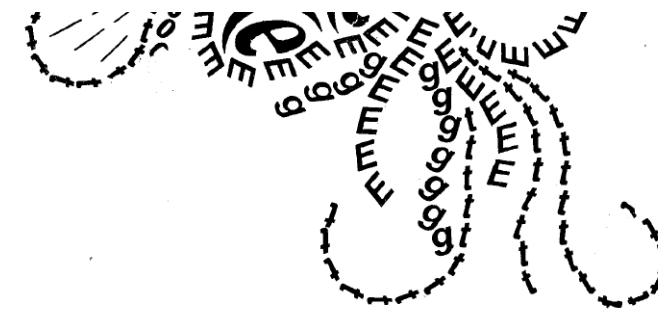
**Your new book, *How To Write*, is a full-flex collage text that’s being commercially framed as a work of fiction. In it, words and sentences are borrowed completely from**

**other writers, strung together to create a brand new narrative — it’s a work that is aptly described as “mash-up meets literature”. Talk about the project and why you decided to do it.**

*How to Write* is a collection of 10 short pieces which are formed entirely by sampling other people’s writing. Each piece is created by taking existing work and rearranging it, sampling it, manipulating it — consider it writing which is aware of the 3R’s: reduce, reuse, recycle. My visual poetry pays attention to the smallest particles of language — the mark, the punctuation, the letter and I was curious what would happen if I started looking at the level of the word and sentence.

**Was it a pleasurable undertaking?**

I found it a very pleasurable project actually — there’s a certain amount of glee involved in using readily available material and reshaping that material. As a child I was captivated by Lego. Each Lego kit came with an instruction booklet, and once that kit was made, I inevitably took the pieces apart and recombined them into a new form, a new spaceship,



a new house, a new fortress. *How to Write* treats language the same way: I isolate a particular piece, while retaining aspects of the instruction manual, and then recombine the words in a new, exciting order.

**You are interested in a “poetics of cheating” — describe this conceptual position and define its boundaries.**

My “poetics of cheating” is a cheeky way of suggesting that what we need most in poetry are things that are non-poetic. Poetry as a genre can only benefit from “cheating”, from approaching and writing poetry in as many non-poetic means as possible. Instead of writing poetry with a pen and paper, why not look to other means? The late Bob Cobbing, for instance, was a master at mimeograph and photocopier manipulation and would poetic texts from utensils, from clothing, from tree rings. The late Bern Porter, upon rejecting his career in nuclear physics, moved into found poetry; he composed solely by using material he would find in newspapers, magazines and advertising.

My colleague Christian Bök argues that we no longer need poets who write like poets — we have more than enough poetry written by people already. He argues that what we need are poems written from the position of microwave oven, asteroids, toaster ovens — anything to “cheat” around our own subjectivity.

**Much of your visual poetry is created using Letraset, which you’ve framed as a tool made obsolete by advances of technology. It’s also a material that has been used by concrete poets for decades, arguably hitting its popular peak in the late 70s. Is contemporary work created using Letraset therefore nostalgic?**

I don’t think its nostalgic, no. I find it interesting how technology has a lifespan, and only once it has passed from usefulness in a larger economic system does it move into an artistic one. Letraset was more ubiquitous

in terms of concrete poetry in the 1970s and 80s when its availability was more prevalent, however it failed to gain a larger foothold in the poetic community because of its cost (which was often over \$20 per sheet).

Once Letraset dropped in price — which was brought about by the increased use of computers in the graphic design and drafting areas — it then had larger use in poetic circles. Now, it is rarely found in stores, and is used mostly is novelty fonts for scrap-booking and hobbyists. The last store I was able to find Letraset in bulk sold mostly to model airplane builders who required smaller dry-transfer typefaces in order to correctly label scratch-built models. Its use has become more and more hermetic.

