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Uncreative Writing, Creative Reading | Full-Stop.net

by SAM ROWE • AUG. 16, 2011

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Kenneth Goldsmith at Street Poets and Visionaries Mercer Union. Toronto, 2009 Photo Credit: © C. Jones

Two volumes published this winter provide an apt summary of and an impressive critical response to one of the more bewildering and fascinating literary developments in recent years: the

ever-increasing quantity of work by writers experimenting with constraint-based and found-text writing. Covering a broad range of contemporary work, from Cagean mesostics and visual poems to rip-offs from pop culture and internet forums to exhaustive transcriptions and process-generated texts, *Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*—edited by Kenneth Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin, themselves both active as conceptual poets—collects an impressive menagerie of literary oddities from the margins of the contemporary scene. Marjorie Perloff's new volume of criticism, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, attempts to make sense of this recent onslaught of outré literary productions, discussing both antecedents in early- and mid-century Modernism as well as contemporary work by Goldsmith, Susan Howe, Carolyn Bergvall, Yoko Tawada, and Charles Bernstein, among others.

Taken together, these two volumes offer a useful introduction to a loosely defined coalition of literary practices, known alternately as conceptual writing, citational writing, “uncreative” writing, and extending to include visual and sound poetics as well as constraint-based literature. In other words, both books cover a lot of ground, and can at times feel rather disorienting—but then again, so can the texts which are their subjects. Ultimately, however, the two volumes are a response to an ongoing reevaluation of the concept of literary authorship: what if the category “literature” includes not only textual production but also postproduction, not only creating texts but also doing things with them?

Dworkin and Goldsmith's *Against Expression* collects a broad range of work by writers, largely but not entirely contemporary, for whom literary production consists not in creativity, originality, or spontaneity but rather in quotation, citation, collation, and appropriation. Or, more precisely, writers who exercise their creative powers as artists not at the level of textual creation but at the level of textual *management*. Goldsmith, in his introduction to the volume (a brief piece that corroborates the Ubuweb founder and provocateur extraordinaire's penchant for the forceful, pithy manifesto), suggests that the recent explosion of “uncreative writing” in the American, Canadian and European literary scenes can be linked to the advent of the blogosphere, in which links and copied text have come to be regarded as “publishable” content in their own right. Dworkin's introduction, on the other hand, offers an intricate, erudite discussion, replete with endnotes, of the precedence for conceptual writing in the conceptual art movements of the twentieth century, with Marcel Duchamp, Sol LeWitt, and Robert Rauschenberg featuring prominently.

Both Dworkin and Goldsmith comment on the apparent tardiness of literature's arrival at the threshold of the conceptual: for art, it happened in the 1910s with DuChamp, for music, in the 1960s with John Cage, so why did the Kenneth Goldsmiths and Christian Böks of the world only start showing up in the late 90s and 2000s? I'll return to this idea (that conceptual writing exemplifies literature's dawdling attempt to “catch up” with the other arts) below in order to push

back on it a bit, but first, a sampling of *Against Expression*'s wares seems in order.

Dworkin and Goldsmith's anthology, which includes over one hundred works in excerpt or in their entirety, is a necessarily diffuse affair, spanning several centuries, many countries, and uncountable literary scenes, and including many frustratingly minimal fragments of longer texts. Of course, it couldn't have been otherwise, given that *Against Expression* attempts to anthologize a baffling number of texts that are baffling to begin with. In any case, I can only offer a shamefully incomplete summary of the volume's content here: among the anthology's motley denizens are terse reductions of Shakespeare's sonnets, poems assembled from text returned by Google searches, disclosures of personal medical records, a complete transcription (not just dialogue but also stage directions, scene descriptions, etc.) of the film *Top Gun*, a long poem written using only questions, a version of *The Sun Also Rises* which includes only sentences starting with a personal pronoun, a meticulous record of personal reading habits, a confessional poem based on standardized questions for psychiatric evaluations, and an entire book written using only the letter "t".

