Let me confess: it has been a frustrating last several years for me in my writing courses. The rapid advance of technology has meant a pedagogical dilemma for me: just what do I do in the classroom, what do I teach? Gail Hawisher and Cindy Selfe have written recently about this struggle, noting “the increasing change [in compositional media] and the increasing alienation that scholars are beginning to recognize as an outgrowth of such instability” (190). Is the essay still our central genre? Do our students do Web sites? Do we teach html? Email as a genre? Where do we go?

Well, where I wanted to go, what made the most sense to me personally, was Marcel Duchamp. Specifically, Duchamp’s Green Box (1934), the collection of personal notes (reproduced above) he made to himself while working on his Large Glass.
Here’s the more conventional textual form of the work, as published in Duchamp’s selected writings:

It’s the idea of the prose catalogue.

Text as a collection of interesting, powerful statements.

A kind of daybook or artist’s notebook.

The way I myself work—jotting notes on the fly, sound-bite aperçus that sound good by themselves but can also become workable bits in a larger structure.

A basic compositional tool; a medium I feel my students (who are certainly capable of interesting stretches of prose) could work well within.

Jean Suquet has some relevant, deeply engaging commentary on Duchamp’s amazing work:

In Paris, in 1934, an edition of a hundred or a hundred and fifty copies of the Green Box was published—so named because of its green flocked cardboard cover and the assonance between “vert” [green], “verre” [glass], and “ouvert” [open]. Ninety-four scraps of paper bearing plans, drawings, hastily jotted notes, and freely drawn rough drafts were delivered in bulk. It was up to the reader to shuffle these cards as he or she pleased. There was no author’s name on the cover; the work appeared anonymous and as if offered to the blowing winds. In light of this, I had not the least scruple, when opening it for the first time in 1949 at the request of André Breton, in making it speak (with Marcel Duchamp’s consent) in my own voice; and out of its sparkling randomness, I began fishing words that resonated with something I felt deep inside me, something obscure yet promising illumination. If an interior journey goes deep enough, at some point it arrives where all roads meet. I was twenty. I dreamt—with due reverence—of taking up the journey where the previous traveler had left off. (86)
Suquet, then, had an encounter with Duchamp, a meeting, to which each of them brought their own experiences and searches, their own effort and commitment. He saw Marcel as a fellow-traveler, and their encounter changed Suquet's life, evoked in him a grand dream, a life-long project. His whole scholarly career became an extension or annotation of The Green Box and The Large Glass. Duchamp was able to effect this vocation in Suquet, perhaps, because the technology of composition he used was different, interesting, human-scaled, interactive.

Formal requirements were left open, ouvert; the focus was on the idea behind the composition, the statement it made: "I considered painting as a means of expression," Marcel said in an interview, "not an end in itself [... P]ainting should not be exclusively retinal or visual; it should have to do with the gray matter, with our urge for understanding" (135-136). Duchamp, then, is concerned with the revelation contained in the text. His comment captures my own interest in technology—the means or media are not as important to me as the expressive or conceptual uses afforded by them. Especially uses that seem simpatico with my students' needs and skills. The Green Box is emblematic of how I want to use technology in my writing courses: as allowing students an easy entrée into composition, a compelling medium and genre with which to re-arrange textual materials—both original and appropriated—in order to have those materials speak the student's own voice and concerns, allowing them to come up with something obscure, perhaps, yet promising illumination. It's difficult to define students' needs, of course. Elbow put the dilemma best, I think: life is long, college short; do we teach to life or college? I'm more and more persuaded to err on the side of life in my courses: both the public, cultural lives students live, as well as their own personal lives and expressions.

So I want a format or method suited to the long strange trip.
“Most of what we teach and what we do is wrong, out of date,” Johndan Johnson-Eilola argued in his 2000 Watson conference address. If we (finally) journey away from the linear norm of essayist prose, which the texts of the everyday world implore us to do, where do we go, especially in a composition classroom? What sorts of formal and material concerns guide a newly-mediated pedagogical practice? This is where Duchamp, and others of his ilk, can help: ever since (at least) the wunderkabinetten, the box has provided a basic container or frame for storing and exhibiting one’s most passionately cherished items. In terms of transcending essayist prose, then, and all its conventions/restrictions/impediments, the box offers a grammar which could prove useful in guiding our classroom practice in light of rapidly shifting compositional media: it allows both textual pleasure, as students archive their personal collections of text and imagery, and formal practice in learning the compositional skills that seem increasingly important in contemporary culture.

To tease out some notions of what the logic of the box has to offer composition pedagogy, I’d like to range between three specific scenes of historical boxes:

- Joseph Cornell, one of the true poets of American art, and one who made the box his artistic genre of choice.

- Walter Benjamin, unpacking the boxes of books that made up his personal library.

- George Maciunas, the founder of Fluxus, an international art movement that, among other things, relied on box technology to curate and disseminate creative work.

I’m going to give the most attention to Cornell because I’m most interested in composition that has an ultimate poetic effect.

Many critics have pointed to the city as a strong influence in the work of Cornell. In the 1920s, Cornell sold textiles throughout the lower Manhattan manufacturing districts, where he began to haunt secondhand stores and junk shops when he had time to kill. Those shops helped him refine his aesthetic, which included, like Benjamin’s monumental attempt to interrogate the history of 19th-century Paris, an obsession for the historical-materialist European past, particularly the aesthetic realm circumscribed by the French writers he studied while a student at Phillips Academy and about which he remained passionate his entire life. That meant the world of poetry, music, theatre, and especially classical ballet. In Dore Ashton’s words, he was a “thrall of the exqui-
site” (1). Also, he was particularly interested in early cinema, and was always excited to find prints of old films in junk shops. He was a pack rat by nature, and his house in Utopia Parkway became a repository for all the magical finds he made on his rounds. Influenced by the Surrealists who moved to America during the 1930s, especially Max Ernst and Marcel Duchamp, he began to make collages of his found objects. Soon, again influenced by Duchamp, he began to arrange his carefully chosen, highly associational objects into boxes. “I've never called myself an artist,” Cornell said. “On voter registration, I call myself a designer. [... ] I can't draw, paint, sculpt, [or] make lithographs” (qtd. in Ashton 4). Ashton felt what he did was create dream-texts, “captur[ing] the dream-thoughts clustered around a nodal point in the dream” (15). This especially makes sense when you consider the repetitive symbology Cornell used, and the deeply idiosyncratic associational logic he used to juxtapose his material symbols. As Freud noted, “the content of the dream merely says as it were: ‘all these things have an element X in common’” (16). So notions of articulate coherence, conventional organization, and extensive development seem irrelevant to a box like Cornell’s. Carter Ratcliff called Cornell “a virtuoso of fragments,” and it's true—the way, in his hands, readymade shards, invested with desire, can have such profound metonymic power: a “white dowel toward the front of [a] box, a toylike column, is an emblem of all of architecture” (43). Ashton nicely describes his compositional method: “Suggestive objects—that is, objects that are named and whose names bestir associations—are juxtaposed with elements provoking unnamed associations, such as glass fragments, mirrors, and astronomical charts. [... T]he Cornell box sojourns in a terra incognita between two art forms, the poetic and the plastic” (23). One might include the sonic, as well. Duchamp might have been the first to add sound to art, in his 1916 piece With Hidden Noise, but Cornell quickly appreciated the possibilities of extending his palette with noise: there are his sand boxes, those with rolling balls, or metal springs—even ones with music boxes in them. Almost immediately with Cornell, as a teacher, I get the possibility of student as passionate designer, with heart and soul as compositional factors that need as much attention as hand, eye, or brain.

The photos of Cornell’s basement studio, shelves crammed with containers labeled “sea shells,” “watch parts,” or “owl cutouts,” show the fruits of his obsession. Also amassed in his house were the immense files he kept, the notes and clippings he collected and which continued to grow to enormous proportions throughout his life; dossiers that became as massive as the ones Benjamin bound together in files called “convolutes” to organize his annotations on various aspects of daily life in 19th century Paris. Cornell, too, then, as the collector. Ashton speaks of “his trove of books, notes, and dossiers, which were his sustenance and inspiration” (1-2). For example, there is one of his most carefully tended dossiers, labeled “The Bay of Naples,” “and its changing contents included, at various times, views of Vesuvius, photographs of windows, reproductions of works by Chirico, old Italian mezzotints that resembled Chiricos,
and engravings of [Fanny] Cerrito” (Ashton 25). Cornell himself described his dossiers as a diary journal repository laboratory, picture gallery, museum, sanctuary, observatory, key [...] the core of a labyrinth, a clearinghouse for dreams and visions [...] childhood regained. (qtd. in Simic 35)

