



Kenneth Goldsmith

CHELSEA, MANHATTAN

"I am sitting in a room."

Comments

On 01.22.07 Geoff wrote:

Your post reminds me also of Tristan Tzara's instructions for writing a Dadaist poem, with its final (biting) line: "And here you are a writer, infinitely original and endowed with a sensibility that is charming though beyond the understanding of the vulgar." I have a hundred questions for you, but I'll limit myself to a few.

Do you think of conceptual poetry as the most apt expression of contemporary life and so the best way "to proceed," as you put it, in the 21st century? Or is it wrong to even call it expression--is it simply the most logical step for poetry to take? Or is it simply A step to take? (In which case, do you think it can be (or is currently) integrated into more traditional practices used to make poems?)

Also, would you explain what you mean by "thinkership" as opposed to "readership" and "readerliness"?

On 01.22.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Geoff,

Poetry is obliged to respond to its times. It appears that over the past five years, the widespread emergence of this new aesthetic has indicated that, once again, poetry is capable of absorbing, registering, and integrating ideas that appear at first seem foreign, even hostile to what we call "poetry." I see this is a sign of life and health for our art form. While I don't wish to be prescriptive about it, I feel that in some way, if a poet's work doesn't in some way address or reflect the linguistic changes in the technological and cultural landscape that we've experienced over the past ten years, it can't be called contemporary.

In terms of conceptual writing's ability to influence more traditional practices, again, I can't see how these practices -- if they are contemporary -- haven't already been infused with the concerns of conceptual writing.

Our conventional goals and notions for writing involve a sense of receivership, usually referred to as a readership. However, there is another way of writing that shuns the goal of the readership in favor of a thinkership. This generally involves creating unreadable texts that are hinged on a machine, or an idea, that is often more compelling than the text itself. Imagine a book intentionally written not to be read, but we're glad that it exists anyway. It does another type of work.

-- Kenneth

On 01.22.07 Anonymous wrote:

So I feel very good reading your un-boring boring. But at what point does something become original? How can you possibly hold apart intellect and emotion? It seems to me that your proposed strategy of opposites is actually the same routine of great art from the beginning—a putting forward of re-imagined life in life-startling ways. Idea is everything or else any word would be meaningless, we can agree. Thinkership IS readership. What is non-conceptual writing, any way? I know, Fox News Channel transcripts...until you or I read them. Then because of our-ship, they become

something else. We can argue that such writing is mumbo-jumbo garbage—and it is. It is place-filler XXX. But on our tongues it tastes different.

Can you talk about the extent to which our idea of reading should change, as opposed to our idea of "writing"?

On 01.23.07 Patricia Smith wrote:

Sorry for getting in touch this way, but I don't have your email address. I waited around to officially "meet" you at Poet's House last night, but you were always surrounded. Just wanted to let you know that I love your work at PennSound, and that you're on my list of heroes.

Glad I discovered you here this morning. If you've got time, check out my December blog...

On 01.23.07 Brian wrote:

I was thinking about your New York Times book, among other things, after seeing the Charles Bernstein and Jon Lovitz ads for The Yellow Pages at the EPC site. Are those ads--which posit Lovitz as the "author" of The Yellow Pages and Bernstein as an enthusiastic critic--themselves acts of conceptual writing/art, or is this another case of the corporate world co-opting artists/the ideas of artists? At first I loved the ad--the very idea, the fact that Bernstein was also in it--but then I was troubled by the implications for conceptual and procedural writing. I expect that Bernstein participated because he thought it'd be good fun, but I wonder if the ads somehow undermine the kind of work you're championing (by shifting them closer to ad-fodder, by inserting them into alien/ating territory).

On 01.23.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Can you talk about the extent to which our idea of reading should change, as opposed to our idea of "writing"?

The question about our change in reading habits is fascinating and goes hand in hand with our reconfiguration as writers. Several years ago, a friend lamented that on the web, he reads greedily and carelessly, skimming over things he would have read closely, had they been in print. I suggested that instead of lamenting this fact, we need to embrace view this condition as a new reading strategy. We have all become expert skimmers.