While the anthology's primary focus is on contemporary authors, Dworkin and Goldsmith are careful to include collage and process-based writing by 60s and 70s figures such as John Cage, Jackson Mac Low and Ted Berrigan (whose contribution to the collection is a sidesplitting "interview" with Cage, in fact cobbled together with text culled from a who's-who of 60s countercultural figures). (On a related note, many of Berrigan's fabulous *Sonnets*—which don't show up in *Against Expression* but are well worth a look if you're not familiar—famously consist of clusters of lines permuted and repermuted to form "new" poems.) More unexpectedly, Dworkin and Goldsmith plumb the depths of the literary canon to unearth examples of found-text poetry and appropriation writing by such figures as Denis Diderot (an unapologetic rip-off of Sterne's *Tristram Shandy*), Stephane Mallarmé (a phony, proto-pop-art fashion magazine), Hart Crane (a collage of lines from the work of contemporaneous minor poet), and William Butler Yeats (a word-for-word verse transcription of a passage from the nineteenth-century historian Walter Pater).

Among my personal favorites in the collection are selections from an ongoing sequence by the young Japanese poet Shigeru Matsui. Relying on the austere density of the written numeral, Shigeru Matsui's searing *Pure Poems* exemplify the work of a group of Japanese artists calling themselves the Methodicists (who in their foundational manifesto insist, with good reason, that their movement be carefully distinguished from Methodism). According to the "Methodicist Manifesto", the "method poem"—the movement's literary manifestation—"is a row of letters which comes to method itself, prohibiting personalization and absorption." The "row of letters", that is, which constitutes the "method poem" is nothing more or less than an iteration of a predetermined

procedure or “method”—an aesthetic choice that, according to the Methodicists, will circumvent the “liberty and equality which have produced license and indolence in arts and sciences,” and seek to “reinstate logics as ethics”. On a slightly more impish note, the manifesto stipulates that “real letters which epicize lyric will sometimes be alternated scrupulously with other signs.” (For an example of work that exercises such scrupulousness, see Matsui’s *Quantum Poem*.)

The (to me, somehow refreshing) austerity of the Methodicist project certainly carries over to Matsui’s *Pure Poems*, an ongoing serial project published online roughly once each week since 2001. Each “pure poem” consists of 20 lines of the Roman Numerals “I”, “II”, and “III”, permuted in ever-changing sequences (with one exception: “1231” mysteriously opens with a single “IIII”). Each poem is laconically titled according to the dates during which it was composed (“0509~0513,” for example, for May 9 to 13, 2011). Nowhere, at least in English, does Matsui describe his method for generating these poems, and this humanities major certainly can’t figure it out, but I do know that some of Matsui’s other serialized projects involve recursive algorithms, in which the content of the previous poem is fed through a randomizing process to create a new text (see *Poetics*). In any case, Matsui has published, by my estimate, nearly 500 “pure poems”, none of them identical, and none of them legible in any customary sense of the word.

So much for the nuts and bolts of Matsui’s singular project. The poems themselves are nothing if not severe: products of an almost maniacally ascetic regimen, their visual surface balances aggressive illegibility with icy repose. Composed only of the simple lines that constitute the character “I”, but nevertheless set with the same type and line spacing that any “normal” poem might be, the *Pure Poems* are radically unstable in their generic identity, occupying the threshold between text and picture, writing and visual design. Inhabiting this threshold, they access the primal scene of literature and of writing in general, the ineffable point at which lexical sense is emergent, but has not yet emerged, from silent marks on the page. The access thus granted to the elemental materials of written language contributes in part to the vibrating intensity of the poems.

That said, the mute ferocity of Matsui’s poems, for me at least, is ultimately attributable the absurd interpenetration of the ludic and the saturnine that necessarily occurs when a playful, almost ingenuously simple idea (that poems—“poems”—merely be iterations of a serialized procedure and need not even readable in any customary sense) is taken very, very seriously. Indeed, the Methodicists themselves insist that art “must not fall into a taste for stoicism. Discipline and death exist in order to affirm delectation, love, and life.” Anyone who thinks that method poetry is where fun goes to die, while probably right, misses the profound connection between procedure, constraint, and literary creation, a connection I don’t have room to unpack in the context of this review but which Matsui’s poems make abundantly—indeed, overwhelmingly—evident.