Our first aspect, then, to how we might use technology to achieve powerful ends with new media lies in aestheticizing the scene of composition in an idiosyncratic, obsessional way. It’s the writer not only as selector (Duchamp) but as collector, where the choosing is suffused with desire. The personally associational becomes key criteria. A kind of idio-aesthetic or idio-connoisseurship. It’s the mood of Benjamin, as he unpacks his library, namely, “anticipation”: “join me,” he invites his reader, “in the disorder of crates that have been wrenched open, the air saturated with the dust of wood, the floor covered with torn paper, [...] join me among piles of volumes that are seeing daylight again after two years of darkness” (59). So, as readers, we might best take the anticipatory stance towards texts: ready to enter an exhibit; students as curators, mounting another show of the ever-evolving permanent collection at their musées imaginaires. Text, then, as a collection of retrojective, idiosyncratic dream-moments, now electronically gathered, framed, and exhibited. Cornell, of course, was the ultimate curator, the ultimate collector. According to Kynaston McShine,

Cornell’s sensibility as a collector is an important element in his art. He treated the ephemeral object as if it were the rarest heirloom of a legendary prince or princess; one must respect the intensity of his vision and the magic with which he invested the ordinary with an eloquent and arresting presence. For Cornell, a necklace from Woolworth’s had as much value as one from Fabergé, and it became the souvenir of a Romantic ballerina who danced for a highwayman on the snow while crossing the Steppes of Russia. (10-11)

Cornell loved his objects, “happy to possess [them], but careful not to[...] destroy [their] enigma” (O’Doherty 258). The materially interesting, then, is what should guide acquisition. Benjamin doesn’t want to write about his textual collection in terms of its “history or even [its] usefulness to a writer” (59). Instead, just the buzz of collecting, the thrill, a feeling “more palpable,” as he terms it (59), “the spring tide of memories which surges toward any collector as he contemplates his possessions” (60). So, finding those aspects of the real that are particularly suffused with fascination becomes a key part of box-oriented composition, putting the wunder into wunderkabinette. “The most profound enchantment for the collector,” writes Benjamin, is the locking of individual items within a magic circle in which they are fixed as the final thrill, the thrill of acquisition, passes over them. [...] Or a true collector the whole background of an item adds up to a magic encyclopedia whose quintessence is the fate of his object. [...] One has only to watch a collector handle the objects in his glass case. As he holds them in his hands, he seems to be seeing through them into their distant past as though inspired. (60-61)
So, text as box = author as collector, as passionate re-fashioner of an idiosyncratic, metonymic world; students working to find their own personal symbologies. “Every passion borders on the chaotic,” Benjamin writes, “but the collector’s passion borders on the chaos of memories” (60). The challenge for the composer, then, is to capture that memory-laden thrill for the viewer, inventing a uniquely visionary world from carefully chosen fragments of the existing one. Even the backs of many of Cornell’s boxes include items collaged into small collections: “he often included a line of poetry that interested him, occasionally a map, perhaps even noted the music he was listening to when the box or collage was being made” (McShine 12).

This presumes, of course, what another famous box artist, Fluxus founder George Maciunas, strove for: bringing an art consciousness to daily life. Maciunas claimed, “there was no need for art. We had merely to learn to take an ‘art attitude’ [...] towards all everyday phenomena” (Wijers 8-9). Harold Rosenberg writes that “when Cornell discovered a particularly brilliant chewing-gum machine in the Thirty-fourth Street station of the B.-M. T., he rushed around urging his friends to go see it” (75). Later, that same machine would provide Cornell with the template for his most famous box, his Medici Slot Machine. A primary goal now in my writing classes: to show my students how their compositional future is assured if they can take an art stance to the everyday, suffusing the materiality of daily life with an aesthetic. It’s learning this possibly new, possibly foreign, reflexive art-attitude towards the stuff of their lives, “participating in the common life while holding [themselves] strictly apart from it” (Rosenberg 78). In a composition class like mine, for example, centered on such treasured material as the texts of rap music, the student must step back, not looking at rap as the bomb (which would be popular writing, ’zine writing), but seeing rap as strange-d, made curious, something interesting to consider, an object of intellectual fascination as much as emotional possession. It’s the writer not only as collector, but as dissatisfied collector, one impatiently seeking pleasure: “Writers are really people who write books [...] because they are dissatisfied with the books which they could buy but do not like” (Benjamin 61). So, composition as craving; teaching students to feel desire and lack. “Cornell [was always] drawn to popular art products, but only when they [...] ceased to be popular; he [was] a devoted collector of old movie films, old phonograph records, old picture postcards” (Rosenberg 78). “[O]wnership,” Benjamin felt, “is the most intimate relationship that one can have to objects. Not that they come alive in him; it is he who lives in them” (67). I want students, for example, to be as obsessed about rap, as interested in creating their boxed homages to it, as Cornell was about Fanny Cerrito. It’s important, I think, to have students work with lived texts of desire (rather than, say, the middlebrow academia of a Jane Tompkins or Mary Louise Pratt) in order to develop a passional aesthetic like Cornell’s and Benjamin’s.
Materials are unoriginal, then, recycled, chosen on the basis of exoticism and strong interest, as well as availability. Work with a strong history to dwell in was key for Benjamin, too: “to renew the old world— that is the collector’s deepest desire when he is driven to acquire new things, and that is why a collection of older books is closer to the wellsprings of collecting than the acquirer of luxury editions” (61). Involved here is an aesthetic of the found object, of interesting, quirky small-t truths one stumbles upon. The objet trouvé was used by modern artists as a way to protest the preciousness of art and reconnect us back to the reality of life. As German curator René Block sees it, such an endeavor “could be most concretely accomplished by using parts of the real world in art just as they were found. The objet trouvé became a quotation of reality” (n. pag.).

In 1912 Apollonaire spoke of a new source of inspiration:

Prospectuses, catalogues, posters, advertisements of all sorts which contain the poetry of our age: The collage technique, that art of reassembling fragments of pre-existing images in such a way as to form a new image, is the most important innovation in the art of this century. Found objects, chance creations, [and] ready-mades[...] abolish the separation between art and life. The commonplace is miraculous if rightly seen, if recognized. (qtd. in Simic 18)

This genre very quickly suggested itself to Maciunas. Art historian Jon Hendricks notes

The idea of producing Fluxus yearboxes of completely new, unpublished works by the most radical artists from many different countries was derived from La Monte Young’s idea for An Anthology. Initially Maciunas thought of a magazine in an expanded format to promote the [Fluxus] movement. (120)

Maciunas soon changed genres from the magazine to the box, choosing for his Fluxus News-Policy-Letter of May 1962, “a flat box to contain the contents so as to permit inclusion of many loose items: records, films, ‘poor man’s flip books,’ ‘original art,’ metal, plastic, wood objects, scraps of paper, clippings, junk, rags [sic]. Any composition or work that cannot be reproduced in standard sheet form or cannot be reproduced at all” (Hendricks 120).

So box artists work amid their trove of personally meaningful detritus, which they know can yield poetry. O’Doherty referred to Cornell’s Utopia Parkway house as “not just an abode, but an image of the artist’s methods, dilemmas, and quests” (280). And Yoshi Wada provides a glimpse of Maciunas’s methods and quests: “He had so many things— various collections of exotic items— spice, water, dirt, rocks, animal and bird shit, huge amounts of bags and containers, Fluxus boxes, archives— and it goes on and on. These were very well arranged on shelves” (Williams and Noël 134). René Block adds: “[Maciunas] was his whole life long on the lookout for ‘good deals,’ special offers of all kinds, be it plastic boxes or groceries. His house was full of the most unlikely objects, acquired through special sales in large lots and bulk purchases” (Williams and Noël 158). Like Cornell and Benjamin, as well, it’s the poignant mix of poverty and desire, laced with an aesthetic of the cool.
Cornell repeatedly wrote of his delight in finding things; he recalled lingering one day, before an appointment, in some second-hand shops:

Found Jenny Lind song sheet, La Sonambula, and colored feathers in dime store.

[...] Up to 59th St. windfall of Bibliothèque Rose to cover etuis, Souvenirs containing Gérard de Nerval (DeCampo), an original colored Deveria of a standing oriental woman musician—two heroic sized forest prints for owl boxes—unusual feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment, unexpected and more abiding than usual.

