

Material language for protest

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Material Language for Protest: collage in Allen Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra'

Abstract

This essay offers a critical re-reading of Allen Ginsberg's 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' (1966), re-situating it within the wider context of twentieth-century collage. It argues that Ginsberg's use of collage enabled him to articulate and embody the anti-Vietnam protest movement during the counterculture of the 1960s. His recognition of the potency of 'images juxtaposed', discovered when writing 'Howl' (1956), enabled him to deploy a material language for protest, in which he adhesively combined the physical with psychic, the personal with the political, and the prophetic with the cathartic, but in which he also created a space where readers and poem might encounter each another affectively. Although much has been written about this poem, it has yet to be comprehensively read in the context of the collage tradition – a growing field of study within which it demonstrably sits. Reading it in this way – as an inheritor of and participant in a global political art-form predicated on resistance and fracture – positions the poem within a more extensive lineage than it has hitherto been assessed, and, most importantly, reveals the ways in which Ginsberg used collage both to demonstrate and to attempt to overcome what he saw as the complicity between language and the perpetuation of the war in Vietnam.

Keywords: Allen Ginsberg; Wichita Vortex Sutra; poetry; collage; Vietnam War; counterculture; affect; protest; voice; materiality; 1966; political; language

‘simultaneous data’

Allen Ginsberg, whose leftist activism and poetic alchemy ‘foreshadowed and then incarnated the culture of the sixties’,¹ formed his poetics affectively, in relation to the world as he experienced it. He subscribed to his friend Frank O’Hara’s belief, voiced in his mock-manifesto ‘Personism’ (1959), that poetry should occur not between pages but between people – between, as Ginsberg put it, ‘my own soul’s ear and a few other golden ears’.² He was celebrated for his often idiosyncratic (and not necessarily poetic) oral qualities, famously talking the Oakland Hell’s Angels out of disrupting a peace march, testifying in courts of law as to the literary importance of his own work and that of others including William S. Burroughs, intoning Hare Krishnas at an unmoved Ezra Pound in Rapallo in 1967, and attempting to diffuse tensions between protestors and the police at the 1968 Democratic Convention by repeatedly chanting his favourite mantras. From 1949 onwards he used his poetry to give voice to big social, political, and economic themes, exploring everything from the power of incantation to money, the media, sex, and death, repeatedly diagnosing the soul of the American establishment with hypocrisy and mendaciousness. Reaching an extraordinarily wide audience (wider, in all likelihood, than any other poet of the 20th century, thanks to his cult status, television coverage, association with other cult figures including Jack Kerouac, Andy Warhol and Bob Dylan, not to mention his enthusiasm for public performance), he accepted ‘with humour and courage his role as public spokesman’.³

This was particularly the case during the long years of widespread protest against the Vietnam War. The absence of (or refusal of the government to accept) accountability for the atrocities and catastrophic loss of life that occurred during the war, combined with what Ginsberg viewed to be the complicity of the press in hoodwinking those who remained on American soil into believing that the war was

under control, led him to write a stinging rebuke to Leo Cherne, Lyndon Johnson's presidential advisor on economics, in December of 1966. 'Violence leads only to more violence', he wrote; 'the War is, and all war is, and always was, a consequence of personal aberration, not some mysterious consequence of non-human forces'.⁴ By the mid-1960s, as American involvement in the war in Vietnam escalated (American troops in the region doubled between January and December of 1966), it was clear to Ginsberg that if he was to successfully disrupt the untruth that the war was 'some mysterious consequence of non-human forces' he would need to heighten and develop the oracular language for which his work up until this point had become well-known. In order to demonstrate the duplicity and unprecedented violence of the war in Vietnam, he needed to make the war, and those mechanisms (primarily the press) which attempted to cover the war up, an emphatic part of his poetic schema.

To do this, he turned to collage, a mode of creative practice that had already revealed to him the potency of 'images juxtaposed',⁵ and which increasingly formed the cornerstone of his poetics. Named after the glue (*la colle*) in which it originates only 'for purposes of simplicity',⁶ collage far exceeds the limited (and limiting) terms within which it was first defined in the early twentieth-century. As a literary-artistic technique predicated on the cutting or tearing apart of existing phenomena, followed by a process of re-assembly, collage embodies an intellectual, aesthetic, and emotional relationship with an artist's environment. It provokes, as the abstract expressionist artist Robert Motherwell put it, 'the sensation of physically operating on the world'.⁷ An encounter with a collage is charged and performative, and requires a certain degree of creative engagement as well as absorptive spectatorship. Making sense of a number of distinct fragments contained within a single frame of reference involves trying to interpret what David Banash refers to as 'a dialogic mass of voices'.⁸ The idea of such a 'mass of

voices' speaks widely to post-war creative practice, which, often through the use of collage, turned urgently, as Stephen Fredman has observed, 'toward the body as a repository of unrecognized cultural potential'.⁹ Furthermore (and in keeping with Motherwell's analogy), collage evokes the performance of an autopsy, a historically public act of constructive mutilation dependent on incision and scrutiny to bring about the destruction of one accepted body (of meaning) and the creation of another. As Elizabeth Klaver observes in *Sites of Autopsy*, 'performing an autopsy in the West has meant surgical mutilation [...] combining *ana-tomē* (to cut up) and *auto-opsis* (to see with one's own eyes) to produce a piercing gaze'.¹⁰ In enabling artists and writers to dissect, or to 'physically operate' on, their increasingly fractured societies, collage facilitated the turn of a 'piercing gaze' toward them, resulting in the active (re-) construction of meaning (creatively, critically, culturally) and, crucially, the defiance of the fiction of a single, universal totality (or the lie of a whole and healthy body).

