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## "Against Expression": Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation- Poets.org

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*The following is a transcript of an interview with Kenneth Goldsmith conducted at the office of the Academy of American Poets on June 17, 2011.*



**Poets.org:** How would you explain conceptual poetry to a younger audience unfamiliar with the tenets of conceptual art?

**Kenneth Goldsmith:** The best thing about conceptual poetry is that it doesn't need to be read. You don't have to read it. As a matter of fact, you can write books, and you don't even have to read them. My books, for example, are unreadable. All you need to know is the concept behind them. Here's every word I spoke for a week. Here's a year's worth of weather reports...and without ever having to read these things, you understand them.

So, in a weird way, if you get the concept—which should be put out in front of the book—then you get the book, and you don't even have to read it. They're better to talk about than they are to read. It's not about inventing anything new; it's about finding things that exist and reframing them and representing them as original texts. The choice of what you're presenting is more interesting than the thing that you're presenting. You're not evaluated on the writing or what's on the page; you're evaluated on the thought process that comes before 'pen is set to paper,' so to speak.

In 1959, Brian Gysin said that writing was 50 years behind painting. And it still is. So if conceptual art happened 50 years ago, we're just beginning to get around to it now. These are ideas that have

never been explored in poetry. We've had a little bit of pastiche, a little bit of—you know, a line from here, a line from there. But we've never had the concept of lifting something that you didn't write and moving it over five inches, saying that it's yours, and claiming that it's a newly authored text.

**Poets.org:** Are there conceptual strains/models you find in classic works by poets like Homer or Sappho, Shakespeare or Keats? Or is the tradition grounded solely in the work of more postmodern writers like John Cage, Jackson Mac Low, Andy Warhol?

**Goldsmith:** Well, Craig Dworkin and I just did this anthology, entitled, *Against Expression*. I think a real scholar—someone like Steve McCaffery—could actually find Renaissance examples of this. But, of course, I'm not that. And Craig's a real modernist.

So we begin with Mallarmé. And Mallarmé's falsified writings on fashion. He made a whole fashion magazine, all by himself, under nom de plumes of various people—how to throw a great dinner party, how to wear fashionable clothes, etc. He wrote *Vogue* but all under pseudonyms. And it became a really popular magazine. Of course, it was a complete lie; the whole thing was a grand work of identity falsification.

*Against Expression*, the anthology of conceptual writing, is not just people who are fifty years old and younger writing. It really does go back to the beginnings of modernism. And there's a pretty straight path that we plot going through that to the contemporary day.

**Poets.org:** What are the new frontiers of experimentation in 'conceptual poetry' itself?

**Goldsmith:** There are different people working on different things. Let me just say that the most interesting investigations in conceptual writing are taking place in fields outside of poetry—so Christian Bök is really almost being a scientist at this point. He's given himself a Ph.D. in Genetics, and he's doing genetic engineering and representing it as poetry. That's something outside of it.

Vanessa Place is taking legal briefs that she writes during the day in the law field. And she doesn't do anything to them, she just represents those as poetry. Darren Wershler is a professor in communication studies and is taking ideas of what's going on in the digital world—stuff that is real hardcore geek stuff—and bringing that into conceptual poetry.

I think the most interesting frontiers of what's happening are coming from outside of the field, and not inside the field. And thereby it's appealing to these other audiences. Christian's work is in *Nature* magazine. He's more well-known to the scientific community than he is to the poetry community. There's a subversion of poetics, an inversion, and a complete broadening of what we

consider to be poetry. It's really amazing.

**Poets.org:** What are your essential texts/influences? What writers/thinkers make up your family tree? What works do you turn back to for pleasure?

**Goldsmith:** The touchstones are always the same. You could go back—it's actually the same lineage from which all experimentation emerges. Our roots are not that much different than Language poetry. We love Stein, we love Pound, we love Joyce. You know, that lineage. But then it breaks. Because what's more important than is Fluxus, Pop Art, Sound Poetry, Visual and Concrete Poetry; of course sampling and hip hop are all very important tenets behind it; situationism is really big; and Language poetry is a real influence as well.

Personally, I come back to Cage and Warhol, who are my two main touchstones. In fact, I just got *The Warhol Diaries*, a thousand-page tome, on the Kindle. I could never read it outside of home, because it's too big. And now it's on the Kindle, and it's an absolute pleasure. That's really pleasurable to read.

**Poets.org:** How do you feel about the title: *conceptual poet*? Is it limiting?

**Goldsmith:** I like limiting things. I think it describes a certain way of working—a certain way that a lot of people are working today. It gives a name to a lot of different gestures.

I'd say that Flarf is one methodology within conceptualism. And Flarf is represented in this book [*Against Expression*].