(Simic 9)

These are artists whose material concerns are guided by their strong, visionary needs, their desires to recreate the deeply felt images that excited them. It wasn't a question of focusing on cutting-edge technology. Fluxus artist Dick Higgins' 1966 "Statement on Intermedia" holds true today and should make us cautious in theorizing new media pedagogies. Higgins asks,

Having discovered tools with an immediate impact, for what are we going to use them? [...] Isn't it appropriate [...] to use what we really care about and love or hate as the new subject matter in our work? Could it be that the central problem of the next ten years or so, for all artists in all possible forms, is going to be less the still further discovery of new media and intermedia, but of the new discovery of ways to use what we care about? (173)

"[W]e are more impatient and more anxious," Higgins felt, "to go to the basic images" (172). The grammar of the box can keep us grounded in the basic image, in things we really care about. That homemade aesthetic history lovingly forged out of the materials of nineteenth century Europe, Ashton calls it Cornell's "other" tradition. As a compositionist, he was always working in two realities: both the actual world, and his own, personally-forged "other" tradition. The epigram for his prose piece The Bel Canto Pet (1955) reads, "the light of other days," and our charge to students, I think, is having them work in and perfect a broad-based textuality, lit by their own other days' light. What I'm hoping is that students, immersed in their material desire, might (as was said of Cornell's favorite poet, Nerval) "invite us to see things in a light in which we do not know them, but which turns out to be almost that one in which we have always hoped one day to see them bathed" (Ashton 111). The everyday transformed, then: Cornell's materials "are available to anyone," Rosenberg wrote, "but in his use of them they take on an entirely subjective character. Each object enters his imagination carrying a large cargo of associations—in the box, it is redefined so as to become a term of a unique metaphor" (78). His compositional goal, according to Rosenberg: "to unveil secret affinities [...] to pin down a state of being in the consciousness of things" (78-79). According to Charles Simic, "This is what Cornell is after[...]: How to construct a vehicle of reverie, an object that would enrich the imagination of the viewer and keep him company forever" (44).
True connection with one’s composition is when the work has a strong life in the writer, when it’s part of an on-going project, which means it continues growing, appearing in variant versions. Thus, no draft is ever finished, especially in the arbitrary scope of an academic semester. For Cornell, “no ‘work’ could ever be really finished, for much of its meaning continued to mill in his imagination” (Ashton 2). The tops of his boxes, in fact, were often only screwed down, so he could re-open them and fiddle with their contents. Electronic composition has always tantalized with the potential for such open-ended text. Benjamin, unpacking his library, writes of his just unboxed books “not yet on the shelves, not yet touched by the mild boredom of order” (59). He speaks of his collection in terms of the chance, the fate, that suffuse the past before my eyes [...] conspicuously present in the accustomed confusion of these books. For what else is this collection but a disorder to which habit has accommodated itself to such an extent that it can appear as order? (60)

The raw, then, not the cooked. A loose, unthematized collection; the parts not necessarily inflecting each other as in a traditional essay. The mind will force an order on the resultant text (the viewers make the pictures, was Duchamp’s famous pronouncement). The refusal to allow text as open-ended, unscrewed-down box, rushing instead to impose on it the mild boredom of order, is a concern I have with much computers and writing scholarship today. A recent chapter on using new information technologies in the classroom, for example, insists on speaking of students’ Web work in terms of the well-wrought essay, demanding all “elements working together to make a unified statement,” requiring “cohesion and thoughtful purpose [...] precision and clarity” (Gillette 3, 4, 9). Another writer sees as one of the “limitations” of new media work that “much of the information found on the Web does not meet the standards of text in print” (Applen 15). And another scholar who also uses Joseph Cornell to theorize students’ new media works takes Cornell to task, giving one of his portfolios a mediocre grade, hallucinatorially finding that “its overall coherence could be enhanced by careful reconsideration and revision”—even suggesting a recent (i.e., non-thrilling) book on the subject Cornell could read to guide that more careful revision (Janangelo 38). Such formal quibbling is absurd: Cornell was the ultimate textual researcher; O’Doherty, for example, recalls that “Everyone who knew the younger Cornell remarks on the tenacity of his pursuit of information—or linkages—that he needed to furnish his mansion of European culture” (259). To second-guess him misses his aesthetic power. I’m more convinced by the work of a theorist like Greg Ulmer, who wants a brand of “learning [that] is much closer to invention than verification”; who sees the hypermedia composer as “construct[ing] an information environment [...] writ[ing] with paradigms (sets) not arguments”; and who believes that “the significant part of the narrative is not in the story but in the physical details of the scene” (xii, 38, 138).
emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is, their usefulness—but studies and loves them as the scene, the stage, of their fate” (60).

As genre, Maciunas felt “Fluxus art-amusement must be simple, amusing, unpretentious, concerned with insignificances, require no skill or countless rehearsals…” (Williams and Noël 144). Poetic enactments, verbal bibelots, and static theater were terms applied to Cornell’s work (Ashton 4); Rosenberg called them object poems. The box, then, is the historically preferred format to archive our most treasured baubles. Johnson-Eilola wonders at the underuse of programs like StorySpace and Dreamweaver in composition classes. In a pedagogy of the box, their blank screens could act as a blank canvas or cartouche, a flatbed frame ready to be inscribed with the flotsam and jetsam of textual fragments from the real or virtual world, objects, images, sounds, along with sound-bite poetry or pensées. The simple frame-container as a reliquary for the personally valuable fragment. That was Cornell’s way: always starting with the box as frame, then “drift[ing] into his procedure of association, putting in and taking out, much as a poet invests his poems with words that later may be changed or eliminated” (Ashton 58). I want students—designers, now, not essayists—free for such associational drifts; entering things naively, without countless rehearsals; trying to capture a mood or vision. The artist Mieko Shiomi gets a gift from Maciunas in 1976:

It was a thin plastic box, which contained eleven small objects [one for each letter of my name], such as a dry strange mushroom, a sea shell, a key, a cigar, a thin glass tube filled with fine dry leaves, etc., and a blue card with this inscription: “MIEKO SHIOMI/Spell your name with these objects/Greetings from George Maciunas.”

This was the last thing I received from him. It continues to be one of the most precious objects in my collection. (qtd. in Williams and Noël 37)

Clearly, then, the element of play is important in box composition. Benjamin speaks of “the childlike element” (61) involved in collecting—namely, the ability to give new life to objects and, hence, renewing existence. To better appreciate this power to enchant, to see the elemental aesthetic of box-composition, bear in mind the other forms of wide-eyed renewal Benjamin cites: “the painting of objects, the cutting out of figures, the application of decals—the whole range of childlike modes of acquisition, from touching things to giving them names” (61). In an article Richard Selfe wrote in collaboration with his graduate students, they issue “a clear and useful warning to academic users and teachers of digital media! Don’t suck the playful, exploratory spirit out of the digital media!” (334).

Think of the Vermeer paintings of rooms that were so influential for Cornell. Glass—whether opening onto room, box, or computer screen—as window into a private world, one jam-packed with personally selected matériel from one’s wanderings. “The city is a huge image machine,” Charles Simic remarks in his book on Cornell. So, the student as cyber-flâneur in the virtual urban. “My work was a natural outcome of love for the city,” Cornell
claimed (qtd. in Ashton 4). But “not the city as most of us experience it,” Ashton noted, rather “a city of mysteries and hidden treasures” (4). In O’Doherty’s words, it was “the city and its vernacular” (258). The subject matter of box artists is the small and possibly overlooked. Even Benjamin, whose topic was the nineteenth century, recreated it through its quotidian objects. About Cornell’s films it was said:

They deal with things very close to us, every day and everywhere. Small things, not the big things. Not wars, not stormy emotions, dramatic clashes or situations. His images are much simpler. Old people in the parks. A tree full of birds. A girl in a blue dress, looking around in the street, with plenty of time on her hands. Water dripping into [a] fountain ring. (Mekas 164)

Mainstream writing instruction too often prefers to put students into contact zones of heightened cultural import. But strong art, we see, can be created out of a collection of well-chosen interesting little bits of the everyday. In a box-oriented composition, I want to allow students immersion in their mediated desires, in order to refine their aesthetic; following whatever road of excess leads to their personal palace of wisdom. So **the two basic skills I focus my course around are practicing search strategies and annotating material.** My students engage in a Rap Arcades Project, reading and note-taking their way through the texts of hiphop as Benjamin did 19th-century Paris in his _Passagenwerk_.

First we do intense study of search engines and strategies: various databases for articles, images, statistics, chat groups, and anything else they might like to wander through in their textual journeys. It’s turning the internet into a virtual arcade, a city full of junk stores to cruise and study. I have even provided them with a Research Guide portal-site linked to my university’s main library page, allowing students easy linkage to a wide variety of databases that I hope will serve as an immersive, interactive map to the infoscape’s topography, providing the means for some interesting rambles. Watching students learn of Google’s capacity for image searches, for example, finding they can call up a whole bunch of photos of Lil Kim, is to see Joseph Cornell’s eyes light up as he walks through the door of a used bookstore specializing in 19th century ballerina memorabilia. And rather than essayist prose, we practice the art of annotation and note-taking.
Ashton reminds us that Cornell’s “readings were so interwoven with his creative life that it is impossible to describe specifically the part they played in his work” (59). Selling students on the habit of notation will, I hope, help them bring an art consciousness to their world, having everyday life and their sound-bite commentary mesh and intertwine. **Arrangement of materials and notational jottings is a desperately important compositional skill.** Cornell’s dossiers were archived in his house; they proved bulky and unmanageable at times, despite their crucial influence on his work. “At times he would ask friends to help him put his mass of notes and files in order (‘This place is bulging with dossiers, something has got to be done’)” (Ashton 2). Young visitors and assistants especially he begged to “make an arrangement of the materials to ‘see what could be done with them’” (Ashton 77). Archiving such work in boxes on the internet would allow others to study and re-arrange our student’s notational scribbles, in much the same way Suquet couldn’t wait to get in and re-arrange Duchamp’s scribbled notes from The Green Box. The ability to archive the mysterious wealth of the quotidian verbalscape is one of the things that initially intrigued many of us about the internet. The pedagogical potential of Cornell’s dossier method was apparent to him. He spoke about his

Portfolios—état brut—explorations—as much potential as the boxes. The spectator can apply this to his own modus operandi. If domestic circumstances had been different, I’d have liked to get into teaching. The spectator can, if he likes it, go out and do his own picking [...] a kind of metaphysique of exploration. [...] This kind of thing has potential for the young blood instead of the museum kind of thing. (O’Doherty 279)