From its inception in 1912, when Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque began using it in an effort to embody life rather than merely to document it (in other words, 'to reintegrate themselves and their art into life'¹¹), collage evolved as an inherently political practice. Like Picasso, Ginsberg was very much an artist-in-society, who also used real 'reports and accounts' in the context of his collages.¹² Picasso's clippings indicated the imminent onset of the First World War, as well as anarchist and socialist responses to it; Ginsberg's were also cut directly from 'the newspaper language factory' (p.418), and exposed coverage of and responses to the war in Vietnam as they appeared in publications including *Life*, the *Omaha World Herald*, the *Lincoln Nebraska Morning Star*, and the *Kansas City Times*, among others. Composing 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' over fifty years after Picasso had first used collage to explore his own growing sense that the 'world was becoming very strange and not exactly reassuring', as he told Françoise

Gilot, Ginsberg appropriated and adapted his methods to express a related sense of social and political disquiet. For Picasso, and for other members of the historical avant-garde, from Max Ernst to Filippo Marinetti to Vladimir Tatlin, the challenge was to use collage to dismantle what was held to be the dangerously soporific didacticism of representative art and literature. Picasso told Gilot:

We tried to get rid of *trompe-l'oeil* to find *trompe l'esprit*. We didn't any longer want to fool the eye; we wanted to fool the mind. The sheet of newspaper was never used in order to make a newspaper [...] It was never used literally but always as an element displaced from its habitual meaning into another meaning to produce a shock between the usual definition at the point of departure and its new definition at the point of arrival [...] This displaced object has entered a universe for which it was not made and where it retains, in a measure, its strangeness.¹³

For Picasso and his contemporaries – and for Ginsberg and his, half a century later – collage was a method and an art-form that entered and engaged the hinterland between reality and representation, an interactive space predicated on the regenerative power of the quotidian, the vernacular, or the discard. As I discuss elsewhere, the unnerving qualities of Picasso's collages are rooted in the surface disruption caused by amputated fragments and alien textures within the context of the more traditional medium of oil paint. It was not enough simply to paint a picture of ripped newsprint or other incongruous elements, as *trompe l'oeil* painters had done during the nineteenth century, because, as Picasso says, the aim of a collage was to fool the mind (*trompe l'esprit*) rather than just the eye. The transposed, juxtaposed fragments in Picasso's collages, and in 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', do more than just *portray* the disquiet their creators experienced, and the socio-political menace they diagnosed: rather, they *embody* these

ruptures, their severed nature indicating the existence elsewhere of the damaged body from which they have been rendered, either destroyed completely or intriguingly continuing to exist, albeit maimed in some way. For Ginsberg, this enabled him to expose and undermine the duplicitousness of language, which he felt had been co-opted by establishment America in a hypocritical attempt to legitimise the ‘American Eagle beating its wings over Asia’ (p.407).

Of course, whilst collage was initially employed by radical artists and writers like Tristan Tzara and André Breton who aimed to destabilise or even destroy traditional representational, institutional, and hegemonic templates, by the mid-1960s collage *was* the template. At once a countercultural sensibility and a technique, and a mode of thinking, creating, and being that spanned art, literature, and music both formally and affectively, it had become the go-to method for blocking commercially-motivated control mechanisms and subverting traditional methodologies of reading and interpretation. In Brandon Taylor’s words, by mid-century collage was ‘indifferent to questions of form or niceties of theory’.¹⁴ from the walls of teenage bedrooms to the Museum of Modern Art, via zines, music studios, publishing houses, and advertising companies, collage was everywhere. Jackson Pollock, Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Jasper Johns, Robert Rauschenberg, Allan Kaprow, Joseph Cornell, Joe Brainard, and Jess, to name but a few key art world figures, had all used or were using it in various ways, unified by the processes of transforming the un-extraordinary into art in order to force questions from viewers about what might be concealed within the stuff of everyday life. Members of Ginsberg’s immediate circle were experimenting with it frequently, both individually and in collaboration with others. Close friends including William S. Burroughs, Gregory Corso, Frank O’Hara and Bob Dylan incorporated collage into their writings, again in various ways ranging from the physical (Burroughs

and Corso) to the conceptual (O'Hara and Dylan). Again, though, different methods were unified by a privileging of the idea of creative re-use, with the aim of denying, or warning against, the comfort and ease of the singular perspective, or unified, universally-applicable, truth. To borrow from Yve-Alain Bois' review of a 2005 Rauschenberg retrospective at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, one of the key effects of collage is to 'prevent the beholder from resting assured in a given viewpoint and thus preclude any synthetic reading of the individualized works'.¹⁵

For Ginsberg, then, collage was an opportunity to tap into the zeitgeist, and to metonymically cut up those institutional bodies (namely, the press and the US government) that he saw as actively working to prevent the kinds of nuanced readings of popular and political culture that collage demanded. Collage provided a means of creating the right voice through which to articulate his prophetic politics, invoking and putting to use the power he felt lay in language and oral traditions. It also provided a vehicle for Ginsberg's inspiration, energy and ambition when it came to protesting the Vietnamese war, and enabled him to centralise himself as both healer and prophet in 1960s America. Using a methodological framework based on the collage experiments of the previous half-century, he employed collage as an act of literary disobedience, attempting to break down and reconstruct language in order to pose questions about how art comes into being, about how it negotiates crisis, and about the position of the reader as a creative, and even manipulative, space. William Carlos Williams, who had collaged his correspondence with Ginsberg into *Paterson* (1946-1958), and who was a significant influence on him, asserted that 'a work of art is important only as evidence, in its structure, of a new world which it has been created to affirm'.¹⁶ Ginsberg used collage to uphold this idea, but also to extend it: in assimilating his observed and/or experienced reality with the mystical properties he found in language, his collage poems

are both evidence and interrogations of the new world in which he found himself living during the 1960s.

Ginsberg was indebted to Williams, but also to Ezra Pound and to William Burroughs, who both used collage in their writing. In his use of found text and integration of alien fragments into his work, he can also be aligned with several twentieth-century avant-garde artists, notably Picasso and Marcel Duchamp, who pioneered these techniques.¹⁷ Following (and modifying) the examples of these poets and artists, many of Ginsberg's poems represent an affective engagement with the lived environment. Poetry, in his view, should be:

a collage of the simultaneous data of the actual sensory situation [which] the very nature of the composition ties [...] together. You don't really have to have a beginning, middle, and end – all they have to do is register the contents of one consciousness during the time period.¹⁸

This is also typical of the kind of written collage increasingly being produced in the postmodern era. There is a tendency, in postmodern collage such as William Burroughs's cut-ups, to include sections of text exactly as they originally appeared in the source material, and the effect of this, as Banash suggests, is to encourage readers to explore the possibility of 'alternative narratives' that exist simultaneously, a significant divergence from high modernist and historical avant-garde collage.¹⁹ By accreting fragments of quotidian material and heterogeneous details and combining them with carefully articulated expressions of his individual poetic consciousness, Ginsberg made particularly clear the importance of the idea of 'simultaneous data' for poems in which 'a personal voice stakes its ground in the social and political assemblage'.²⁰