Some of the most dazzling and fascinating pieces in *Against Expression* are, like Matsui's work, notably simple, consisting merely in the execution of an eloquent, forceful idea which, as Goldsmith describes it in his manifesto "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing", "becomes a machine that makes the text." ("Paragraphs" is itself a conceptual text: a word-for-word transcription of Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art", with a few appropriate substitutions—"writer" for "artist", "text" for "artwork".) Many of my favorite texts (or, I guess, my favorite ideas) in the collection discover a disruptive potential in the most quotidian, and indeed, clerical of tasks: alphabetization. Rory Macbeth's *The Bible (alphabetized)*, which is exactly what it sounds like, transforms the Holy Book into a relentless flow of data—the eight pages of "be"s, believe it or not, are strangely riveting.

Even more devastating, and, as the editors glowingly attest, even more "unreadable", is Claude Closky's "The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order", which is also exactly what it sounds like: typed out in longhand and set as a single block of prose, the numbers form a nearly impenetrable textual surface. Almost devious in its simplicity, Closky's piece effortlessly fuses the two sequences indispensable to the creation, storage, and distribution of knowledge into a monstrously nonsensical hybrid, as fascinating as it is useless.

Which is not to say that the text itself is fascinating, of course; in fact, it's pretty darn boring. No small portion of the piece's brilliance lies in the fact that it is calibrated to produce a text so densely monotonous as to not suggest but *demand* recourse to alternative forms of reading. The alternative (subversive?) reading practices thus made available might concern the rhythms of the spoken words (characterized by intricately distorted periodicities and jarring double-stresses) or the visual patterning of the layout (whose stark, almost brutal monotony allows the interplay of spaces and solids, lines and counter-lines, inherent in any block of prose to emerge). And, most significantly, they might transpose the act of poetry-reading beyond the frontier of the form-content problematic by treating a poem neither as a product of skillful craftsmanship or as an attempt to communicate the incommunicable, but rather as a direct projection of its own theoretical and ideological basis for existence, an unfiltered manifestation of the conditions and processes which brought it into being.

By collapsing the schism between the intentional, technical, and procedural histories of the poem and the resultant textual surface, conceptualist poetics creates literary objects that have a peculiarly insistent energy, a sense of immediacy—or better yet, of *availability*—that frustrates, indeed, renders obsolete, conventional approaches to reading and interpretation that rely on "surface" and "depth". The conceptualist poem is not a compound of intention and result, being and epiphenomenon, the incommunicable and the commonplace, the private and the public, the invisible and the visible. Indeed, it is curiously resistant to these oppositions, constituting itself as

a poetic gesture that unifies abstraction and surface: to read (“read”) “The First Thousand Numbers” is to gaze upon an abstract idea fully manifest as a material text, or a material text which fully encompasses the procedure that created it. Conceptualist poetics, at least as it is represented in such exceptional examples as the work of Closky, MacBeth, Goldsmith, and Matsui, renders one of the most storied pronouncements in the history of American poetics reversible: “no ideas but in things;” but also, no things but in ideas.

It should come as no surprise that Marjorie Perloff, the grand dame of avant garde poetics and criticism, has already taken a stab at making sense of the new influx of literature using conceptualist, aleatoric, procedural, appropriative, pluralist, and collage methods. Her most recent volume, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century*, is a collection of topical essays unified by their engagement with a central problem: what does it mean for poets to create works that are ostentatiously unoriginal, and why are so many of them doing it now? Included in Perloff’s inventory of (to borrow Goldsmith’s phrase) “uncreative writing” practices are the scrapbook-style modernism of Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades Project*, the layout and format experiments of the Brazilian concrete school, a process-written opera libretto by East-Coast language school fixture Charles Bernstein, Susan Howe’s incorporation of found visual objects, Caroline Bergvall’s trans-linguistic poetry, and, of course, Kenneth Goldsmith’s zany monumental transcriptions. The book, to be honest, reads more like an accumulation of recent essays than a truly unified critical narrative, but the introduction does provide a fairly powerful theoretical framework for approaching the essays, and more importantly—in case you haven’t got the memo—Perloff is *really* good at reading poems, especially weird ones.