There’s something increasingly untenable about the integrated coherence of college essayist prose, in which the easy falseness of a unified resolution gets prized over the richer, more difficult, de facto text the world presents itself as. The box as dossier allows a credible collection of the variety of field-notes my students amass on their journey. It’s interesting to share with my students examples of the notes Benjamin took for his Arcades Project. I genuinely believe those samples of scholarly glosses and poetic rêverie offer them new possibilities for verbal expression. I plan to teach even more strongly to such a genre, showing them, for example, the associationally suggestive, poetic box-grammar of the diary of Robert Schumann, one of Cornell’s favorite composers. A typical entry in Schumann’s diary reads, “Ave Maria... evening... the large garden... the dear child... the moon...” (qtd. in Ashton 21). This is the same logic at work in the diary entries of Cornell himself, as well as the notebook entries of Duchamp—both “liberally adorned with suggestive hiatuses” (Ashton 21-22). **Caesura—the stylistic device most absent in our curricula.**

Association as a conjoining logic is even more basic than juxtaposition. The objects of Cornell’s boxes were like words from a personal vocabulary. He said he worked “in a rebus-like way” (Ashton 71). It is this associational logic of linkages that we need to develop in our classrooms, in order to help foster a personal aesthetic among our students. The logic of the box for writing
instruction in an electronic environment would include a notion of textual form as short, amorphous, concrete, simply-structured; the importance of interestingly associational juxtapositions of word, image, and sound; a materiality in which desire is a key measure of quality; the unfinished nature of the “final” product, as representing perhaps the mere shimmer of an intention, rather than the result of Composition’s endless perfectability-machine of revision. A composition of underlying images; poetic concretism, object poems. Not text as representation, but as trace or remainder, gesturing towards situations that once existed and were strongly felt, re-activatable with their concomitant quota of wonder. Pulsion as a term we now need for evaluating composition. A classroom practice that tries to resolve a key dichotomy in composition, that between craft and cool, what Benjamin named as “the struggle between builder and decorator, École Polytechnique and École des Beaux Arts” (Charles Baudelaire 158). The expressive, substantially refined now, returned to prominence in our curriculum, ending the long reign of the strictly analytic. “Cornell’s objects express something,” O’Doherty knew. “They are not subjects of inquiry, but immensely learned and allusive carriers of meaning. They support a vision” (283).

One of the most eagerly awaited events in popular music has been the publication of the diaries Kurt Cobain kept from his teenage years until just a few months before his death. The facsimile-page published version, a compositional box permeated with lived desire, went straight to the best-seller lists; no surprise—poring through Cobain’s drawings, notations, unsent letters, drafts of lyrics and album covers, music video storyboards, impassioned rants, fake interviews, reminiscences, and endless reworking of his lists of favorite albums poignantly evokes a life. The possibilities of archiving such interesting, suggestive work, logically fitting into the open-ended, flatbed frame of the box, have me especially keen on teaching composition lately. In 1962, Fluxus artist Ben Vautier did A Flux Suicide Kit, catalogued as “Green cardboard and metal carrying case with handwriting containing rope, shotgun shells, razor blades, electrical plug and metal clamps” (Kellein 102). OK, that’s kind of morbid, perhaps, but my students might do a Survival Kit: hypermedia with links, found objects, sampled sounds, and personal writing, containing all one would need, in their opinion (music, food, art, activities, etc) to get by. Or perhaps something after Maciunas’s Fluxpost (Smiles) (1978)—a serial work, with textual overlay added: perhaps a series of people are asked a question like ‘What’s bugging you?’ or ‘What’s worth buying?’ Then digital photos of the respondents are image-mapped to activate their catalogued responses. I’ve already alluded to my Benjamin-derived genre of reading notes, students’ engagement with texts they choose to help them think about a favorite topic, producing a record of short fabulous textual realities, a kind of street-derived genre of drive-by criticism, blips of unfinished text needing the reader as participant in the inquiry, to fill in the holes.
What I want, I guess, is to re-habilitate Thomas C. Buell's 1969 CCC piece called “Notes on Keeping a Journal.” I want to choose a wide variety of textual possibilities (Buell suggests things like “Report on a local event,” “Advertise a product for TV,” “Destroy an enemy,” “Transcribe a page from a book [...] which strongly appeals to you,” even simply “copying down Beatles lyrics” [45]) to provide interesting, expressive contents for a journal. What a wonderful autobiographical box such a collection of genres would be. Others are moving in this direction. There's Byron Hawk's “Spring Break Assignment,” asking students to produce a photographic essay, in text and images, documenting their life over Spring Break; Jeff Rice's assignment asking students to pick the date of their choice and research what was happening then in areas such as history, politics, literature, film, comics, music, art, business, or science, building a hypertext catalogue of the results (Rice, then, has unwittingly re-invented Maciunas's famous “Biography Boxes”); Jody Shipka’s “A History of ‘this’ Space” assignment, in which each student must take a turn documenting the class in the medium of their choice (photography, fantasy narrative, interview, transcribed tape, personal ads, whatever), all results boxed together at the end of the class; and, in his chapter in this book, Johndan Johnson-Eilola's assignment in which students interrogate search engines and compare the results. I'm suggesting, then, a pedagogy of the curio cabinet, an aesthetic of the objet trouvé. One that rejects auratic craft as weird and obsessive, in favor of celebrating the basic image, seeing perception as a performative gesture. One whose contents mirror those desired by Maciunas for his early boxes: “‘ready mades,’ ‘found objects,’ junk, records” (Hendricks 121). What is it that writers do, exactly, if not (as Katherine Stiles describes the Fluxus box artists) “point to things in the world and negotiate their meanings through symbolic productions” (67)? The new classroom activities to refine these elements let students use what they really care about and love (or hate) as the new subject matter in their work. Homepage as hommage; personal immersion in the stuff of one's other tradition as a writer's material composition. It's getting our students and ourselves back to the basic image. So the ur-assignment in our courses might be the one Charles Simic saw as underlying every one of Cornell's boxes:

Somewhere in the city [...] there are four or five still-unknown objects that belong together. Once together they'll make a work of art. That's Cornell's premise, his metaphysics, and his religion [...] The city has an infinite number of interesting objects in an infinite number of unlikely places [...] America still waits to be discovered. (14-15)
I don’t expect students to produce a perfect Cornell (just as I don’t expect them to write a perfect research paper). I do, though, want them to see the logic of the box as compositional grammar, what it implies about interesting research, selection, arrangement, and expression. The research can (of necessity) be definitively unfinished, closing only on a sense of the ultimate statement trying to be made (as well as any exciting bits along the way). It’s the passion of appreciation and collection, combined with a sense of inquiry; a heartfelt concern mixed with intellectual problem-solving. Opening writing to new media affords us (really, demands) the opportunity to wipe the slate of classroom writing clean and ask, in true modernist fashion, “What is essential to composition? What are the inescapable, minimal institutional constraints that must be considered?” and, maybe better, in true postmodernist fashion, “What are the inessential but desirable, interesting features of composition? What are the outermost institutional limits?” And, since ours is a teaching discipline, “What are the technologies and strategies both essential and desirable for students to perform and practice?”

The Logic of These Assignments

To explain the logic for the assignments I’ve chosen, let me continue my art analogy a bit more: for most of my career as a composition instructor, I was uncomfortable with my status as academic gate-keeper. I bristled at that role of mine in an institution whose goals I saw as somberly conservative. But I’ve since learned to approach my role strategically. Take Hans Haacke, who creates highly-prized installations, exhibited in museums and galleries, which are deeply critical of the museum and its corporate-sponsored ability to fix form and content (not to mention its complicity in helping shape the larger cultural ambiance). When asked why he showed his work in museums, since he hated them so much, he answered:

You have to be part of the system in order to participate in a public discourse... As soon as you exhibit your work in galleries and museums, you are part of the system.

I have always been part of the system. I am of the opinion that you cannot act outside the system, or be on your own, and participate in a discourse. (“School” 23)

As composition teachers, we mount exhibits, prize certain works, neglect others, and in so doing, lead our local patrons through a tour of form, content, and larger questions of cultural ambiance. We are, indeed, curators, but as such, we need to do our job well. SFMOMA’s Bruce Weil feels his job as curator is to work actively against the museum’s role as repository of the culture’s finest, positioning the institution instead as a more neutral information-provider for people: art as ideas, data, rather than (overly determined) objects. As curators of academia, then, we can exploit the possibilities of our status, exposing students to a range of culturally valid forms as well as non-mainstream content;
in so doing, we provide our audience with a host of possibilities for worlds and forms to inhabit. What I see in many curricular projects these days, though, are a lot of weak, safe shows; shows with less-than-risky themes, all showing the same kind of middle-brow art. Most composition readers I see carry on some version of the traditional curatorial project, perpetually glossing the canon of our permanent collection, inviting students in to study the great works and contemplate “the way the text positions them in relationship to a history of writing” (Bartholomae 21). The titles of these shows (as reflected by the reader-textbooks so many teachers use to teach writing) all sound like the titles of those bland, corporate-sponsored traveling exhibits: How We Live Now, Re-Reading America, Gender Images, Our Times. I eagerly await textbooks with titles like Pharmacy; Soap Bubble Set; Fluxkit; The Hotel Eden; or Medici Slot Machine. Such courses are too much traditional Art Appreciation, re-charging the masterpieces for a student, re-enchanting them. It’s pedagogy as docency. The “questions for further discussion” those reader-textbooks ask about their permanent-collection articles are designed to make the work come alive for students, to make them learn to savor it the way we in academia (supposedly) do, to make the work’s discursive field viral, recombinant. We still have not learned from the work done by our field’s historical avant-garde about the failure to see our composition classes in the larger world, particularly in terms of the student-imaginary. In one of his last textbooks, Searching Writing, Ken Macrorie locates his student not in the institution but on the street (in a camera shop, a fire station, a zoo): “Go to people,” he urges his student-reader. “They’re alive this year, up to date” (89).