Ginsberg's presentation of 'simultaneous data' in much of his 1960s poetry enabled him both to document and to approximate in his work the deception that he felt

the government and the press was practicing on the American people, and to explore what he felt to be the karmic consequences of America's participation and antagonism in the war in Vietnam. This poetry, in which fragments cohere through an 'intense, vatic, turned-on association of images' was part of what Morris Dickstein terms 'a new Surrealism', tuned into a 'dialectic of fantasy and fact, politics and vision'.²¹ 'Angkor Wat' (1963), a Surrealist-Buddhist-influenced response to US expansionism, for example, collages multiple voices together to form a discursive landscape in which the poet can actively converse with himself whilst resisting or subverting intimidating military discourse. 'Iron Horse' (1966), meanwhile, composed (like many of Ginsberg's poems) on public transport and dictated onto a tape recorder, collages into its pages a selection of eavesdropped conversations on a train ("It's my country, / better fight 'em over there than here"), snippets of news reports and references to news publications ('600 Cong Death Toll this week'; 'Lounge Car with Time Magazine / Amarillo Globe, US News & World Report'; 'the whole populace fed by News'), and an account of 'Ninety nine airforce boys / lined up with their pants down forever', who get on the train at Amarillo, 'the Iron Horse hurrying to war', and are just 'three months' away from deployment in Vietnam (pp.451-3). The combined effect of the many fragments that make up the poem is the evidence that supports the assertion, made by 'the lone beard who don't like / Vietnam War' (p.415), that 'the Karma accumulated bombing Vietnam [...] Karma of bribery, Karma blood-money / Must come home to America' (p.460). 'I will haunt these States', Ginsberg writes in 'A Vow' (1966, p.468), and the devastating cumulative effect of his 1973 National Book Award-winning collection *The Fall of America: Poems of These States*, which contains many of his most vitriolic collage poems and was intended, according to Ginsberg, 'to cover like a collage a lone consciousness travelling through these states during the Vietnam War',²² is exactly that.

His own life almost entirely eclipsed by that of the United States, Ginsberg's spirit lingers to deliver an apocalyptic judgment on its country. As Helen Vendler wrote in her *New York Times* review of the collection, 'Ginsberg's avalanche of detail is like the rain of dust and lava that preserved Pompeii – here lies America, in literally thousands of its emanations'.²³

Most important amongst the poems collected in *The Fall of America* is the collage apotheosis of Ginsberg's career, the 1966 poem 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', which originally appeared in his 1968 collection, *Planet News*. A long poem that explicitly deals with Ginsberg's conviction that violence is self-perpetuating and that war is a 'consequence of personal aberration', as noted above, 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' seeks to find a voice in which he can articulate these views, and attempt, through language, to bring about 'the end of the War' (p.415). Like many of his poems, it is intuitively written and highly performative. It employs the notion of 'simultaneous data' extensively throughout: auditory phenomena, such as crackling snippets from the radio ('*In advance of the Cold Wave / Snow is spreading eastward to / the Great Lakes*'), and visual images ('*Turn Right Next Corner / The Biggest Little Town in Kansas*' (p.402)), recorded verbally into a tape recorder as Ginsberg encountered them, are juxtaposed with imagined scenes ('*When a woman's heart bursts in Waterville / a woman screams equal in Hanoi*' (p.412)) and impassioned, vatic incantation ('*I lift my voice aloud, / make Mantra of American language now, I here declare the end of the War!*' (p.415)). Much has been written about this poem, but it has yet to be comprehensively read in the context of the collage tradition. Reading it as an inheritor of and participant in a global political art-form predicated on resistance and fracture does much to illuminate the 'vortex', as well as repositioning the poem more significantly within the wider field of American poetry. Importantly, such a reading provides a critical lens through which to

explore the ways in which Ginsberg uses collage both to demonstrate and to attempt to overcome the complicity between language and the perpetuation of the war in Vietnam, which can be usefully applied to his poetics more widely.

‘States of consciousness’: Language and Politics

‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ was part of a trio of poems (the other two were ‘Hiway Poesy LA-Albuquerque-Texas-Wichita’, and ‘Chances ‘R’’) composed by Ginsberg during and following a trip to Kansas in 1966. The intuitive, improvisatory collage-poem was ‘written’ in the back of a Volkswagen van in the company of Peter Orlovsky (Ginsberg’s partner), and Peter’s brother Julius. It was dictated, for the most part, like many of the poems which subsequently appeared in *The Fall of America*, onto a Uher tape recorder (itself a vortex of documented discourse) as the three men travelled through Kansas and Nebraska. The lines, images, and rhythms are suggestive of spontaneous choice, products of a nimble mind snatching at whatever fits as the poet (literally) goes along. The spontaneity of the poem is such that it was edited only where Ginsberg felt it necessary to foreground ‘an emotional feeling-center with a clear idea’.²⁴ Line breaks replace the ‘click’ sound, or collaged junctures, that the tape recorder made as it was turned on and off. The writing of the poem, according to Ginsberg, had less to do with poetic composition than with ‘absolutely logical scientific notation of [...] what was going on in the head’.²⁵ And not just in the head, but outside it too: the van criss-crosses ‘rolling earth hills / icy winter / gray sky bare trees lining the road’ [space in text is Ginsberg’s], whilst he recorded the voices of radio broadcasters bringing distorted reports from Vietnam: ‘60,000 / Northvietnamese troops now infiltrated but over 250,000 / South Vietnamese armed men’; “‘8000 American troops handle the situation’”; ‘Johnson got some bad advice’ (p.406), and so on.

His idea, as Daniel Belgrad argues, ‘was not abstract or expressionistic but in fact the closest approximation possible to truth or reality’ – a literal take on John Clare’s notion that he ‘found poems in the field / and only wrote them down’.²⁶ Like many collage works, ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ demystifies the phenomenon of writing and reveals it to the reader, mapping, in this case, not just the writer’s consciousness but also his physical journey from ‘*The Biggest Little Town in Kansas*’ to ‘Proud Wichita! vain Wichita!’ (p.418). Ginsberg’s poem also narrates the process of its own conception. As I have written elsewhere, collage not only ‘declares the continuity of realms’ – it also declares the *contiguity* of realms, and carries the ‘implications of a life beyond art’.²⁷ In other words, the environment out of which the collage develops, in this case a journey through Kansas in late winter, is ultimately that from which it is made, and that which the reader or viewer experiences affectively, with the force of encounter, as ‘a kind of immediate presence beyond the necessity of representation’.²⁸

Rich with allusions, voices, visual imagery, religious incantation, and associative wordplay, Ginsberg described the collection in which ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ appeared (and is of a piece with) as

chronicle taperecorded scribed by hand or sung condensed, the flux of car
bus airplane dream consciousness Person during Automated Electronic War
years, newspaper headline radio brain auto poesy & silent desk musings,
headlights flashing on road through these States of consciousness.²⁹