It comes back again to our role as information managers. When we are faced with an onslaught of language, creating a new textual environment, we are forced to respond in a new way. One of the new issues we face as readers is the fact that of the loss of the page, replaced with the "webpage", which really isn't a page at all. On paper, there is quantifiable accountability: pick up a book and you know what it "weighs." That same book, translated onto a webpage is elusive. One can skim (read: scroll) through a 500 page book in a matter of seconds. We spend all day moving information from one place to another. Some of us call this writing and others call it reading.

On 01.23.07 Anonymous wrote:

This is a great big breath of fresh air. Thanks.

I'm wondering what you think of the proposition that good writers squeeze from life like a lemon what they can, and great writers set entire universes spinning.

If you accept this rule, how does it apply to conceptual writing? Are we back to a simple weighing of good, bad, and ugly?

On 01.23.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

I'm wondering what you think of the proposition that good writers squeeze from life like a lemon what they can, and great writers set entire universes spinning.

I'm not so sure I accept your proposition. I think that the universe spins fine on its own without any assistance from writers.

Are we back to a simple weighing of good, bad, and ugly?

No. Conceptual writing doesn't weigh the morality of language; it weighs the materiality of language. In language is enough morality without any further intervention from the writer. We simply move it from one container into another, reframe it... but never judge it.

On 01.23.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

*Are those ads--which posit Lovitz as the "author" of *The Yellow Pages* and Bernstein as an enthusiastic critic--themselves acts of conceptual writing/art, or is this another case of the corporate world co-opting artists/the ideas of artists?*

The Lovitz character is in opposition to conceptual writing. Lovitz reinforces every cliché of the Romantic author, particularly in the scene where he is typing and has his moment of inspiration when hitting the "A." The distinction can be traced back to Borges's conception of Pierre Menard. Menard invents two chapters of *Don Quixote* word for word, thus casting him in the tradition of Romantic genius. If Lovitz or Menard copied -- not invented -- their works could be called conceptual writing.

On 01.23.07 Geoff wrote:

I would call scanning through 500 pages of text in a matter of seconds neither reading nor writing (nor even information management). I would call it nauseating (the biggest problem with scrolling--well, that and the anomie and despair it seems to inspire).

On 01.24.07 Amos Johannes Hunt wrote:

You describe a method of writing poetry whose product (poems) is not designed to be read. The value of such writing, you say, is not that its residue might be engaged by a "readership," but that its process might be engaged by a "thinkership." A poet, then, is not essentially someone who makes poems, but someone who makes processes.

But there's already a word for such a person: "engineer." What entitles the word "poet" to usurp the customary domain of that former word, which the so-called Dadaists did not hesitate to apply to themselves? Your own discourse suggests that the language of mechanics is more suited to the process you describe than the language of art.

In short, why even call it poetry anymore if it is no longer concerned with poems?

On 01.24.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

But there's already a word for such a person: "engineer." What entitles the word "poet" to usurp the customary domain of that former word?

Simply because I don't think that the engineering world would accept our work as part of their discourse. Happily, the poetry world does.

In short, why even call it poetry anymore if it is no longer concerned with poems?

Of course it is concerned with poems; the works are in direct discourse with contemporary and historical issues of language and poetry, published within the context of the poetry world, and received by critics and readers of poetry, making it, unassailably, poetry.

On 01.25.07 jes wrote:

Your comments this week have been very engaging, and I am here voluntarily. I'm most interested today in what I see as an odd anomaly in your list of the 'boring boring': watching a toddler for the afternoon. This list, as you note, describes things relative to obligation, and in all other instances, cites examples of arbitrary, unnecessary, and/or stereotypical obligation. However, excepting the toddler, the examples you cite are all universals: people conduct business of one sort or another, people endure the self-expression of their friends or higher-ups for various reasons, people must endure various family events--but the toddler example stands out as an example that is simply biased and prejudicial. Do you mean "someone else's toddler" or your own? Are all children inherently 'boring boring'? Is there a hidden status issue involved here--traditional women's work is beneath the speaker? I would question that, particularly in light of the sentences preceding the one from which I quote. Toddlers are the perfect example of individuals who participate endlessly in 'unboring boring' activities: they repeat things over and over, voluntarily--to the point of utter fascination, utter transcendence. By assuming that women's work is the ultimate in tedium, 'boring boring', you are missing opportunities both in terms of proving your thesis and observing processes which you, in other contexts, appear to find valuable.