Macrorie’s idea of building a writing course on something as simple as the “deeply felt truth” (31) of experience has continued to resonate in my practice because it’s the quality of my students’ writing I like best, the aspect I think represents their strongest work. Take Greg White, a student for whom writing an essay is a tenuous process; he shows his true voice, his heart and insight, in short works, in in-class writings and in the email messages he sends me. Here, for example, in an email with the subject heading “been there, done that!,” he reflects on the discussion we had earlier that day of some Tupac Shakur songs:

dear mr. sirc

i’m in class today were talking about 2pac and not so much disappointed, however the people in class don’t understand 2pac the way i do. see my life is very different from what people think. it pissed me off to hear people in our class talk but not from experience. but from what they learne by the media. 2pac song “keep ya head up” is so true. how do i know? because everything he said i’ve been through remember when you said you can’t listen to this song without having a tear come to your eye. well it did because it hurt for 2pac to be so much on point. the things this man said was so true for instance he said he blame his mother for turning brother into a crack baby. my mother had a child who is my brother who has down syndrome from my mother drinking, and then he goes on telling how he tries to find his friend
but their blowing in the wind. When I went home I tried to find my friends, the one's who I was hanging with when I was young they were around just always out of reach. I understand when Pac said he people use the ghetto as a scapegoat I love my ghetto I'm not just talking about the people I'm talking about the place. the people most of the people are good to me. the rest want to see my fell I have so many mixed feelings right now I can't stay focused on what I'm saying I guess that's another down fall us people from the "ghetto" have sometimes the feelings as Pac fuck the world attitude and other times I say I'm going to show all these mother fuckers what I can do so many obstacles so little time makes me frustrated. so I can't focused i what I supposed to do.

I have many students like Greg, and my challenge, I feel, is to have these young people burnish not anthologized writers' essays but their own form of powerful pensée, while, certainly, at the same time learning some kind of basic prose styling to help them avoid verbal pitfalls in formal settings. It's a tough struggle, doubtless because it's the key tension in all fields throughout modernity with the idea of composition at their center: the tension between the academic and the avant-garde. **Box-logical composition focuses on the institutional space that enframes the human scene of written expression.** As such, it fits with what art theorist Hal Foster sees as the crucial difference between the historical and neo-avant-gardes: "the historical avant-garde focuses on the conventional, the neo-avant-garde concentrates on the institutional" (17). So Macrorie, Bill Coles, and the rest of Composition's historical avant-garde in the 1960s took as their focus the conventions of the texts students produced, opening them up to the passional possibilities of new forms like those generated by the Happenings; as William Lutz declared, "We must as teachers of writing concentrate first on the creative aspect of writing" (35). Our concern in the second wave of Composition's avant-garde is on academic spaces, and the traditional cachet that essayist prose doggedly enjoys there. We are not so fortunate, perhaps, to live in the heady times of the historical avant-garde. As Foster shows, those were times when the rhetoric was anarchistic. He cites the language of Daniel Buren's 1971 essay on "The Function of the Studio," calling for "total revolution" and "the extinction" of the studio (25). "Our present is bereft of this sense of imminent revolution," as Foster acknowledges; hence, contemporary artists engaged in the institutional critique of the neo-avant-garde "have moved from grand oppositions to subtle displacements" (25). So the goal becomes ways to pressure the academic context in firm but subtle ways. **The assignments I offer, then, are attempts at strategies to allow the voice and concerns of a Greg White to become a meaningful part of the academic verballscape, to find credible genres for preserving such deeply felt truth.**
A box-logic for composition instruction allows us to think of our work as teaching English Juxtaposition 101 (Lutz 36). The student becomes a mixer or DJ, practicing the key compositional arts of selection, arrangement, and expression. A simple, but effective way to practice those arts is suggested in a work by Anne Carson. In one of her collections, Carson has a series of short poems entitled “Hopper: Confessions.” In this series, the poems are all titled with the names of paintings by Edward Hopper; then, following each poem (in a kind of orchestrated colloquy), there is a quotation from the Confessions of St. Augustine, speaking to the emotions conjured by the amalgam of Hopper’s image and Carson’s reverie. So, for example, there is the poem “Office at Night”:

```
Office at Night

Made money with unpressed paper for changes,
A
Light from
Go
Most accounting for unaccounted
A
Wind
All
Balance that place or home!
```

Carson doesn’t reproduce the Hopper paintings, of course (counting on a contemporary poet’s hyper-literate audience to be familiar with them), but it is worthwhile, as a way to think about students’ initial work with new media, to literalize her composition a bit further.
Speculating on how Carson came up with her work yields a process students might follow to develop a similar juxtapositional series. Surely, Carson might have thought of the Hopper pictures as powerful images. Somehow, the idea of using pithy quotes from Augustine to “read” and comment on those paintings (and the moods they called up in her) suggested itself. Her own poetic text captured the ideas or feelings generated by brushing those two information-sites against each other. This suggests the following lesson.

ACTIVITY
1 Students might (after being introduced to productive on-line or off-line search strategies, if that’s needed) spend one or two class sessions searching for a similar body of interesting visual material. Entering the phrase “photo archives” into any major search engine will yield very interesting results, from high school sports photos to a photo-
chronology of the life of Freud. (The canny instructor might prepare for this lesson by having a few interesting visual and verbal sites ready to show students, but the idea is for students to explore and find something personally meaningful.) And, of course, a search engine like Google allows for image searching. Students should conference with each other on what they have or haven't found (if they like what they have, they can tell why; if some students haven't found anything yet, others can suggest ideas). On-line searching is the simplest, of course, but images might be scanned from books or come directly from digital photographs the students take (if those technologies are available and the instructor is comfortable using them). During the image conferences, students should also talk about the ideas evoked from the pictures, why they feel drawn to them, what message they hold for them (this will help guide the kind of verbal text they can juxtapose with those pictures).

2 Students look for their verbal (or aural, if they so desire) texts. Again, if students need tips on textual searching, those can be given (most composition handbooks contain fairly good surveys of print and electronic information indexes and sources to help students get started; but doubtless the instructor can supplement with sites tailored to students’ specific needs). Again, conferences where students share their investigative results can help ensure good choices.

3 Students juxtapose quotes and images. If sophisticated graphic software is available and the instructor can easily introduce students to it, great, but words and text can be juxtaposed quite simply using text-editing programs, most of which currently allow both image-insertion as well as fairly interesting manipulation of text: for my version of Carson’s "Office at Night" above, for example, I simply opened a Word document, inserted a simple table of two rows, put the Hopper image (which I found on-line, in a Web museum) in one box, and put the Augustine quote in the other; then I inserted a text box into the Hopper image (using the "no fill" and "no line" commands, so the text would simply be overwritten on the image) and typed the Carson poem into the text box. My experience with this assignment shows that students will be even more imaginative.

4 Once students have selected and arranged their juxtapositions, they can write their own expressive commentary, reflecting on what the juxtaposed texts mean to them (poetry is tough, so I would tell students prose is just fine), and artfully integrate it into the work. Again, students can add this element to their box any way they want (I had one student who figured out how to put his pithy, interpolative comments into the thin grey space below an internet browser window).
NOTES
This simple lesson in juxtaposition—found images x found text x student prose—is a powerful one to allow students to practice the basic skills of contemporary composition: search and selection, arrangement/juxtaposition/layout, and self-expression. They learn a little of the basic logic of academic, citational prose, as well: how one text is used to read or make sense of another text, with the writer's own work a triangulation among data-sites. Students get practice in using electronic technology (to both search and arrange), and they also get practice in writing as a way of being, of developing a stance and voice in the textual world. Mostly, though, they come up with cool virtual boxes. Hopefully, students will be as personally creative as possible: a skater, possibly, might take several digital photos of heavily pierced or tattooed friends in their skateboard gear; then he might search the National Archives site to find texts that comment on freedom, finding something like the one below, from the Eisenhower Library (Ike's letter to Nelson Rockefeller, filled with his musings on the "endeavor to insure each citizen the fullest possible opportunity to develop himself spiritually, socially and economically").