There are echoes, here, of the work of Ginsberg’s friend and fellow Beat writer William Burroughs, who for years had asserted what he felt to be the ground-breaking potency of cut-up and collage, particularly in relation to ideas of flux, the use of tape recordings, and the possibilities afforded by collage for rendering narrative as both an internal and an external process. Whilst composing *Naked Lunch* in the late 1950s, for instance,

Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg to confess: 'I have given up all attempts to impose any arbitrary form on my novel and it seems to be taking that is to already have a form of its own [...] All I have to do is transcribe' [sic].³⁰ Clearly making a bid for freedom from what he perceived to be the controlling forces of traditional narrative form, including his own prior outputs (*Junky* (1953) and the written but as yet unpublished *Queer* (1985)), he continued to vigorously extol the potentialities of a creative method based on collage inheritances and practices, writing:

if anyone finds this form confusing, it is because they are accustomed to the historical novel form, which is a three-dimensional chronology of events happening to someone already, for the purposes of the novel, dead. That is the usual novel *has happened*. This novel *is happening*. The only way I can write narrative is to get right outside my body and experience it.³¹

Having experienced 'narrative' both internally and externally, Burroughs had discovered he was able to create an oneiric text that oscillates frenetically between states of coherence and incoherence, and which it is impossible not to experience affectively. Deeply preoccupied with the body's ability (and inability) to act and the mind's parallel ability (and inability) to think,³² *Naked Lunch* compels its readers to grapple with discursive forces which lie outside the hegemonic representative paradigm. It embodies a total lack of interest in prescribed transitions or connections, and is, as John Tytell has argued, 'concerned primarily with capturing the sense of chaotic flux'.³³ In June of 1960, Burroughs wrote to Ginsberg enthusiastically encouraging him to attempt his cut-up method, specifying the need spontaneity. 'Don't theorize. Try it', he wrote, explaining:

Take the enclosed copy of this letter. Cut along the lines. Rearrange by putting section one by section three and section two by section four. Now read aloud and you will hear My Voice. Whose voice? ³⁴

Ginsberg's 'flux of car bus airplane dream consciousness Person during Automated Electronic War years, newspaper headline radio brain auto poesy & silent desk musings, headlights flashing on road through these States of consciousness' clearly bears the hallmarks of a serious attempt to follow Burroughs's advice to use automatic transcription and collage in order that the resulting text might assume a form of its own and function affectively. Like *Naked Lunch*, 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' is literally 'happening' – captured direct on Ginsberg's Uher tape recorder 'betwixt Lincoln and Wichita', ³⁵ with the lines 'arranged according to their organic time-spacing as per the mind's coming up with the phrases and the mouth pronouncing them'. ³⁶ It is swift, cinematic, and imbued with a sense of chaos and flux, in which transitions and connections exist but are repeatedly questioned or thrown into relief – as noted above, Ginsberg edited the poem only where he felt it was necessary to foreground 'an emotional feeling-center with a clear idea'. The body of the poet, 'lone man from the void' (p.402), is also collaged in the poem with the landscape through which he travels both physically and psychically, a cultural repository of a piece with the ecology of his surroundings – untheorized, experimental.

Recognisable, by 1966, by his long hair and beard, Ginsberg evokes these visual cues by figuring himself in the poem as a kind of sorcerer or high priest of language, using references to 'the Good Gray Poet' (p.408) and to 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice' to achieve this effect, as well as to render his own subjectivity ambiguous (for example, the invocation 'O longhaired magician' (p.409) could equally refer to himself as to Whitman). Language, meanwhile, is presented as simultaneously omnipotent and

ineffective. This is the poem's double-bind, negotiated through Ginsberg's amalgamation of prophetic and transcriptive modes. Like the broomstick in Goethe's poem, language in the wrong hands (or mouths) becomes a weapon or a threat, figured as 'black language / writ by machine!' (p.413). The problem, Ginsberg suggests, as his VW rolls 'On to Wichita to prophesy!', is that only he (and perhaps a limited number of others) realises this.³⁷ Language, in which sutras and songs and poems are transmitted, is facing colonization by the verbal blitzkrieg of false information, propaganda, and manufactured opinions about the Vietnam War. The 'Sorcerer's Apprentices' have 'lost control / of the simplest broomstick in the world: / Language'. By positioning himself as the Sorcerer, he renders his envisioned readership – American consumers of the wrong kind of language, represented by the inhabitants of the paradoxical vortex of the conservative Midwestern city of Wichita, 'the heart of the Vortex / where anxiety rings' (p.412) – as apprentices who have made a 'bad guess [...] / that's lasted a whole decade', or 'bum magicians [...] / working with the wrong equations'. In other words, he suggests, in failing to comprehend that 'the war is language', the 'dumb helper' is complicit in bringing about the impending 'radiation deluge' threatening to flood American living rooms.

Like Goethe's Sorcerer, Ginsberg is both generous in his clemency ('Thy sins are forgiven, Wichita!' (p.403)) and unambiguous in his critique of 'inferior magicians with / the wrong alchemical formula' (p.409). Using the often disembodied voice of the poet-sorcerer, he repeatedly declares 'the end of the War', as well as 'singing the requiem of Walt Whitman's democratic vistas':³⁸

What if I opened my soul to sing my absolutely self

Singing as the car crash chomped thru blood & muscle

tendon skull?

What if I sang, and loosed the chords of fear brow?

What exquisite noise wd

shiver my car companions?

I am the Universe tonite

riding in all my Power riding

chauffeured thru my self by a long haired saint with eyeglasses

What if I sang till Students knew I was free

Of Vietnam (p.405).

The 'exquisite noise' is the sound of the sutra ('Buddhist discourses or dialogues, joining teacher and student in transmission of Dharma, or doctrine, over generations' (p.771)) being read or sung aloud in the face of virulent lies and the attendant fear and destruction they caused (allegorised here as a violent car accident, as metal chomping 'thru blood and muscle'). Ginsberg contemplates the power of leading by doing: singing the sutra until his 'Students' know he is free, and can follow suit, as he has followed, variously and simultaneously, Whitman, Buddha, and the Supreme Being.

Concurrently, 'Angelic [Bob] Dylan', whose song 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' led Ginsberg to view him as his natural heir,³⁹ sings 'across the nation', 'His youthful voice making glad / the brown endless meadows / His tenderness penetrating aether, / soft prayer on the airwaves / Language language, and sweet music too' (p.417).