People are working differently because of the digital environment. You could call it digital poetics, but a lot of it is not actually happening on the screen. A lot of it is happening on the page, and yet it's informed by the fact that you can cut and paste the entire internet. And then what do you do with that? You just take something and claim it as your own, because you can copy it, and you can cut it and paste it.

I think it's a useful term—a useful umbrella term—and it's not really as much of a break as a continuation. There are precedents—in this book, for example, Burroughs—pre-digital precedents of people who were working digitally before the digital. The book is absolutely full of them. Joyce, some text-based conceptual art, or Cage. Beckett is working with words in a mechanical way, a conceptual way. Clark Coolidge is in here. There's all sorts of stuff...

When the digital *happens*, we begin to think of language very differently. And the idea of conceptualism becomes useful in describing those digital tendencies.

**Poets.org:** What are some of the most interesting reactions you've had to your work? And do they feed the work itself?

**Goldsmith:** Well, you know, it's universally reviled. From the right and from the left. When I read at the White House, Linh Dinh, on the left, accused me of performing for a mass murderer, Mr. Obama. And on the right, a right-wing talk-show radio host named Michael Savage called my invitation to the White House "the decline of western civilization" and "the emergence of Marxist class warfare," and he said that I was "Abbie Hoffman part two."

The White House was a real flash-point for both the left and the right, and it was so shocking to me—maybe not so shocking—but curious how close the rhetoric of the extremes were, about the gesture of conceptualism being in a very prominent place like that.

**Poets.org:** Do you seek out those extremes?

**Goldsmith:** I enjoy them. You don't get those reactions in the art world. Art has long ceased to shock. In the poetry world, it's so conservative, that we can still get people upset. It's kind of great in a way.

In the art world, since Duchamp or Jeff Koons crumpled up pieces of paper, or relational aesthetics where people served chicken curry for dinner and that's called "art," everyone goes, "Hey, man, that's cool," and it sells for a lot of money. In the poetry world, you can say, "I'm going to be unoriginal. I'm going to be uncreative," and you can get people very upset by that gesture.

It's a very slow-moving, backwards thing, so you can still have a little bit of scandal. It's sort of exciting. I don't court it, but it happens.

**Poets.org:** How is your work informed by your contemporaries/friends working in the field—poets like Christian Bök, Vanessa Place, Robert Fitterman, Caroline Bergvall, others?

**Goldsmith:** It's a long conversation. We have an anthology. We're fifteen years into this. Now everybody's talking about conceptual writing, but it was just a thing that sort of emerged with Darren Wershler, Christian, and myself—just kind of feeling that there was a change in the air which was being precipitated by digital availability, back in the late nineties. So, suddenly, everybody's talking about this. But you have to realize it's been going on for some time.

We just smelled something in the air that was going to change, because of technology. And over the years, various people joined in, and joined on. And now a lot of people are working that way. But the core group is still very much in touch and still very excited.

Vanessa [Place]—five years ago, we hadn't heard about Vanessa. She just sort of came. We had been having this conversation for ten years before, and suddenly, Vanessa's this huge force. But Caroline, also, has been along for the entire ride. And you've got people like Kim Rosenfield and Nada Gordon and Katie Degentesh. There are just people all over.

The other thing I want to say about conceptual writing is that it's the first poetry movement since concrete poetry that is an international poetry movement. Language writing wasn't international. There were a few participants in England, many in Canada and the U.S., and that was it, even though it was known world-wide.

One of the reasons that concrete poetry became an international movement was because you didn't need to know a specific language in order to understand the work. It was primarily visual. So you could get a little key, and you could kind of understand the poems. So you had participants from all over the world. Those were global anthologies. Now, this is a global anthology as well. And the reason being, again, is that you don't really need to read the work. Again, it's not predicated upon knowing a language—it's knowing a concept. And if the concept is put out before you, who cares what happens after that.

People are working this way. We've got friends in France, in England, Brazil, Argentina, of course Canada, and all over Scandinavia. Conceptual writing is massive in Scandinavia. So it's the first global poetics movement since concrete poetry, and that's an amazing thing.

**Poets.org:** Was there a moment when you shifted from just doing the work you were doing, to writing critical work in order to frame a movement?

Nobody else was going to do it. When we started, and still, until only really recently, the only thing that people could talk about was Language poetry, which they'd been talking about since 1973. So you had scads of poetics students coming out of Buffalo, still working as Language poetry's umpteenth generation, students of Charles Bernstein, Language poets, or variants of that. And the critical work was still centered on Language poetry. And it really was getting tiresome.

I like Language poetry, but what we learned from Language poetry was that if you wait around for somebody to write about it, it's not going to happen. You've got to get out there, and you've got to do the critical writing, at first, yourself.

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