

# ugly feelings

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From Chapter 7 “Paranoia.” Excerpt begins here:

[F]ear and  
its implications for the politicization of aesthetics. Here, bad or sus-

picious timing, a question that is central to conspiracy theory (“why is it that at the same time . . . ?”), plays a prominent role as it resurfaces in a poetry that unapologetically aims for what Spivak has described as “the agential grasping *of* the spectral [entity]” that is patriarchy-capitalism.<sup>15</sup> The motif of bad timing will bring us to the question of the vexed relationship *between* poetry and theory—a relationship that not only played an incisive role in the historical development of late twentieth-century, language-centered avant-garde writing, but remains of pressing concern to feminist writers in this cohort, in their efforts both to theorize their own work and to assert their contemporaneity. For as Gertrude Stein noted, what it means to be “contemporary” is by no means self-evident or something to be taken for granted: “It is so very much more exciting and satisfactory for everybody if one can have contemporaries, if all one’s contemporaries could be one’s contemporaries.”<sup>16</sup>

*The Problem with the Timing Is That  
It Is Always Off While It Cannot Be Off at All*

We can see some of these questions about gender, fear, and timing converge in “Memnoir” (2000), a short poem by Joan Retallack:

. . . it might be necessary to replace all  
vowels with x mxgxcxllly txrxng prxmxtxrx txrxrx xntx pxst-pxst  
xrxny.

. . . it is that that is the problem with  
the timing that it is always off while it cannot be off at all that is  
the he to be sure that the she did not choose the wrong  
thing . . .<sup>17</sup>

The “always off” timing seems to reside in an oscillation between the excessively early (the “prxmxtxrx”) and the excessively late (“pxst-pxst”). This timing clearly has affective consequences, since

the transition from precipitateness to belatedness involves a shift from terror (“txrrxr”) to irony (“xrxny”), while at the same time producing an illegibility undermining the transformation itself. The surplus of *x*’s that attends the shift from one emotional tonality of late capitalism to another—premature fear (“prxmxtxr txrrxr”) to doubly-belated irony (“pxst-pxst xrxny”)—recalls an analogous moment from Diane Ward’s long poem “Imaginary Movie,” in which a similar excess of signification coalesces around the issue of timing ...