We can discern, in lines like these, as well as those quoted above, Ginsberg's poetic choices and editorial decisions in shaping the poem's audio transcript. At moments like this – when he chooses to include Dylan's 'soft prayer on the airwaves'

instead of, say, music by The Lovin' Spoonful or Dusty Springfield (or anyone else who was big in 1966) – Ginsberg reveals that 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' is underpinned by a decision-making process that functions at a remove from some of the more chance-generated, aleatory pieces that make up the collage canon. Clearly, he wants the readers of this poem to free themselves from the controlling forces of un-interrogated language, but, having done so, he also wants them to turn their thoughts in a certain direction. In this respect, the poem embodies the revolutionary potential that the Surrealists had identified in newspapers earlier in the century, and that, more recently, William Burroughs and Brion Gysin had been attempting to reanimate. Like newspapers, in which 'juxtapositions and chance encounters [...] cut against whatever editorial viewpoint or commercial agenda', 'Wichita Vortex Sutra is, to paraphrase Banash, encoded with promises.⁴⁰ For Ginsberg, as for Breton, 'the riot of chance connections and possibilities, even the palpably false promises of advertising, might be recombined to form a critical, utopian statement, revealing and actualizing the desire for a vastly different world'.⁴¹ But given what was at stake, Ginsberg in his role as poet-sorcerer is reluctant to hand total interpretive control of such a statement to his 'magic errandboy' (p.409), and keeps a relatively firm grasp on the utopian broomstick – as firm, at least, as the collage form he deploys will allow.

On the original back cover of *Planet News*, the collection in which 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' first appeared, Ginsberg referred to the poem as:

mind-collage & keystone section of progressively longer poem on "These States" – here Self sitting in its own meat throne invokes Harekrishna as preserver of human planet & challenges all other Powers usurping State Consciousness to recognize same Identity, thus, 'I here declare the End of the War'.⁴²

What Ginsberg refers to as ‘mind-collage’ here is his attempt to approximate and provide a framework for consciousness and experience in relation to human potency and fallibility, embodied, as he saw it, by the war in Vietnam, the central theme of ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’. Ginsberg’s mind, in the poem, functions metonymically at a national level, and is under constant threat of colonization, or usurpation, by the war, and by its attendant forces of commerce, materialism, and propaganda, whose chief weapon is language: ‘almost all our language has been taxed by war’, Ginsberg writes, and it is down to ‘all Powers of imagination’ to resist such taxation (p.414). But, of course, Ginsberg’s own chief weapon is also language, or the yoking of ‘mind-collage’ and ‘Harekrishna’ (a Sanskrit incantation addressing the Supreme Being, one of whose incarnations is Vishnu, or the god who removes illusion) and ‘Powers of imagination’ to reclaim control over language, that mythical broomstick threatening to drown the world.

Resistance, in the poem, is achieved through collage in a number of ways, but primarily through the poet’s attempt to take control of the fragmentation and abstraction he sees in the language used by the media to disseminate the war. As has been established, in using collage to ‘write’ ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’, Ginsberg was the inheritor of a practice born out of a desire to subvert traditional modes of reading and viewing.⁴³ Collage practices pioneered new possibilities in signification, as artists attempted to ‘reassert [...] control over a pictorial world’.⁴⁴ Picasso’s 1912 *Still Life With Chair Caning* paved the way for painting to be read as a form of writing – in other words, as ‘a system structured by arbitrary signs’,⁴⁵ which can be read horizontally, as well as seen vertically. The opposite was therefore also made true, with writing taking the form of a visual assembly over which our eyes may range freely, as writers attempted to reassert control over language, as Ginsberg does in ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’. Like many complex literary collage works, such as Ernst’s *Une Semaine De Bonté*

(1934), Burroughs' *Nova Trilogy* (1961-64) , or Cortázar's *Hopscotch* (1963), 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' operates using a shifting field of reference, based on a system of juxtaposition, fracture and fusion. In requiring readers to make their own connections, the encounter between reader and text becomes charged and affective, foregrounding the poet's subversive intentions. The poem provides no satisfying or pleasurable allusions (or illusions) and instead relies on gesture, discussion, reaction and perception in order to achieve its dissident effect. Cary Nelson recalls witnessing Ginsberg perform the poem:

[h]earing Ginsberg read 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' during the war was exhilarating. In a large audience the declaration of the war's end was collectively purgative. The text of the poem retains that fragile, deluded but dramatic effectiveness because it registers its unresolvable ambiguities with such clarity.⁴⁶

In 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' Ginsberg uses his position as both a popular figure and an outsider to give voice to a range of communities, from 'students [...] trembling in their beds', to 'little girls suspecting their elders of murder', to boys 'chilled in the heart by the mailman / with a letter from an aging white haired General / Director of selection in Deathwar' (pp.412-3). In defiance of 'all this black language' (p.413) he offers an affective invitation:

Come, Nebraska, sing & dance with me –

Come lovers of Lincoln and Omaha,

hear my soft voice at last (p.403).

The defiance in the poem is not measured, but it calls for, gives examples of, and legitimizes alternative means of political participation, whether in the form of 'Angelic

Dylan singing across the nation’ or ‘A lone man talking to myself’ or the ‘Mantra of American language’, with the power to ‘declare the end of the War’. As Judith Butler suggests in *Excitable Speech*, not only is it ‘clearly possible to speak with authority *without* being authorised to speak’, but it is also this kind of ‘insurrectionary speech’ that brings about social transformation.⁴⁷ ‘Black Magic language’ (p.409) – the language of collage – enables him to reclaim ‘language abused for Advertisement’ or to defy ‘Senators reinterpreting language’ (p.410) and move to declare:

I lift my voice aloud,

make Mantra of American language now,

I here declare the end of the War! (p.415)

In breaking down the false constructs of the language used in news reports and political speeches (through, for example, the anaphoric repetition of the phrase ‘Put it this way’ (p.407), the recurring motif of the ironically-referenced ‘bad guess’, the interspersing of cut-up news reports with graphic descriptions of the very scenes they are not describing, and the semantic satiation caused by the sustained repetition of the word ‘language’) Ginsberg is able to move language, as experienced by the reader, into a realm of potent disorientation. This is an alinguistic state that effectively mimics the experience of being bombarded by information, misinformation, and disinformation.