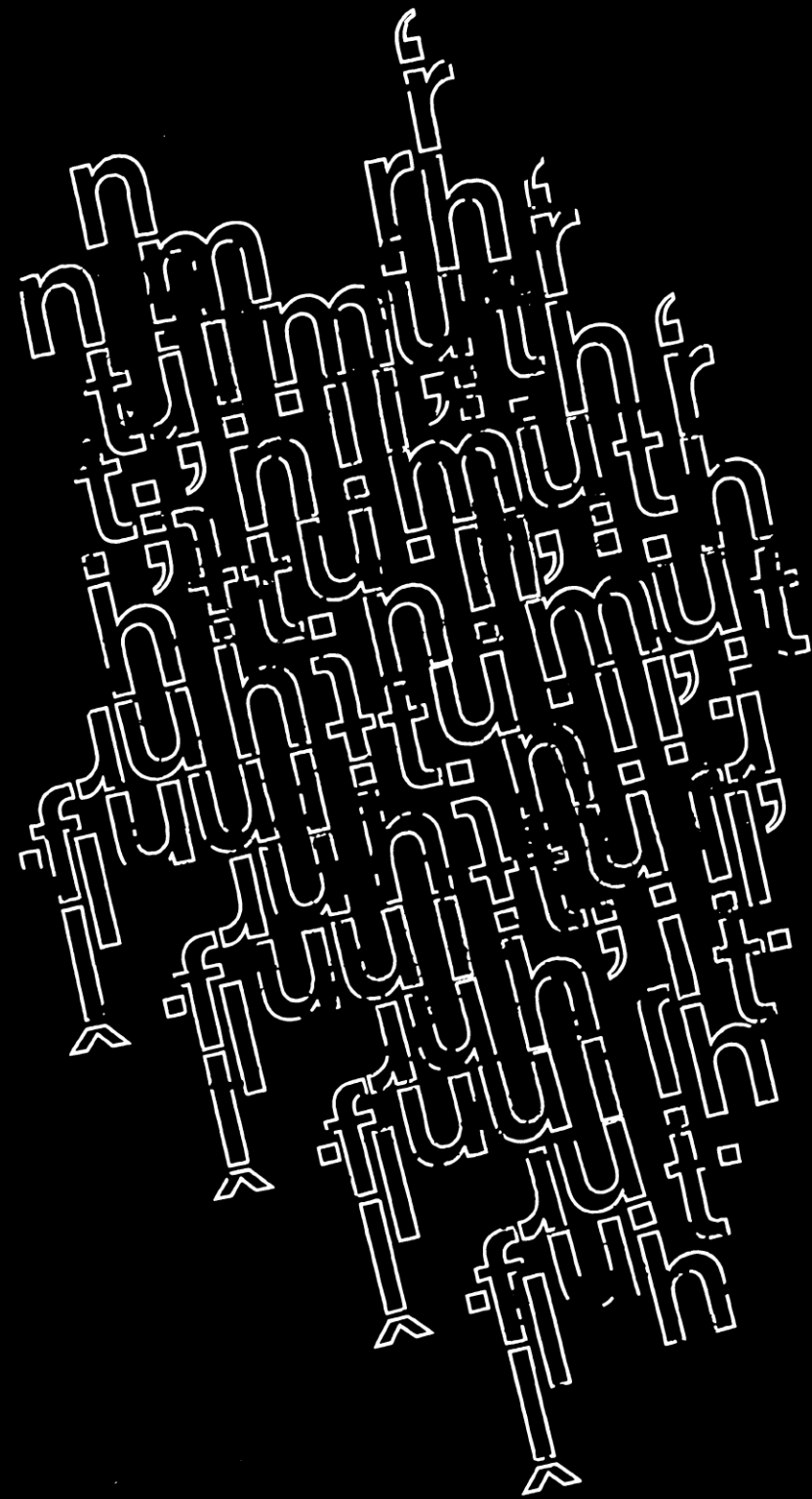


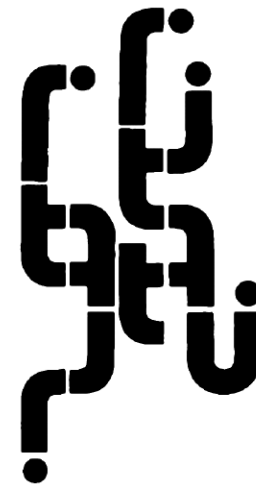
**How does a book like *Chains* capitalize or comment on this history?**

I think *Chains* (which is now sadly out of print) works within a tradition of concrete poetry both within and outside of Canada. I look to inspiration in the work of Peggy Lefler, jwcurry, Bob Cobbing (UK), Dom Sylvester Houedard (UK) and Pete Spence (Australia) in particular. I don’t know that we need to capitalize on histories of poetics, instead we need to try and create a dialogue with the work — a means of creating discussion and keeping older pieces within a cultural vocabulary.

**How do you see your work fitting into the experimental CanLit landscape?**

There is an incredibly strong poetic landscape in Canada, and one which has a great deal of space for





series of 22 sculptural shadowboxes (insect mounting Cornell Drawers) consisting entirely of the contents of a single box of **Alpha-Bits** cereal sorted by letter.

I mount each letter individually on a pin, according to strict scientific standards — 180 letters per 19”w x 16”h x 3”d drawer. The drawers are hung vertically placing them in an interstitial space between scientific research and visual artwork. Scientifically and linguistically, this project mixes its metaphors to treat the population of a single box of **Alpha-Bits** cereal as a population sample of a physical embodiment of the English alphabet. The sample is *sorted* (by letter), *counted* (in order to compare population distribution), and *mounted* (to exact scientific standards, after research and discussions with professors concerning correct methods) as one sees insects and butterflies mounted in natural history museums. Language is thus treated as ready for physical study, where the viewer can observe the appreciable artistic variety within the design of each letter. ✎

experimentation. I consider my work as in dialogue with poets such as Kevin McPherson Eckhoff, Donato Mancini, Helen Hajnoczky and Jesse Ferguson. Each of these poets are approaching language and its particles in different ways. For all of us, it's part of our job to challenge the boundaries of what poetry can be, and try to make new areas accessible for poetic experimentation.

**What is your writing routine like?**

I find writing an extremely social activity, and so writing is something I'm working on pretty continuously. Most days I will find a means of writing — or participating in associated tasks like correspondence, applications, submissions and reading — for at least 3-4 hours per day (on top of teaching, spending time with my family and everything else that a life includes, of course). It's a continuous project: as I complete work I try to submit it relatively quickly to small- and medium-sized magazines, chapbooks, etc as a means of interrogating what poetry can be and what spaces it can occupy.

**What big project are you working on now?**

I have several projects on the go at the moment, but much of my energy is going into a series of 22 sculptural pieces — a 22 page “book” — which examines consumer culture and how it shapes language. *The Alphabet* is a