On 01.25.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Jes,

My toddler comment is biased, prejudicial, and wildly subjective, having spent many boring boring hours with two toddlers of my own. In my house, it's not women's work, it's men's work too. As Mike Kelley has said about art, but I think is applicable here: "More love hours than can ever be repaid."

But thanks for pointing this problem out. I think it makes a good case for my ongoing avoidance of subjectivity. ;)

-- Kenneth

On 01.25.07 jes wrote:

Good to hear. Perhaps I overstated the bias issue. Glad to have been of service in your ongoing avoidance of subjectivity.

Perhaps toddler activity is, though, more interesting, or 'unboring boring' (I do like that concept) through the lens of memory.

On 01.26.07 Amos Johannes Hunt wrote:

I hope I won't seem like too much of a crank for saying this, but I don't think you answered my question. For it seems to me that you say both that "poet" is merely a label that is conveniently allowed by whoever it is that condones your work (i.e. that names are a matter simply of politics), and that you are actually entitled to the name (i.e. that names belong to certain named things properly, apart from politics).

But in case you were being flippant in your first remark, I'll assume that you do in fact believe your work to be properly called poetry.

Still, I can't think what you might mean by being "in direct discourse with contemporary issues of language and poetry," such that the phrase might describe, say, a 900-page transcription of an issue of the *New York Times*. I think perhaps you meant that your method was, metaphorically speaking, in conversation with the issues. If this is so, then the work itself no longer qualifies as a poem. If not, then what does the "poem" have to say *directly* (as you say) to the issues?

(Not that I see why speaking directly to issues of language and poetry should qualify a text as a poem, since even this text I am now writing would qualify on that account)

Nor do I see that it is quite accurate to say that your works are "received" by critics and readers of poetry, since as you say you do not even expect your books to be read, and I would be more surprised to learn of someone having read them than I was to learn of your having written them. Perhaps, again, you meant that your method was received by critics and readers.

But a method is not a poem. It is a method.

By the way, I'm very impressed with your writing (I mean by the more broadly accepted definition). This journal alone is considerable evidence for the pedagogical value you claim for "uncreative writing," if the style you have here attained was made possible by it. I've been enjoying it far more than any of the other journals I've watched here (which is what has tempted me to reply at such length), and can't wait for tomorrow's post. Thanks for doing this.

On 01.26.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Amos,

I apologize if my remark seemed flippant. They weren't intended to be. Let me see if I can articulate a little bit more clearly -- and more generously -- why and how this work might be considered poetry and also in what ways it assumes a discourse with prior poetics.

Still, I can't think what you might mean by being "in direct discourse with contemporary issues of language and poetry," such that the phrase might describe, say, a 900-page transcription of an issue of the New York Times. I think perhaps you meant that your method was, metaphorically speaking, in conversation with the issues. If this is so, then the work itself no longer qualifies as a poem. If not, then what does the "poem" have to say directly (as you say) to the issues?

If we accept John Cage's idea of all sounds being music, as I do, then that can be extended to the idea that all language can be poetry. Cage made the point that every sound has timbre, rhythm, duration and pitch; we can make those same extensions into language. I'm certainly not the first one to make this claim: over the past 100 years there have been many examples of works received as poetry that don't happen to look like or sound like what we know to be Poetry. I think that at this point in time -- after all that's happened in modernism -- that we can no longer make the claim the "the work itself no longer qualifies as a poem," just as in art, after Duchamp, we can no longer make the claim that any object is not art.

(Not that I see why speaking directly to issues of language and poetry should qualify a text as a poem, since even this text I am now writing would qualify on that account)

Exactly my point. If you should claim this passage to be poetry, I must accept it. While it might not be to my taste or liking, I have no choice but to admit that it is poetry if you say it is. Cage: "Music is all around us, if only we had the ears to listen."

Nor do I see that it is quite accurate to say that your works are "received" by critics and readers of poetry, since as you say you do not even expect your books to be read, and I would be more surprised to learn of someone having read them than I was to learn of your having written them. Perhaps, again, you meant that your method was received by critics and readers.

I am of the belief that works -- inseparable as methodology and text --- exist in whatever intellectual economy in which one wishes to place them. The works I'm referring to are published by presses with long histories of publishing poetry; as poems they are published in poetry journals; they are written about by academics and critics of poetry; and are studied by students of poetry. I'm not sure what else they can be called.