Toward the end of the poem, Ginsberg deconstructs several pages from the ‘Eagle News Services Saigon’ in a highly visual, atemporal section of collage that emphasises the failure of language to articulate the reality of the physical world and the harm it inflicts on the body, particularly during conflict. The section begins with a headline which is announced as being one (‘Headline Surrounded Vietcong Charge Into Fire Fight’). This indicates the shaping forces of the ‘newspaper language factory’

behind the information which will subsequently be presented, reminding us of its constructed nature. Immediately following this, however, Ginsberg cuts into the newspaper page, severing the headline from its article for six lines, in order to insert a graphic alternative narrative more akin with the subjective war stories of Michael Herr than with the coverage usually provided in contemporary print journalism during the Vietnam war, and focussed not on the American war effort but on ‘a sensitive yellow boy by a muddy wall’, one of many people experiencing ‘The last spasms of the dragon of pain’. There is no opportunity to dwell on this, however: the original news report, ‘Continued from page one’, is pasted back into the poem, and proceeds for another line and a half, interrupted inexplicably by a blank space about a centimetre long and the word ‘area’. The words ‘Harvest Moon last December’ appear next, apropos of nothing – they appear to be related, given their temporal nature, but their combination results in uncertainty, because Harvest Moon is usually in the early fall (not December). This is compounded by the fact that immediately following them comes the repeated word ‘language’, by this point in the poem simultaneously familiar and almost entirely meaningless. The news report continues for five lines, its factual details cut into sections demarcated by the phrase ‘language language’, until it appears to merge with the Herr-esque story told several lines previously. The language of objective information-sharing (‘the Marines killed 256 Vietcong captured 31’) becomes more subtly emotive:

Some of the

Language language

Communist

Language language soldiers

charged so desperately

they were struck with six or seven bullets before they fell.

The repeated use of the word ‘charged’ suggests that this is the story that followed the headline that opened the section (‘Surrounded Vietcong Charge Into Fire Fight’), but the descriptive word ‘desperately’ creates a different tone, one more akin to the more emotionally-attuned interjecting story about the final ‘suffering’ of the ‘sensitive yellow boy’. It suggests a level of perception typically absent from jingoistic Vietnam war reports, which tended to view the Vietcong as dangerously inscrutable: these lines bear the authority of witness. The fractures that typically mark a collage out as a collage have become blurred. A few lines later, following more repetitions of ‘language language’ cut into more factual-sounding details (‘60 Machine Guns [...] in La Drang Valley’), we are presented with what sounds like a diary entry (‘the terrain is rougher infested with leeches and scorpions’), followed by the admonishing interjection of Ginsberg’s vatic voice into this by now almost hallucinogenic narrative (‘The war was over several hours ago!’), shortly before ‘Angelic Dylan’ begins singing *Queen Jane Approximately* on the radio and we realise we are back in the VW van (all quotations pp. 416-7).

The effect of this passage is the emergence of the reader into *Śūnyatā*, or ‘awakened emptiness’.⁴⁸ In other words, rather than asserting the linguistic power of symbols and imagery over us, Ginsberg has instead collaged together a range of phenomena and encouraged us to simply observe it in detail, intuiting any possible connections. This section is layered; it combines self-evident fissures with ones which are harder to discern; it both cuts apart, and cuts together. It moves at pace, and Ginsberg’s use of collage here results in sudden shifts, erratic spacing, elisions, contemporary allusions, disjunctive language, and unreasoned transitions. Above all, it resists what David Lehman calls New Critical-style ‘symbol-hunting’.⁴⁹ But symbol-

hunting is not required: our response to ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ is visceral, not rational: we experience it with the force of encounter, as we are compelled to withdraw from the linguistic fallacy and feel before we think. As André Breton observed, collage can combine ‘two widely separate realities without departing from the realm of our experience [...] bringing them together and drawing a spark from their contact’.⁵⁰ Here, ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ brings together the widely separate ‘realities’ of the much-publicised official narratives of the Vietnam war with less well-known personal accounts and imagined horrors, and the spark he draws is the realisation of the vast gulf between the two. The act of withdrawing from the rational economy of language, in this way, in favour of a performative, subjective mode, was, as Burroughs would argue in 1969, ‘the most subversive move to any establishment’,⁵¹ because it rendered the imposition of law by any control mechanism obsolete.

‘the language that is also yours’: Freedom of the Mind

This internal liberation, or freeing of the mind and the imagination (and dismantling of ‘conflicting language, language proliferating in airwaves’ (p.410)) is suggestive of a self-destructive code – even a form of skywriting, in which a message dissolves and disappears as it is given. ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ presents only fragmented evidence of the US in the depths of both war and winter, and our response to this evidence is largely dependent upon our own subjectivities. The poet is, after all, searching ‘for the language / that is also yours’ (p.414). Broken down, the poem suggests, words have little intrinsic ‘meaning’. Ezra Pound’s ideogram, the image of a ‘man standing by his word’ – ‘the Chinese Written Character for truth’ – is both welcomed in the poem for its ability to visually capture in an instant what English words cannot, and interrogated:

Word picture: forked creature

Man

standing by a box, birds flying out

representing mouth speech. (pp.408-9)

Man stands helplessly by whilst his words take flight – fleeting and mercurial, the scattering birds are like the fragments of the collage that is the poem as a whole: individually they can do little more than *represent* speech, but collectively (subjectively) they are able to capture ‘perhaps more than any other work, the precise atmosphere of the country at the height of the war’.⁵² Collage enables Ginsberg to interact intellectually, emotionally and physically with his environment, deliberately drawing attention to the inconsistencies in conventional metaphoric language and creating a matrix through which glimpses of vision – of resistance – might penetrate. Collage involves ‘both placing and ellipsis’,⁵³ and functions simultaneously as the facilitator of both determined protest and silent, stoic resistance. By using a tape recorder to inscribe his protest Ginsberg embraces – or lays claim to – the electronic environment which, in the form of television, radio reports, and advertising, is the vehicle for the legitimisation of bodily and linguistic violence by establishment America (‘Are screaming faces made of dots, / electric dots on Television?’ (p.408)). In other words, he enters into dialogue with the establishment, speaking its language. But as Cary Nelson suggests, ‘Ginsberg manages a gesture whose political significance is precisely its powerlessness. If the war for us is language, he will let it end on his tongue’.⁵⁴ He uses collage to conjure a sort of absent presence – something akin to Susan Sontag’s notion of ‘a speech beyond silence’ or, perhaps, Bakhtin’s carnival laughter, that both ‘asserts and denies [...] buries and revives’.⁵⁵ This speaks to his aim

to be both healer and prophet, and to turn ‘political demonstrations into exemplary spectacle’ that could exist, and function, ‘OUTSIDE the war psychology’.⁵⁶ ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ was quickly established as the counterculture’s most profound rejoinder to the Vietnam War. It was first published by *The Village Voice* on 28 April 1966, and went on to appear in the *L.A. Free Press*, *Ramparts*, *the Fifth Estate*, *the Berkeley Barb* and *Peace News* (UK). It was also featured in *Life* (27 May 1966), and distributed in pamphlet form by City Lights Books. Much of its potency lies in its mutability, subjectivity and elusiveness. Its authority, to use Roland Barthes’ phrase, lies ‘not in its origin but in its destination’, governed, to a considerable degree, by the reader’s imagination.⁵⁷ The aesthetic systems of order which underpin more conventional literary texts – or what Ginsberg referred to as ‘Newtonian’ (as opposed to Einsteinian)⁵⁸ – are substituted in ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ for the key communal element of most collage texts, described by Martyn Chalk as ‘some intuitive grasp of how the world might be put together’.⁵⁹