The student might juxtapose snippets of Eisenhower's rhetoric with the pictures of his friends, and next to each he might write reflections of times he and his friends were hassled for skateboarding.
Some of the results I’ve received: one student found a bunch of cityscape photos for her visual text, then chose street signs as her verbal component, interpolating them with some really nice poems she wrote. Another chose kooky photos of weddings he found online, overlaid them with snippets from Elizabeth Barrett Browning, and then added his own thoughts on marriage and romance in America.

EVALUATION
For an initial project like this, with a strong creative element, I would be very encouraging with grading. “A work needs only be interesting,” was the single criteria Donald Judd put forward to judge contemporary art, and for student work here, I think any interesting effort—where some obvious care in choices has been taken in terms of finding images and text that produce, when juxtaposed, a frisson of drama or amusement—should be rewarded. Similarly, the instructor can doubtless judge the quality of a student’s own written work. The instructor might also think about asking students to submit a reflective commentary with the work, to better estimate the quality of a student’s effort in terms of the selection and arrangement goals targeted here.

RESOURCES
The Anne Carson book in which “Hopper: Confessions” appears is Men in the Off Hours. The only other resource needed, besides computers with Internet and text-editing capabilities—and possibly PowerPoint—(and a hand-out for how to create tables, insert text, and do simple design with the software), is possibly a list of search engines—or, a portal site like http://www.assignmenteditor.com, which includes links to all major search engines as well as to sites for newspapers (U.S., world, and tabloid), photo searches, politics, entertainment, money, and law enforcement, among many others.
As Cornell shows, a genre like the box can be an ideal vehicle to act as a compendium for students’ research and inquiry. And just as Duchamp thought, investigated, and planned in writing, students, too, can think of their research box as a medium to store the textual results of their own inquiry-quests. This would be an ideal assignment to do collaboratively, students working in pairs or teams, depending on the complexity or depth of the inquiry desired. The topic might either be generated from students themselves or from the instructor; it can be tied into a central course reading or can simply be a stand-alone assignment.

What will result will be a very basic Web site of student writing and inquiry: rough notes/ideas/questions/sound-bites, along with more finished student text; interesting visual or verbal or aural items found off the Internet or in print-based media (if the technology is available) and reported on and/or sampled; and a catalog of any student interviews or surveys done.

When finished, the box will be a class research-page, either exploring the general course topic or helping to illuminate the central class reading—a compendium of cool enlightenment.

So, for example, students might get together (if they have the choice) and generate a class topic like clothing, why we wear what we wear. Then, various research teams would carve out the areas they will be responsible for: teams might explore their own ideas like a brief history of fashion, issues of clothing manufacture, a certain designer, regional differences in fashion, retailing and advertising, political issues (such as sweatshops or dress codes), even theorists of fashion. Then students search, read, interview/survey, and write through their inquiry, trying to amass and arrange as much interesting “objects” (textual or otherwise) as possible.

If the instructor chooses to link the research box to the course’s central text, an equally interesting work can be done: say the students are all reading The Autobiography of Malcolm X— as they read, research teams will be finding information and collecting/writing/arranging it on topics like slavery, African-American religion, the Northern migration, Harlem nightlife, the Nation of Islam, Malcolm’s speeches, Malcolm’s media reception, the Islamic faith, and Malcolm’s legacy today. An assignment like this (one very similar to digital storytelling) is both participatory and immersive, a good combination for education.
Present an overview of the assignment. If students are allowed to choose a topic, then that choice should be settled, but care must be given in a whole-class project like this to urge students to choose a topic that won’t intellectually disenfranchise some class members; a topic like the clothing one I used as example above is good because everyone has a way into an issue like that. Once the topic is decided, students can suggest possible areas for research (instructor guidance and encouragement are obviously helpful here, as students might come up with a limited topic that will frustrate their research).

Once the teams are formed (2–3 per group seems right), then the instructor needs to explain the basics of research—on-line, as well as print- and community-based. I haven’t met too many first-year students lately who were unfamiliar with search engines, but some explanation (even bringing in sites that seem especially fruitful) might be needed. It’s been my experience that students are less familiar with print-based materials, so some care should be taken to familiarize students with those, especially the ones that will yield the most information (campus librarians might be contacted to either spend a day in class or to help with a guided tour of the library). Some good, basic techniques in interviewing/surveying should be given, too, if those are thought pertinent.

The class is turned loose to search, read, view, sample, scan audio/visual/verbal texts, take notes on them (be sure to introduce students to the kinds of note-taking you want them to do—I like a mix of summary, quotation, pithy analysis, and personal/reflective writing), and collect interesting sites to link to. All work should be saved electronically: this shouldn’t be hard with verbal texts, but you might need to explain how to copy and save visual/aural texts.

As students are working (and such a project can be scheduled for anywhere from half-a-term to the full term), the class should begin to build a simple Web page. Most students and faculty I know find it easier to use an authoring program (such as Dreamweaver), which necessitates a minimum of prior knowledge. After explaining how to open a file, create tables, and make links (realizing your class will have the full range of familiarity with these styles), students can see how to enter text, insert images, and link internally and externally in the site. Students are very good at judging how little or much they need to know. They can simply choose images, write text about them (based on their research), and figure out what in that writing might best be linked to other data they’ve found in order to present an intriguing and informative view of the research they’ve discovered. Ping-ponging through that dynamic, they’ll soon amass their site. Very basic features of text insertion, arrangement and linking are needed for this
assignment, as the goal is simply to provide a medium to capture what the students collect and write. Each team can do their own individual page(s), making whatever stylistic choices they want. The class might need a couple days to learn and practice the fundamentals here, and the instructor should provide a basic one- or two-page handout the students can use for the actual page design. And I suggest you take time to let students explore a few simple but powerful digital stories on the Web (just search “digital story” to find a bunch) to see how well-chosen text and imagery can combine to form an interesting, informative, oftentimes delightful narrative. If your college or department has a technical support center, it might help if teams scheduled appointments for a little help, if they felt the need.

5 Most first-year composition classes require student practice in academic prose. Obviously the research box does not preclude such practice, and actually enhances it. Students will be much better prepared to write citational prose after engaging in their research (and reading each other’s). The smaller bits of prose they generated for their Web page, and the insights they derived from their inquiry, have academic cachet and can serve as the seeds for a more polished, self-contained prose genre (an analysis, reflection, narrative, or some mixed genre), which can be a required component of the assignment.

EVALUATION
Following the box-artists discussed above, the important things emphasized here are voice, inquiry, atmosphere, selection, insight, and interesting materials. The actual Webwork should not be fetishized. Rather, measure process-traces:

• How thoroughly did students range over resources for their task?
• What novel items/sources did they discover?
• How engaged was their original writing?
• Did they come up with interesting insights?
• Was a scene successfully re-created?
• If they did interviews and surveys, what sort of useful or creative information did they yield?

Those are the criteria I would apply to this project.

RESOURCES
For background reading on the box as avant-garde genre, I’d suggest Brian O’Doherty’s “Joseph Cornell: Outsider on the Left,” from his work on several key contemporary artists, American Masters: The Voice and the Myth (Universe Books, 1988); Charles Simic’s Dime-Store Alchemy (Ecco, 1992), though out of print, can be found in libraries and used-book stores, and gives a truly raptur-
ous account of Cornell’s art (if the project requires any short, reflective commentary by students, Simic’s brief reveries on Cornell could be inspirational); there have been many books written on Fluxus recently, a good start is the exhibition catalogue In the Spirit of Fluxus (Walker Art Center, 1993); textual reproductions of Duchamp’s boxes are found in his book Salt Seller (Oxford UP, 1973). Besides that background reading, the instructor would obviously need networked computers for students with a good browser, as well as a basic hypertext authoring program (either on the classroom computers or on machines students can access in the school’s tech center). A hand-out for simple page-making commands is important. Also, the instructor should be prepared with some of the most interesting URL’s to help students begin their research. If print-based material will be scanned, then access to appropriate hard/software will be needed.
Duchamp's collection of notes on his Large Glass is a nice template to allow students to record l'état brut inquiry results; it's a good, open genre to allow them to think of research as an ongoing project of discovery. But advanced composition courses, as well as graduate seminars, could better use a template that meshes well with actual, engaged interest, one allowing sustained, focused, scholarly writing. For example, in the second course in my college's undergraduate composition sequence, I have found rap music to be a topic that students both live and love, one that allows them to see the logic in being engaged scholars. That email from Greg White was written in the basic writing class I center around hip hop. It's a course students have begged to get into for the past 6 years I've been running it, some even waiting an entire year to enroll. No surprise: hip hop is a rubric for some of the most exciting cultural media available to young people today, transcending perceived distinctions of age, gender, race, and ethnicity, and emphasizing rich verbal and visual style. My goal as academic curator in this case is to mount a hip hop exhibit that will satisfy my students' desire, as well as leave them with an intense formal, verbal, and conceptual experience, one that will give them cultural and discursive capital to do with as they see fit. Like most curators, I am a preservationist; and one of the curator's duties is to preserve for public consumption powerful but unknown works that might otherwise go unnoticed. I'm tired of seeing so many Greg Whites come and go in my courses and not have their heartfelt work archived in some culturally meaningful way.