The central impetus for *Unoriginal Genius* is an attempt to describe and theorize a poetic modality that Perloff terms “citationality” and views as technologically-determined and at the core of a wide array of contemporary avant-garde practices:

“ [. . .] *citationality*, with its dialectic of removal and graft, disjunction and conjunction, its interpenetration of origin and destruction, is central to twenty-first-century poetics. Indeed, *réécriture*, as Antoine Compagnon calls it, is the logical form of “writing” in an age of literally mobile or transferable text—text that can be readily moved from one digital site to another or from print to screen, that can be appropriated, transformed, or hidden by all sorts of means and for all sorts of purposes. This is not Pound’s “Make it New!” but Jasper John’s “Take an object. Do something to it. Do something else to it.” (17)

For Perloff, as for Goldsmith and Dworkin, the poetics of textual appropriation and reuse is a

response to the exigencies of the contemporary media, in which an overwhelming quantity of readable content has necessitated an expansion of the notion of “writing” to include not only the generation of texts but also their collection, juxtaposition, collation, filtering, and modification. Personally, I’m inclined to be slightly suspicious of a certain messianism that seem to lurk within Perloff’s, as well as Goldsmith’s and Dworkin’s, evaluations of contemporary writing, a desire to place the present at the end of literary history. More pointedly: I feel uncertain that the inclusion of appropriative and citational practices within the domain of “writing” is entirely a new development, or that ongoing mutations in the nature of authorship are wholly without precedent—more on this below. Nevertheless, Perloff’s concept of “citational” writing is a powerful descriptive tool for beginning to make sense of the motley assortment of work she draws together.

Perhaps the highlight of *Unoriginal Genius* is the final chapter, which reads, or attempts to read, Goldsmith’s *Traffic*. The second installment of Goldsmith’s *New York Trilogy*, *Traffic* is a verbatim transcription of each and every word uttered during the hourly traffic reports on New York City’s WINS during a single holiday weekend. Perloff musters her considerable critical chops in attempting to make sense of Goldsmith’s text, first considering the work’s localist streak (since, after all, it’s all about New York), next viewing the poem in relation to the famous traffic jam scene in Godard’s *Weekend*, then meditating on the relationship between the text and the photograph chosen for the cover of the volume, attempting a formalist reading—in which recurring elements such as “GW Bridge” and “alternate parking rules are in effect” recur with slight variations like “a single chord . . . in minimalist music”, and finally comparing the closing passages of *Traffic* (in which traffic is “flowing smoothly across the Hudson at both the Lincoln and Holland tunnels” as well as other arteries out of the city) to the iconic, and similarly utopian, ending of another storied New York book, *The Great Gatsby*.

In other words, Perloff ransacks literary criticism’s arsenal of techniques in order to read a poem not written to be read: she traces intertextual reference and influence, considers cultural and geographical context, and parses formal development, all as part of a valiant sally against the impenetrable surface of Goldsmith’s text. And it works—to a certain degree. While I’m certainly interested in Perloff’s reading of *Traffic*, for me its ultimate value is as a productive engagement with a question, perhaps *the* question, that haunts our response to conceptual poetics: am I actually supposed to read this? Perloff has the audacity to answer this question in the unequivocal affirmative (with an acknowledged disregard for Goldsmith’s own statements about his work) and see what happens. This gambit allows the true force of Goldsmith’s work, and of conceptual poetics in general, to emerge: following Perloff, we can view *Traffic* not as a facile inside joke or as a naïve rejection of the richness of literary tradition, but simply as a much-needed opportunity to read more imaginatively. By forcing us to confront the unintelligible, the boring, the insipid, and

the illegible, conceptual poetics gives us no choice but to circumvent unreadability and discover new modes of reading and new spaces for interaction with literary texts.