I hope this helps clear things up a bit for you.

Kenneth

On 01.26.07 jane wrote:

O Mighty Kenny!

First, thanks for the week's good times. Second, the kvetching:

We find ourselves in great sympathy with you, your project and your colleagues and collaborators. This shit's pretty fun to read. That for some it goes to far toward its logic is unsurprising, and you're probably used to it; we get concerned over here when it doesn't go *far enough*.

Two places in particular seem half-hearted at best. One is in a contradiction about cultural specificity: you make this repeated claim about uncreative writing astringently removing the ego etc of the author; at the same time, you argue (repeatedly, again) for the historical nature of uncreative writing, as a response to changed and changing conditions, the world as it is now, and so forth. But of course, the world *is* this way only for some people; your historical account is appealing as a story about the First World's leading edge, eating silicon and shitting Razrs. But it makes little sense for life as she is lived in various other places.

This is not to take you to task for failing to recognize the struggles in Africa: yawn, the *tiersmondisme* of the Eighties. It's simply to note that, because your conceptual apparatus makes sense only for certain people in certain places, it's irreconcilable with the claim that it involves the suppression or elision of individual interests — that it's "non-interventionalist" or floats in a "valueless space." That's neither good nor bad, just an inconsistency that might want some further attention.

The second incompleteness, it seems to me, lies in that quote of Craig Dworkin's to which you make recursive reference, concerning "A poetry of intellect rather than emotion." Now, we understand that, to achieve some critical negativity, you have to posit your practice against something — in this case, among other things, an idea of poetry that's emotionalist or even sentimentalist.

We worry, however, that this is no step forward. Indeed, it seems quite like accepting rather poor terms of debate: that emotion and intellect are somehow separate, alienated, reified categories. Anti-intellectual sorts have long ridden that hobbyhorse about, trumpeting the primacy of feeling over idea in poetry; to simply insist on the other is to concede the larger game by fighting the smaller.

Isn't the separation of the two into distinct categories something like a replication of the logic of the division of labor, sentencing not just each person but each poem to a fixed, clarified, repetitive task, one that is anything but unborning

boring, but is instead the supremely inhuman boring boring of the assembly line?

Again, *this is not an account of the writing you champion, but of the logic of separation itself*, which you seem to require. It is, rather, a problem which presents itself, which we fear will need resolving before you truly have a concept adequate to your concept.

PS: we love the combination of Debord (as cited by Prof. Dworkin) and Cage (cited all around), insofar as it reminds us that the former once called the latter "a Buddhist cretin"!

On 01.26.07 Eik Belgum wrote:

I was thinking about all this today as I was driving around. From a writer's point of view, I'm wondering if you could consider the works you cite and your work as writing where the re-writing is done in advance of the first draft. The process being the "re-writing."

The reason I ask is that as a consumer I've always loved process-based, conceptual type writing and music, but as a writer, I hate the first draft process, but I love the re-writing process.

Can I still play if I re-write after the first draft?

In my mind I'd compare, say, Boulez and Xenakis. Boulez starts by fine tuning a massive formula and then the piece follows, fairly unaltered. Xenakis starts with a giant formula, then picks through the results for what he likes best.

I don't exactly know where I'm going with this, except that, for me, re-writing seems to be the issue.

I'd like to hear what you think about re-writing, whether it happens before you write the piece, or after.

Thanks man! You RULE!

On 01.27.07 Kent Johnson wrote:

Kenneth, you write, concerning Uncreative Writing:

"(...) it employs intentionally self and ego effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as its precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as its methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as its ethos."

(And in response to a question in the comments box, asking if the presentation of John Lovitz as phone-book "Author" in a Yellow Pages ad represents an instance of conceptual writing, you write):

"The Lovitz character is in opposition to conceptual writing. Lovitz reinforces every cliché of the Romantic author, particularly in the scene where he is typing and has his moment of inspiration when hitting the "A." The distinction can be traced back to Borges's conception of Pierre Menard. Menard invents two chapters of Don Quixote word for word, thus casting him in the tradition of Romantic genius. If Lovitz or Menard copied -- not invented -- their works could be called conceptual writing."