To attempt such a trace-capturing in my class, as a way to allow student desire to subtly pressure academic writing, I've been drawn to another box-theorist's catalogue of passionate inquiry, Walter Benjamin's record of his thirteen years of library research into the cultural preoccupations of nineteenth-century Paris, Das Passagen-Werk (The Arcades Project) (1927-1940, 1982). It is a work similar to both Cornell's and Duchamp's, a definitively unfinished project that one is intended to extend, "at best a 'torso,' a monumental frag-
ment or ruin, and at worst a mere notebook, which the author supposedly intended to mine for more extended discursive applications" (Eiland & McLaughlin, x). According to the English translators of this work, the subject of the Arcades' quest was an idiosyncratic study of the residual objects left behind from the ongoing performance piece called "Paris of the Nineteenth-Century":

- diverse material [from the literary and philosophical to the political, economic, and technological] under the general category of Urgeschichte, signifying the "primal history" of the nineteenth century. This was something that could be realized only indirectly, through "cunning": it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the "refuse" and "detritus" of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of "the collective," that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods more akin—above all, in their dependence on chance—to the methods of the nineteenth-century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than to those of the modern historian. Not conceptual analysis but something like dream interpretation was the model. The nineteenth century was the collective dream which we, its heirs, were obliged to reenter, as patiently and minutely as possible, in order to follow out its ramifications and, finally, awaken from it. (Eiland & McLaughlin ix)

So we find entries such as the two, shown on these pages, from the convolute (or grouped sheaf of notes) on "[Boredom, Eternal Return]."

A vector analysis of these or any other pages from the Passagen gives an idea of the various genres in which Benjamin worked: quotation (of passages of varying lengths), summary, short critical reflection, more extended quotation and/or analysis, brief sound-bite snippets, notes to himself. In terms of the material content, it's more open, more lived than traditional text-based academic inquiry—among the myriad topics covered are history, urbanism, desire, horror, shopping, pleasure, conspiracy, art, architecture, prostitution, gambling, engineering, even the simple transcription of names and signs (I like how the translators use the word torso because there is definitely a body moving in this space). He achieves, then, the true daybook for an engaged researcher, one whose method implies "how everything one is thinking at a
specific moment in time must at all costs be incorporated into the project at hand” (Benjamin, Arcades 456). Finally we can note the pre-figurement of writing as hypertext: that entry above, for example, in the “[Boredom, Eternal Return]” convolute, with the “Dioramas” tag, anticipates readers who can click that selection, taking them to the “[Panorama]” convolute.

Why am I drawn to this method, and how do I advocate using it?

First, it’s the idea of sustained inquiry, of the search as project—for me the most crucial part of the academic enterprise. Also, it’s form ouvert, a minimalistic building structure, that “slender but sturdy scaffolding” the historian erects “in order to draw the most vital aspects of the past into his net” (Benjamin, Arcades 459).

Currently, my students are involved in an Arcades Project trying to permeate the phantasmagoria of hip hop’s drama because, as a curator, I want my gallery-space to be thought of as an important information-source for the student-audience. Each class member selects a convolute, based on desire (topics such as old school, cultural roots, the socio-political, gender, race, gangsta, 2Pac, Eminem, violence, the industry); some general theory and background are read and annotated; then, after discussion of sophisticated online and print-based searching, students do more specialized individual reading and note-taking as their contemplative, inquiry-based field work (they are Benjamin’s in their virtual Bibliothèque Nationale). Audio and video are brought in as necessary. It’s a much more sustained and scholarly-focused version of the simple ‘box’ above, one requiring greater student prose effort. What they produce are a mass of brief snatches constellated together into the larger interactive project. This is writing that works minutely, from the inside out, to develop a statement.

So Scot Rewerts, for example, begins his own Arcades Project on rap and politics by recording and reflecting on a text snippet concerning Malcolm X he found on a Web site dealing with Rage Against the Machine lyrics:

–El Hajj Malik El Shabazz aka Malcolm X was assassinated on February 21 1965 but his connection to Hip Hop has been a long and strangely eerie one. The man who once ran the streets of Harlem, lived the fast life, and spent time in prison was a bona fide Hip Hopper of sorts back in the days of his youth. Malcolm went to all the latest shows, hung out with all the coolest music cats. He was up on the latest happenings as they were emerging from the streets. Back when he was a youth, the Hip Hop of his day was known as Be-bop and Malcolm who was always known for keeping it real was down with the whole scene. (Davey D’s Newsletter)

A direct correlation with one of the most powerful black men that ever lived to hip hop, shows how truly political hip hop is. In a Rage Against the Machine song Zach rap/rocks "Ya know they murdered X and tried to blame it on Islam!" (http://www.musicfanclubs.org/rage/lyrics/wakeup.html)

--Background: ‘Black nationalism’
'He may be a real contender for this position should he abandon his supposed obedience to white liberal doctrine of non-violence... and embrace black nationalism' 'Through counter-intelligence it should be possible to pinpoint potential troublemakers ... and neutralize them' (http://www.musicfan-clubs.org/rage/lyrics/wakeup.html

--This is in the background to Rage's song "Wake up." This, even though not really thought to be a hip hop genre of music, is extremely political in reference to the Civil Rights movement.

And here are some selections from Peter Prudden's convolute on the topic of whiteness in rap music, responding to reading he did in Nelson George's Hip Hop America:

"What had been proven in the 60's, particularly by Motown, was that R&B-based music by black singers could easily be sold in massive quantities to white teens, creating a lucrative commercial-cultural crossover" (3).

- George brings up a very good point in this quote. I believe this is a fore-shadow for the success of the rap industry. White teens indulge in gangsta rap simply because it takes them from their middle-class suburban homes and into the heart of the inner city. More importantly, it opens their imaginations to drugs, sex, guns and violence, the very things they are sheltered from in their daily lives.

"The heroin invasion [...] empowered a new vicious kind of black gangster. Heroin emboldened the black criminal class. Hip hop would chronicle, celebrate, and be blamed for the next level of drug culture development" (George 35)

- From the words of Notorious B.I.G., "either your slingin crack rock or you gotta wicked jump shot." Over time the African-American male has been notoriously rocked with this assumption.

"I can't leave the topic of rap and white folks without offering up this memory. It is summer 1995 and I am spending the long Labor Day weekend at a house out on the tip of Long Island. To my surprise, in a local publication I spot an ad for a Run-D.M.C. gig at the Bay Club in the Hamptons' town of East Quogue. Along with two other old-school hip hop colleague, Ann Carli and Bill Stephney, I drive to the club, where we encounter a large drunken crowd of college-age and young adult whites. The club is jam-packed and the narrow stage swollen with equipment.

"When Run, D.M.C., and Jam Master Jay arrive onstage, the building rocks. The 99.9 percent white audience knows the words to every song. "My Adidas," "Rock Box," and "King of Rock" are not exotic to this crowd. It is the music they grew up on. I flash back on Temptations-Four Tops concerts that are '60s nostalgia lovefests. Well, for these twenty-somethings, Run-D.M.C. is '80s nostalgia. They don't feel the music like a black kid from Harlem might. No, they feel it like white people have always felt black pop—
it speaks to them in some deep, joyous sense as a sweet memory of childhood fun. In a frenzy of rhymed words, familiar beats, and chanted hooks the suburban crowd drinks, laughs, and tongue kisses with their heads pressed against booming speakers. It may not be what many folks want hip hop to mean, but it is a true aspect of what hip hop has become.” (74-75)

This quote [from Nelson George] depicts the classic stereotype of the white suburban teen seeking a revolutionary moment derived of independence, attitude, style, and tough guy mentality. I realize this image simply because I have fallen under these circumstances countless times. As a teenager living in a middle class society with rules and regulations operating in every arena the feeling of rebellion against the norm is consistently present. Others and I view rap as an escape to a world un-imaginable to our Abercrombie & Fitch lives, where the biggest thing we must decipher is whose house we will watch Dawson’s Creek at. The fact is driving down the street with the windows down in the parent’s expensive car with the latest track blaring and the bass bumpin’ presents a bad boy thuggish image. The truth is we as adolescent white kids have absolutely no indication of what it means to live the life of the lyrics we feel associate with our lives. On how many occasions have you heard of a 14-year old white child shot to death for his Air Jordans? The reality is never, we dream and paint pictures in our minds of what life is like in the inner-city through these albums. I enjoy listening to rap music, but to say I can relate or I feel for those who lives are filled with drugs, guns, violence, poverty, and sex is completely asinine.

ACTIVITY

Students’ writing in this genre can be entered onto Web pages the instructor has made beforehand or that the students work on themselves; additionally, weblogs could be used. À la Benjamin himself, as students write about topics that address the other convolutes, they can link appropriately. Text and visuals can be inserted where appropriate. The course my students do this work in is designed to culminate in a research paper, so students, in effect, are doing old-fashioned note cards for the term paper, only in a much more interesting format, one that is a genre in itself.