The disorienting effect of the poem’s ‘mind-collage’ recalls (though does not mirror exactly) the avant-garde composer John Cage’s explanation for his own use of collage, namely ‘the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where someone arranged you should’, so that ‘you are then free to deal with your freedom just as the artist dealt with his, not in the same way but, nevertheless, originally’.⁶⁰ ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’, of course, is not quite as unrestricted as a chance-generated piece by Cage: its anti-war and anti-establishment stance is clear, and the pre-eminence of Ginsberg’s prophetic voice, and vision of himself as a kind of sorcerer, is never in doubt. But in breaking down language through collage – deconstructing headlines, reactionary soundbites, factual news reports, straightforward lies and ‘bad guesses’ – Ginsberg reminds readers that conformity is an act of choice, and offers a different path for them to follow. The

poem's collage form, however, which has been clearly evident from the very beginning, productively interrogates the poet's vatic voice. 'Wichita Vortex Sutra' offers in its form, if not its content, the possibility of a third way – of an alternative narrative to the one offered by the US establishment and the one offered by the poem. It is up to us to figure out what that alternative might be. Formally, the poem serves as a model, to paraphrase Cage, of free looking: having used collage to illuminate what a process of verbal recombination makes possible, the 'longhaired magician' hands back control over language to his 'dumb helper'. Of course, the poem's other key aim, and one which remains, to a degree, in conflict with 'the possibility of looking anywhere, not just where someone arranged you should', is to empower Americans to subvert the wartime complicity of the mass media and 'overwhelm the force field of language pronounced out the State Department and out of Johnson's mouth'.⁶¹ By deploying a material language for protest – collage – Ginsberg adhesively combines the physical with psychic, the personal with the political, and the prophetic with the cathartic, but he also creates an affective space in which reader and poem collide. On account of the organic, transcriptive method by which the fragments of Ginsberg's experiences in Kansas were inscribed into the poem, the experience of reading or hearing it was (and still is) an egalitarian one, irrespective of artistic background, educational training, or social standing. The act of decoding required from the viewer or reader constitutes an intellectual and emotional challenge based primarily on the premise of a shared intuition between teacher and student ('I search for the language that is also yours') rather than the more straightforward anti-war didacticism for which Ginsberg is perhaps better known. The result, in 'Wichita Vortex Sutra', is that the 'highly personal magic' that emanates from Ginsberg's chosen materials enables writer and reader, or teacher and

student, regardless of their psychic, spatial, or temporal separateness, to meet in the vortex and to ‘have their effect on one another’.⁶²

¹ Morris Dickstein, *Gates of Eden: American Culture in the Sixties* (New York: Liveright, 2015 (1977)), p.11.

² ‘Personism: a Manifesto’ was published in *Yugen* 7 (1961). Quotation is from Allen Ginsberg, ‘Notes for *Howl and Other Poems*’, in Donald Allen, *The Poetics of the New American Poetry* (Grove Press, 1974), p.318.

³ In a 1970 letter to Donald Maness, a New York politico who accused Ginsberg of being a ‘commie’, he pointed out that ‘That poem [‘America’] and ‘Wichita Vortex Sutra’ are widely known as examples of respectable legitimate poetry’. In *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Bill Morgan (Da Capo Press, 2008), pp.359-362, p.361. Quotation is from Mark Ford, ‘That Goddam Ginsberg’, in *A Driftwood Altar: Essays and Reviews* (London: Waywiser, 2005), pp.32-44, p. 40.

⁴ Ginsberg, Letter to Leo Cherne, (3 December 1966), in *The Letters of Allen Ginsberg*, ed. Morgan, pp.319-320.

⁵ David Banash, *Collage Culture: Readymades, Meaning, and the Age of Consumption* (Rodopi, 2013), pp.25-6.

⁶ Louis Aragon, ‘La peinture au défi’, in *Les Collages* (Paris: Hermann, 1965 (1980)), n.p..

⁷ Robert Motherwell, ‘Beyond the Aesthetic’, *Design* 47, no. 8 (April 1946).

⁸ Banash, pp.87-9.

⁹ Stephen Fredman, *Contextual Practice: Assemblage and the Erotic in Postwar Poetry and Art* (Stanford University Press, 2010), p.xi.

¹⁰ Elizabeth Klaver, *Sites of Autopsy in Contemporary Culture* (State University of New York Press, 2005), p.19.

¹¹ Jochen Schulte-Sasse, foreword to Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Manchester University Press, 1984), p.xxxvi.

¹² Patricia Leighton, ‘Picasso’s Collages and the Threat of War, 1912-13’, in *Collage: Critical Views*, ed. Hoffman (Ann Arbor: UMI Research Press, 1989), p.122.