Ironic as it is, given the anti-aesthetic being championed, your posts have been very provocative and interesting. I agree with "Jane," above, that your proposals have been **fun** to read, easily the least boring posts I've seen on the Poetry Foundation blog. But I think Jane raises some provocative issues in turn, arguing that you don't go "far enough" (even if she does get a little sardonic in the process--which is all in the spirit of things, really). I hope, out of sincere curiosity, that you will engage her suggestion that there are some "conceptual" blindnesses inherent to your insights, though not, as she says, that this is necessarily a bad thing in the least.

Adding to her points, and bouncing off your comments quoted above, I wanted to ask about something I'd see as another example of your program not taking its principles "far enough":

Why, if unoriginality, valuelessness, selflessness, and unmediated textual monotony are the aim, do you and other Uncreative Writers insistently present yourselves under the institutional sign of Authorship? Why, that is, do you choose to burden your iconoclastic philosophy with an ideological function that, to draw from you, extends and reinforces the figure of the Romantic author: the figure who originates, who, yes, CREATES his "uncreativity"? Why adorn a series of polemics in favor of ego-erasure-via-valueless-text with the titillating values of Authorial identity (and a raffish hat in an promotional photo, to boot)? Why not just make things REALLY boring and present meticulously copied text without attribution of any kind?

Well, there are actually lots of other questions I'd like to ask... But in a way, and despite an admiration--even fascination--for the tenacity and ambition involved, one can't (speaking for myself) help but wonder if behind this purported quest for self-effacement and pure ennui is a hidden wish that the "concept" of it all will provoke a certain excitement, an institutional frisson, so to speak, that will make Authors like Kenny Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin super Interesting to the Poetry public (if you'll excuse my Capitals).

As I said, not that there is anything terrible about this, necessarily. We're all a bundle of contradictions and hypocrisies. But might there be some of these in your program that are not yet sufficiently acknowledged?

Kent Johnson

On 01.27.07 csperez wrote:

hi kenneth,

some of the best posts on this journal so far! thanks!

and i was going to post seeing that you have been responding, but it seems you might have your hands full with jane and kent...so i'll keep this to one short, perhaps easy question:

you wrote: "Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts."

i wholeheartedly agree that this is often the case...and i've always wondered how one judges the idea...how do you judge whether an idea for conceptual poetry is good?

is it only good IF the resultant text is less interesting?

take care and thanks again!

csperez

On 01.27.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Ms. Dark,

Two places in particular seem half-hearted at best. One is in a contradiction about cultural specificity...But of course, the world is this way only for some people; your historical account is appealing as a story about the First World's leading edge, eating silicon and shitting Razrs. But it makes little sense for life as she is lived in various other places.

I'm not so sure we can break this down anymore into First World / Third World arguments; arguably certain sectors of the Third World as just, if not more technologized than the First World. I would say that many people in the Third World

are just as involved in moving information from one place to another as we are here in the First: think of Bangalore and Shanghai for starters. And the future seem to hold more of that in store for everyone. The sooner we adapt ourselves (collectively) to these conditions, the better off, as artists we can respond. And certainly, when I make statements like, "There is no museum or bookstore in the world better than our local Staples," one can assume that I'm specifically addressing that constituency that has a local Staples.

The second incompleteness, it seems to me, lies in that quote of Craig Dworkin's to which you make recursive reference, concerning "A poetry of intellect rather than emotion." Now, we understand that, to achieve some critical negativity, you have to posit your practice against something — in this case, among other things, an idea of poetry that's emotionalist or even sentimentalist.

I don't think that Prof. Dworkin's proposition is asked often enough. On the contrary, if we inverse his statement, "A poetry of emotion rather than intellect," we get a typical workshop notion, a sentiment frequently expressed. The fact is that while Dworkin's statement is hyperbolic, I think that it underscores the fact that this notion has not been seriously entertained in 30-some-odd years. It's not a new statement, yet to get back to your issue of technology, I think needs to be addressed with a fresh eye in light of so many changes that have happened since the question was posed the last time. A synthetic (emotion + logic) proposal has been made recently by Rob Fitterman, who has, in fact, forsaken conceptual writing already for post-conceptual writing which, I think, aims more at what you've proposed.

KG

On 01.27.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Can I still play if I re-write after the first draft?