Often present in Perloff's, Goldsmith's, and Dworkin's discussions of conceptual writing is a sense of urgent historicity, a sense that work like that of Matsui, Closky, Goldsmith, and others, driven by sweeping late-century changes in media technologies and consolidating earlier innovations in art and music, is an unprecedented and potentially irreversible mutation in literary history (for the sake of brevity, I'm caricaturizing slightly the position that these critics establish in relation to literary history). The sense that we are teetering on a precipice at the end of literary history, beyond which the category of the literary as we know it faces an uncertain future, is admittedly quite exhilarating. However, pronouncements that the end of days has come generally deserve scrutiny, and indeed, Goldsmith and Dworkin provide us with ample implements for such scrutiny by scattering a few stray oddities from the eighteenth and nineteenth century within *Against Expression's* catalog of contemporary pieces. Perloff hits even closer to home by beginning the introductory chapter of *Original Genius* not with Goldsmith, Cage, or Mac Low but rather with *the* canonical work of literary modernism: T. S. Eliot's *The Wasteland*. After all, the poem often regarded as the most luminous indictment of the modern condition (or the human condition) available in English does, upon reflection, rely an *awful* lot on quotations and references to other works. From Petronius and Ovid, to Dante and Shakespeare, to Paul Verlaine and household nursery rhymes, the greatest poem of the twentieth century is stuffed to the gills with text that was written, well, not by T. S. Eliot. For Perloff, Eliot's apparent enthusiasm for collage work (and for that matter, similar techniques in Pound's late—and strange—*Cantos*, and Benjamin's *Arcades Project*) speaks to the existence of what she calls "citationality" even among the titans of literary modernism, with whom the cult of originality reached its apex.

As a staunch student of modern and postmodern poetry, it is no surprise that Perloff chooses *The Wasteland* to illustrate the long historical reach of "uncreative writing"; personally, I see no reason to stop at the turn of the twentieth century in the hunt for early collage and process writing. Examples might include the commonplace books used by Renaissance intellectuals (simultaneously a mnemonic technology, an art-form, and a systematized accumulation of found texts) and the compilation of the *Glossa Ordinaria* on the Vulgate bible by twelfth- and thirteenth-century monastics (essentially a collectively-written hypertext collage executed on vellum).

There is reason, it seems, to suspect that authors have been "writing" simply by (following Jasper Johns) "doing things" to preexisting texts for some time. Newfound writerly interest in citationality and procedure is ultimately difficult to describe entirely as a function of contemporary media structures or a tardy copycat of 1960s innovations in other art-forms. Indeed, one might argue that the doctrine of "originality"—one of the literary paradigms conceptual writing seems

most intent on disrupting—is a fairly recent development in intellectual history (the eighteenth century, for what it’s worth, is a plausible point of origin). To complete this coda, I find myself compelled to rely on the same theorist whose flag so many conceptualists have rallied around: in his famous essay proclaiming “the death of the author”, Roland Barthes imagines the literary work as “a text [. . .] made of multiple writings, drawn from many cultures and entering into mutual relations to dialogue, parody, contestation [. . .]”

For Barthes, writing—any kind of writing at all—is never an act of spontaneous creation but rather the feat of allowing oneself to act as a conduit for “multiple writings”—processing, sorting, glossing, and editing the multiplicity of texts that compose the human subject in order to produce something “new”. In other words, writing is always appropriative in the sense that it is always preceded by prior writings, and always procedural in the sense that it devises *methods* (recall Matsui’s appropriation of this word) for refining the torrential onslaught of verbiage each of us faces every day into something productive, memorable, and significant; that is, something original.

This is not to say that conceptual literature merely confirms that everything is always as it has been: the sun rises every day, the Pope is catholic, the author is dead, etc.: the recent explosion in the volume of conceptual texts being written is unquestionably a significant event in literary history, and its connections to hypermedia, postmodernity, and what have you are undeniable. Rather, I simply mean to suggest that a body of work that may be destined to remain, at least for now, on the margins of the literary scene may be worth paying attention to. If the specters of the appropriated, the aleatory, the procedural, and the arbitrary lurk even in the most hallowed corners of the literary world, then conceptual writing, with its courageous embrace of these specters, can’t be ignored. That is, it can’t be ignored if we are serious about the work of coming to terms with the singular phenomenon we call literature.

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