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- ¹³ Françoise Gilot and Carlton Lake, *Life with Picasso* (London: Nelson, 1964), p.70.
- ¹⁴ Brandon Taylor, *Collage: The Making of Modern Art* (Thames & Hudson, 2004), p.171.
- ¹⁵ Yve-Alain Bois and Carroll Dunham, 'Robert Rauschenberg's Combines: Two Views', *Artforum International* (March 2006), p.245.
- ¹⁶ William Carlos Williams, 'Against the Weather', in *Selected Essays* (Random House, 1954), p.196.
- ¹⁷ Ginsberg once met Marcel Duchamp in Paris. On meeting him, according to Wambly Bald, he got down on his knees and began kissing Duchamp's knees, 'thinking he was doing something Surrealistic [...] Duchamp was so embarrassed'. (Wambly Bald, 'Ah Paris', *Lost Generation Journal* 7, no. 3 (Winter 1983), p.11.)
- ¹⁸ Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', in *Composed on the Tongue*, ed. Donald Allen (Bolinas: Grey Fox, 1980), pp.26-7.
- ¹⁹ Banash, p.113.
- ²⁰ Fredman, *Contextual Practice*, p.66.
- ²¹ Dickstein, p.16.
- ²² Quoted in Michael Andre, 'Levertov, Creeley, Wright, Auden, Ginsberg, Corso, Dickey: Essays and Interviews with Contemporary American Poets', unpublished doctoral dissertation (Columbia University, 1974), p.146. (Source: Fred Moramarco, 'Moloch's Poet: A Retrospective Look At Allen Ginsberg's Poetry', in *American Poetry Review* 11, no.5 (September/October, 1982), pp.10-14, pp.16-18.
- ²³ Helen Vendler, 'Allen Ginsberg Considers His Country and Himself', *New York Times*, 15 April 1973.
- ²⁴ Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', pp.26-7.
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.56.
- ²⁶ Daniel Belgrad, *The Culture of Spontaneity: Improvisation and the Arts in Postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), p.201. John Clare, 'Sighing for Retirement', *Later Poems 1837-1864: Volume 1*, eds. Eric Robinson and David Powell (Oxford University Press, 1984), pp.19-20.
- ²⁷ David Rosand, 'Paint, Paste and Plane', in *Collage*, ed. Jeanine Parisier Plottel (New York Literary Forum, 1983), p.128.
- ²⁸ Thomas Brockelman, *The Frame and the Mirror: On Collage and the Post Modern* (Northwestern University Press, 2001), p.1.

²⁹ Ginsberg, *The Fall of America: Poems of These States 1965-1971* (San Francisco: City Lights, 1972), n.p. (back cover).

³⁰ Burroughs to Ginsberg, 14 and 28 October 1957 (*Ginsberg Papers*, Columbia; Box 2, fol. 3).

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² See Michael Hardt, foreword to *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social* (Duke University Press, 2007), p.ix-xiii.

³³ John Tytell, *Naked Angels: Kerouac, Ginsberg, Burroughs* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 1976), p.112.

³⁴ Burroughs to Ginsberg, 21 June 1960, in *Rub Out The Words: The Letters of William S. Burroughs 1959 – 1974*, ed. Bill Morgan (London: Penguin, 2012), p.31.

³⁵ Ginsberg to Gregory Corso, quoted in Barry Miles, *Allen Ginsberg: Beat Poet* (Virgin, 2010), p.380.

³⁶ Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', p.29.

³⁷ In situating the poem and its struggle for control over language in Wichita, Ginsberg subtly references the significant numbers of artists and writers he knew who came from and who had, crucially, left the city. In 'Hiway Poesy: L.A.-Albuquerque-Texas-Wichita' he makes direct reference to some of them:

Beautiful children've been driven from Wichita
McClure & Branaman gone
J. Alan White departed left no address
Charlie Plymell come Now to San Francisco
Ann Buchanan passing thru,
Bruce Connors took his joke to another coast – (p.396).

These individuals, Ginsberg seems to suggest, do understand the significance and power of language, and have departed the 'vortex' in that knowledge.

³⁸ Michael Davidson, *Ghostlier Demarcations: Modern Poetry and the Material Word* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), p.204.

³⁹ See Martin Scorsese (dir.), *No Direction Home: Bob Dylan* (Paramount, 2005). In the film, Ginsberg recalls hearing 'A Hard Rain's A-Gonna Fall' for the first time, and says: "It seemed the torch had been passed to another generation".

⁴⁰ Banash, p.109.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

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- ⁴² Ginsberg, back cover for *Planet News* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1968), n.p. (see also *Collected Poems*, p.823).
- ⁴³ Ironically, perhaps, by 1966 collage had been established as a tradition in its own right, and as David Sweet suggests, ‘to be avant-garde in the wake of the radical Avant-Garde is to have a kind of perverse recourse to tradition, illusionism, and obsolete form’. But as John Ashbery pointed out, although this might have seemed like ‘a degradation’, it is nonetheless ‘difficult to impose limitations on the unconscious, which has a habit of turning up in unlikely places’. David Sweet, “‘And Ut Pictura Poesis Is Her Name’”: John Ashbery, the Plastic Arts, and the Avant-Garde’, *Comparative Literature* 50, no.4 (Autumn 1998), p.319. Ashbery, ‘In the Surrealist Tradition’, *Reported Sightings*, ed. David Bergman (New York: Knopf, 1989), p.4.
- ⁴⁴ Rosand, p.122.
- ⁴⁵ Yve-Alain Bois and Rosemary Krauss, *Formless* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), p.28.
- ⁴⁶ Cary Nelson, *Our Last First Poets: Vision and History in Contemporary American Poetry* (University of Illinois Press, 1982), p.15.
- ⁴⁷ Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (Routledge, 1997), p.157.
- ⁴⁸ Ginsberg, *To Eberhart from Ginsberg: a Letter about Howl, 1956* (Lincoln, Mass.: Penmaen Press, 1976).
- ⁴⁹ David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p.157.
- ⁵⁰ André Breton, ‘Preface to the Max Ernst Exhibition, May 1920’, in Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, 1948), p.177.
- ⁵¹ Burroughs, ‘Tactics of Deconditioning’ (interview with Felix Scorpio, London 1969), in *Burroughs Live: The Collected Interviews of William S. Burroughs 1960 – 1997*, ed. Sylvère Lotringer (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2001), pp.116-125, p.117.
- ⁵² Miles, p.380.
- ⁵³ Robert Motherwell, quoted in Taylor, p.105.
- ⁵⁴ Nelson, p.15.
- ⁵⁵ Susan Sontag, *Styles of Radical Will* (London: Secker and Warburg, 1969), p.18. Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Hélène Iswolsky (Indiana University Press, 1984), p.12.

⁵⁶ Jane Kramer, 'Paterfamilias – 1', *The New Yorker* (17 August 1968), p.33.

⁵⁷ Roland Barthes, 'The Death of the Author', *Image, Music, Text*, ed. Stephen Heath (Fontana, 1977), p.148.

⁵⁸ Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', pp.55-56.

⁵⁹ Martyn Chalk, *Missing, Presumed Destroyed: Seven Reconstructions of Lost Works by V.E. Tatlin* (Kingston upon Hull: Ferens Art Gallery, 1981), p.9.

⁶⁰ John Cage, *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Wesleyan University Press, 1961), p.100.

⁶¹ Ginsberg, 'Improvised Poetics', p.47.

⁶² Herta Wescher, *Collage*, trans. Robert E. Wolf (Harry N. Abrams, 1978), p.29 and p.251.