It's about how dogmatic one wishes to be. Jackson Mac Low always used to chide me for avoiding the *clinamen*; he used to say that the magic happened when the structure was broken - something very few people associate with Mac Low's poetics. He would constantly encourage me to go in and re-write, edit, make it better.

Similarly, Bruce Andrews said to me that the genius of a piece of writing was in its editing. I responded that certain works specifically set out to accept the "first draft" -- mechanical or process-oriented writing -- and that it was predetermined that editing was simply not a part of the writing process.

Mac Low & Andrews. Big guns them. I feel differently.

I can't stand the re-writing process and have made a system by which I don't need to re-write. ("My books are impossible to read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly.") Like Warhol's *A*, I accept the first thing the "machine" spits out and that's it, errors and all. "The necessity of bad transcription: working to make sure that the pages in the book matched the way the high-school typist had transcribed them, right down to the last spelling mistake. I wanted to do a "bad book," just the way I'd done "bad movies" and "bad art," because when you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something."

This is personal, not prescriptive. I've just found a way in my practice to avoid doing what I hate.

On 01.27.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Why, if unoriginality, valuelessness, selflessness, and unmediated textual monotony are the aim, do you and other Uncreative Writers insistently present yourselves under the institutional sign of Authorship? (...) Why not just make things REALLY boring and present meticulously copied text without attribution of any kind?

Someone has to build (and mind) the machine, Kent. Again, to cite Cage who, when asked: Couldn't anyone do what he did? Responded: Yes, anyone can, but nobody has.

Why were Duchamp and Warhol so extraordinary? They knew exactly *what* and *how* to frame.

I love your idea of "meticulously copied text without attribution"; I'm sure it's already happening, rendering these ideas of conceptual writing as I've imagined them -- laden with labor and effort -- old-fashioned. I look forward to seeing that.

(...) that will make Authors like Kenny Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin super Interesting to the Poetry public.

Indeed. I never said that the project was anti-art or anti-poetry. On the contrary, I see this project as engaged in close discourse with and responding to the dialogue that's been going on in innovative poetics. Again, it's written with a poetry audience in mind, received by critics of poetry, published in poetry magazines & by poetry presses, and studied by students of poetry. If it's not poetry, what else could it possibly be?

On 01.28.07 Samuel Vriezen wrote:

As a composer/poet and a big Cage-fan myself, this topic is of great interest to me, and I find the posts wonderful and the discussion engaging.

Here's a question.

Somehow, there seems to be this drive towards bigness, conspicuousness, the spectacular here. How essential is this? What makes it that so much uncreative work you cite seems to lead to 200+ page books? Can you imagine - a silly example perhaps - a very interesting (or unboring boring) uncreative haiku?

The thing I've always found most interesting about Duchamp's ready-mades for example was his idea that there should be a small number of them, that he should restrict himself to perhaps one a year or so. And then he comes up with such triumphs of inconspicuousness as the shovel In Advance Of The Broken Arm, etc.

Also, Cage of course did many big projects but he was a great master of the very short work as well, even in the later period - recall that his most famous piece is under five minutes.

Of course, many shorter pieces of Cage's were in fact parts of larger series - Music for Piano, the etudes, etc. But generally you don't play them all, you play a couple at a concert (a good friend of mine has become a specialist at the 2nd Etude Australis these days). Perhaps then, just a little idea here, it might make more (or equal) sense not to print 200-page books but to sell only excerpts, sell the books page by page, as you might do a series of prints or something like that.

On 01.28.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

how do you judge whether an idea for conceptual poetry is good?

Judgment is a tricky proposition here in a field of slippery valuations. Let's take a concrete example: Craig Dworkin's *Parse*. I think it's a great concept: parsing a grammar book according to its own rules. I find the resultant text thrilling. What I find successful about the piece is its flawless accountability: concept, process, and text are all inseparable in what I consider to be a shining example of the genre. I would think less of this work if there were some weak link in his conceptual chain and, as a result, I would judge it to be an unsuccessful piece.

On 01.28.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Somehow, there seems to be this drive towards bigness, conspicuousness, the spectacular here. How essential is this? What makes it that so much uncreative work you cite seems to lead to 200+ page books?