I feel good as a curator with this project because my students discover an already-enchanted space and wander through that (the classroom-museum now conceived of as populist, audience-responsive studio/data-site). In too many composition courses, especially those centered around Ways of Reading-type textbooks, students encounter high-toned, expansive, relatively empty spaces, far removed from their own world; they don’t awaken from the dream of academic discourse, they learn to speak it and keep dreaming it. The Passagen is not the student’s clever response to a docent-guided tour through the great works of literary culture, but simply a re-representation of the students’ own self-guided tours through cultural detritus that fascinates, which
maybe holds clues; as Macrorie termed these material searches, they are “sto-
ries of quests that counted for questers” (“Preface,” n. pag.). Texts in such a 
curriculum become paratactic assemblage, with an intuitive structure based 
on association and implication, allowing the reader to fish out of them words 
that resonate with something felt deep inside (an escape to a world un-imagi-
nable to our Abercrombie & Fitch lives). Writing apassionato e con molto sen-
timento. I really don’t think it’s up to me to teach students how to process that 
“serious writing, [...] the long and complicated texts” (Bartholomae and 
Petrosky iii) of the academy; if certain disciplines feel the need to use those 
texts, they’re free to teach students their intricacies themselves. A box-logical 
genre like this displaces such texts from the writing class, substituting a basic 
a Awareness of how to use language and information, a cool project, and a sense of poetry. This, after all, is a highly respectable curatorial mission: “to reinvest 
art with a new humanism, using basic forms of symbolism, allegory, figura-
tion, and language... ask[ing] us to think about how we feel about the world 
we live in” (Auping 11).

1 The first thing you should do to mount an interactive exhibit like a Rap 
Arcades Project in your class is to look at Benjamin’s text to determine 
if the flavor and format of the inquiry is one you find conducive. If it 
is, I urge you to begin planning where I did: working with reference 
librarians to design a Web-based research guide. Together, you can 
decide which sites/sources, both rap-oriented ones (or whatever 
subject your students will explore) as well as those pertaining to larger 
cultural contexts, will be key starting points for your students. At my 
school, the library’s Web site has a section designed to get students 
started on intensive research paper assignments, so the page for my 
course (http://research.lib.umn.edu/results.asp?sid=439) easily fits 
into that site. We chose links to what seemed like the most useful scholarly indexes (ABI Inform, ComIndex, Expanded Academic Index, 
RILM Abstracts of Music Literature, and Sociological Abstracts), as 
well as some mainstream newspaper indexes (since so much of rap is 
reported on in the daily papers) and alternative press/ethnic sites. We 
chose a few of the richer hip hop sites, a rap dictionary, the best lyrics 
site, and an annotated list of some of the key scholarly texts in rap. We 
also included a few assignments students could work through: some to 
familiarize them with the differences between scholarly and popular 
sources, as well as one to help them judge the quality of some of those 
odd, unattributed sources that float across the Web.

2 Incorporate your best practices for introducing solid academic 
research writing (framing research questions and hypotheses; how to 
work with sources, and the distinction between primary, secondary, 
and tertiary; quotation, paraphrase, summary, and plagiarism; and 
documentation format).
3 Present students with the rationale and format for Arcades-style reading notes. I show a few examples from Benjamin and give students a hand-out articulating the various genres or styles of notes they'll be taking. I ask students to practice a page of notes for the next day's class, based on that night's reading assignment. Then we go over these together, so students have a sense of the range of notational strategies available to them.

4 As students begin working through the on-line sources, I require them to turn in 2 pages of Arcades-style notes per week. I have students turn them in on paper, so I can respond, question, and suggest leads/sources based on developing patterns of inquiry. But you could easily have students begin entering them on to a Web site or weblog immediately.

5 Then, it's just a matter of reading, responding, helping to guide inquiry, and suggesting links. I like to bring in different on-line and print-based resources every week to help them take their inquiry in interesting directions. These can be targeted to the whole-class and/or student-specific. So one week, if I see a lot of students trying to figure out how to make claims about fans, I would introduce them to the Usenet archives of rap discussion groups. If a student is trying to explore gender issues, she and I would spend some time figuring out the best sources for claims on domestic violence (or whatever the topic). Midway through the project we look at how books can help, as well as other print-based sources.

- An individual conference with each student several weeks into the process of searching/reading/note-writing is a good idea, to see what problems/successes students are having and to help them think about a proposal for their research paper. The proposal should be due about 5 weeks before their final research paper is due; fleshing out a proposal will then shape the rest of their information-searching.

- As time for the actual formal research paper moves closer, we talk about that as a text in itself, drawing on the Arcades-work done so far to show in detail the movement from notes to more specifically-styled formal prose (mapping, chunking, development, finished format).

EVALUATION

I evaluate my student’s Arcades work, in part, on the basis of how thorough they have been in their investigation (most instructors can tell the difference between thin coverage and research that satisfies).

I also look for an engaged voice to appear in the work, the confident tone of a scholar immersed in a project, one who gives off a sense of control; a kind of perceptual growth, then (hopefully, with the kind of poetically expressed sentiments we saw in Peter Prudden’s work). I’m also interested to see if they’ve discovered interesting, novel sites and sources I’ve never heard of.
(another sign of an engaged scholar). A two-pages-per-week requirement gives them a pace for their research; letting them see each other’s work shows them what the more engaged students are doing (if they need to see that). It also allows me to respond to and maybe help shape their inquiry (excited comments for wonderful things they’re finding, prompts to extend their search, caution when the work is getting too one-dimensional or the sources too similar). As above, I would not grade on the quality of any Web-work, but solely on the quality of the inquiry.

RESOURCES
Besides Benjamin’s book The Arcades Project, if instructors desire to afford their students the opportunity to do a Rap Arcades Project, the instructor needs to be familiar with rap music. Davey D’s Web site is a good place to start (www.daveyd.com); Davey’s a Bay Area DJ with one of the best Web sites in hip hop (excellent archive and links), and he sends out a weekly newsletter over the internet (I have my students subscribe), informing readers of the current events and controversies in rap and publishing provocative commentary from both insiders and fans. There are a variety of books that serve as a general introduction to the topic (e.g., David Toop’s Rap Attack #3, Serpent’s Tail, 2000; Tricia Rose’s Black Noise, Wesleyan UP, 1994; Nelson George’s Hip Hop America, Penguin, 1998), as well as mainstream magazines like The Source. But the important thing is to listen to the music (find your city’s best hip hop station or explore other cities’ on Web radio; the BET cable is a good source for rap videos; and check out a few club shows). Spend some time surfing the net to find the hip hop sites you want your students to know about. And see your school’s reference librarian to find out about a Web-based research guide to support your class.

MODIFICATION FOR A GRADUATE-LEVEL COURSE
An Arcades Project for a graduate seminar would be ideal, I think, as Benjamin was a sort of a model graduate student for the thirteen years he worked on his project. The topic for a graduate project would correspond to the seminar content; the students themselves could determine the convolutes they were interested in exploring. Early class sessions would be an ideal time to introduce students to the more arcane scholarly sites and sources they might still be unfamiliar with. Rather than providing them with a Web research guide, the students themselves could each generate a topic-specific one as a sort of review of on-line literature (if it was a graduate class in pedagogy, they could do a full-blown Research Quickstart-type page that they could use with their own students). The seminar would culminate in a publishable article based on their Arcades work, much like Benjamin wrote articles/chapters on Charles Baudelaire and 19th Century Paris based on his own Arcades work.
FINALLY...

My projects above are all attempts to use technology to infuse contemporary composition instruction with a spirit of the neo-avant-garde. The box-theorists provide a way to think about composition as an interactive amalgam, mixing video, graphic, and audio with the verbal; a medium in which students can both archive their desires as well as publish passionate writing on their social reality vis-à-vis the larger culture: the explorations, reflections, discoveries, and analyses regarding those desires. The result gives them a serviceable non-fiction prose, enchanted somewhat, I hope, with a sense of wonder about the world and an interest in making meaning about it. I don't want student voices to be changed, re-shaped, or made over; rather I focus on helping students with a better sense of awareness and language, voice and content, and an appreciation of information. Those are all good goals for life as well as good skills to take into another class.

It's the box-artist's goal: text rubbing against text, making an arrangement of materials to see what could be done with them. The open-ended forms and available materials permit an intimacy and intensity that more mediated genres make difficult; students see writing elementally, as a material encounter rather than commodified production.

And when provided with a rich range of materials, the result can be what Cornell strived to construct: a vehicle of reverie, an object that would enrich the imagination of the viewer. The model for college writing, then, becomes the contemporary DVD—a compendium of “finished” text, commentary, selected features, interviews, alternative versions, sections initially deleted (but now appended) from the main text, amusing bits, and other assorted items of interest, clickable as desired, rather than the traditional scholarly essay. Some of the most important rhetorical strategies are practiced, such as searching, selection, juxtaposition, and arrangement/layout, as well as the always-important ability to phrase important personal insights in as clear and memorable a way possible (what I call the heartfelt pensée).

The definitively unfinished nature (made more so if readers are urged to continue the work) captures the flux of contemporaneity, that direct experience of life, allowing us to participate in its unfolding. With the essay displaced, our new classroom genre might best be called a diary journal repository laboratory, picture gallery, museum, sanctuary, observatory, key... inviting us to see things in a light in which we do not know them, but which turns out to be almost that one in which we have always hoped one day to see them bathed.