Scale is a fascinating issue and I'm glad you brought it up, Samuel. One of the things I find fascinating in conceptual writing is the idea of *realized literature* as opposed to *potential literature*. Potential literature, of course, you will remember from Oulipo, literally an idea factory for texts. Sadly, with a few prominent exceptions, Oulipo's ideas remained ideas; very few were actually executed. We find that the few that were realized were spectacular successes such as Perec's *La Disparition* & *La Vie mode d'emploi* and Queneau's *Hundred Thousand Billion Poems*. Much conceptual writing sets out to find out what happens when a great idea is actuated into a text. Again, to use Dworkin as an example: how different the piece would be if he simply made a proposition "Parse a grammar book according to its own rules." But the fact that he went through the process, I think, makes for a different type of writing. There's an extremity to the writing process that I feel gives a sort of weight and substance to what would otherwise be a merely fascinating concept. Conceptual writing finds its strongest expression in the marriage of materiality and concept.

On 01.28.07 Jarrod wrote:

Rhythm

On 01.29.07 tom johnson wrote:

Dear Kenneth Goldsmith:

I'm a composer, but your way of working intersects a lot with mine. In reading texts on your web site, I was often reminded of something my teacher Morton Feldman so often said: "Let the music do what it wants to do." Cage was a big influence for me too.

While you are "Sitting in a Room," you must be pretty aware of musical parallels, but I'd like to know what your musical interests really are. And do you think that writers and musicians might work together in these ways?

Thanks,
Tom Johnson

On 01.29.07 Kenneth Goldsmith wrote:

Tom,

I am a great fan of your music and your writings and have been extremely influenced and inspired by all your activities.

I think that while "Conceptual Music" (an umbrella term for so many things you've championed over the years) has been fully explored, accepted, and perhaps even exhausted, the poetry world is only now beginning to consider these ideas in a full way. The generation of writers from the 60s and 70s asked similar questions, but failed to follow through in as a thorough way as did the artists & musicians of that period. With a nod to your own work, I can't think of too many actualized examples of mathematical writing. The writers, musicians & artists of that period left hundreds of hints as to what was possible in literature; I think poets today are beginning to pick up those long, yet severed threads, and see where they lead. My feeling is that the same questions may be asked during different periods and that the responses and results will be different. This generation comes to concept and process as a result of the new informational technologies, the machines that create these conditions, and the resultant texts that ensue: something

about information management; wanting to mimic those processes and manipulate & reframe their spew.

I think that writers and musicians might very well work together in this way. I could imagine, say, applying the processes of *Music for 88* or *The Chord Catalogue* to text, thereby creating a libretto. But you've already done some many of those things so well.

Kenneth

For those of you who don't know, Tom Johnson was the music critic for *The Village Voice* throughout the 70s. His writings, chronicling the development of conceptual music and minimalism was compiled into an incredible book, *The Voice of New Music* which is available as a free download at:

<http://www.editions75.com/Books/TheVoiceOfNewMusic.PDF>

I also highly recommend Tom's CDs for anyone interested in any strain of conceptualism. They are all fascinating. More info at:

<http://www.editions75.com/English/defaultenglish.html>

On 01.29.07 Jarrod wrote:

Rhythm!

["Conceptual Music has been fully explored, accepted, and perhaps even exhausted"]

On 02.01.07 Lanny Quarles wrote:

what a jollity of sophism!
 there is no difference in creative and uncreative,
 the uncreation you propose
 is still simply a version
 of the creative masquerading
 under the deflector assembly
 of sophist language! great.

its good to teach experiential dynamism.
 i was taught to do this as an artist in my youth with
 staring. you stare at something until it becomes something else, more of itself, you let its morphology begin to haunt
 you, you begin to haunt its morphology. one might argue
 that using english letters at all is "uncreative"..
 and in a sense all novelty
 has become just a filling in
 with color alll the projections or basic outlines made by previous
 fictions. even the term "conceptual" is a bit of a joke.. what writing isn't "conceptual" well all of it, concepts only exist
 as representations, so really the whole thing just becomes a kind of sophist jollity played out in the willing, the
 creatively uncreative, the uncreatively creative..

chiasmus is a wily old engine..

vroom, vroom..

boring is the new exciting.
or boring is the new boring.
or do these distinctions
even need to be drawn.

hmm, drawn?

yes well, they are lines..

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