

Fall 2008

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American Trilogist

An Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith

by Kareem Estefan

Acclaimed conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith is the author of numerous works of what he calls “uncreative writing”—books that in recording quotidian events or transcribing unliturgical texts, nonetheless reveal permutations in the language and achieve a kind of sculpted beauty. Works in this vein include *Fidget* (a transcription of every movement Goldsmith’s body made over the course of a single day), *Soliloquy* (every word he spoke over the course of a week), and *Day* (a retyping of an issue of the New York Times). Goldsmith’s latest work, the “American Trilogy” of *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports* (all from Make Now Press), is reviewed in the current print edition of *Rain Taxi Review of Books*. Goldsmith has also edited *I’ll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, the impresario behind the astonishing online archive UbuWeb, and hosts a weekly radio show on WFMU in New York City.

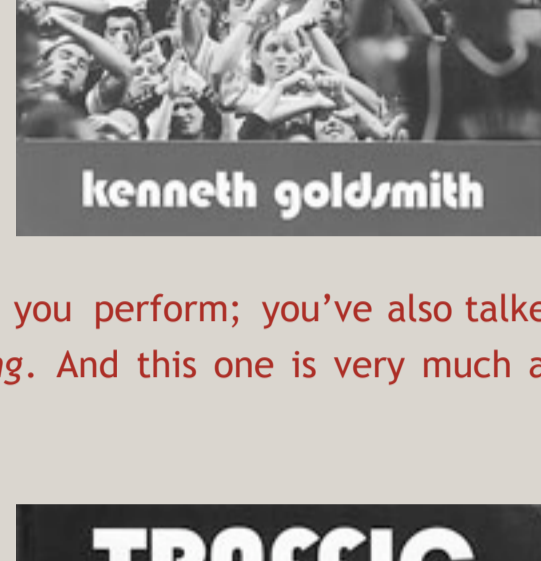
The following interview with Goldsmith, conducted by Kareem Estefan on WNYU Radio’s “Ceptuetics” show, took place on March 26, 2008, and has been lightly edited for publication.

Kareem Estefan: Let’s start out by talking about your most recent book, *Sports*, and the American Trilogy that’s now complete. Could you tell us a bit about the project on the whole?

Kenneth Goldsmith: Yeah, the project as a whole is, as you said, an American Trilogy, also known as the “On the Ones” trilogy. It’s three books: *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports*. The first book is a year’s worth of weather reports, all recorded daily and transcribed all the time/WINS here in New York (for those of you who are not from New York, it’s all news from 10/10 —they give weather, traffic, and sports every ten minutes). The second part of the trilogy is called *Traffic*, and it is a day’s worth of traffic reports, recorded ten minutes apart from each other, transcribed for 24 hours. And the final piece is called *Sports*, and that is a full transcription of the longest nine inning Major League Baseball game in history, and that was August 18, 2006, the Yankees vs. the Red Sox, the second part of a double header at Fenway Park.

KE: I can’t tell how boring this one will be. [laughter] How long is it?

KG: It’s as long as the other ones, they’re all about 120 pages. Oddly enough, they’re all identical size. This is a very boring book, because it’s said that in a typical baseball game—which is two, two-and-a-half hours—eight minutes of action happens. This, being the longest one, is almost five-and-a-half hours, and only about 14 minutes of action happen. So how do they possibly fill the time for five hours? It’s absolutely painful. But it was a great game!



KE: It also seems like a good metaphor for your work. You’ve often said that your writing is “extreme writing” and that you’d win an Olympics medal for the boredom that you perform; you’ve also talked about writing in a kind of athletic way, *the feat of writing*. And this one is very much an American book, as all of your work has been.

KG: It’s also very New York. It’s the traffic in New York, listening to the names of the streets. I read from *Traffic* in California recently, and all the former New Yorkers came rushing up to me and said, “God, hearing that makes me wish I was stuck in traffic on the BQE! I’m so nostalgic for New York-style traffic jams.”



KE: [laughter] Yeah, it is very distinctly New York. I wanted to talk about another book that’s coming out soon too, your anthology of conceptual writing, called *Against Expression*, which is co-edited with Craig Dworkin. This movement seems to be getting a lot of visibility recently—you’re posting on the Poetry Foundation blog, definitely reaching a lot of poetry fans not normally into some of the more avant-garde strains of poetry, and there’s also a conference coming up called “Conceptual Poetry and Its Others” at the University of Arizona. Just wondering if you wanted to comment on the extent to which conceptual writing is now a movement (or is not), especially maybe in relation to Conceptual Art, which for a long time struggled with the narrowness of this name and struggled to define itself.

KG: Well, I often am fond of quoting Brion Gysin that “Writing is fifty years behind painting,” and that remains true today. So, in terms of Conceptual Art, which was finished about 40 years ago, we’re just getting to that now in writing. It really is a bit of a lag. There have been strains and gestures toward conceptual writing, but it always seemed like it was wrapped up in a more conventional pose of poetry—even what we consider to be the most avant-garde and innovative poetry of recent times still looked and felt very much like poetry. Our last avant-garde in the poetry might be equivalent to Abstract Expressionism. And suddenly, in the early 60s in the art world, with ideas of Pop Art, painting became something in quotations, and hence leaping off into gestures of Conceptual Art, Minimal Art, and all the other visual strains of the 1960s.

So, in a sense, this is very much a break from what looks and feels like poetry, because most of the stuff really doesn’t. And yet it’s not fiction. It is received within the poetry world, so it has a very direct discourse with poetry—hence, I believe, making it poetry, because I can’t imagine what else it could possibly be. And the poetry world is very receptive to it, as opposed to the fiction world, which absolutely has no interest, no sense of what to do with this. In fact, poetry was looking for its next move and I think it’s found it here.

KE: Which is interesting also because most of the books of conceptual writing have the heft of novels. They look very different from most poetry books.

KG: Well, there’s a reason for that, because a lot of this type of writing is reflecting the environment that we’re living in now, which is an environment rife with multitudes of information. And a lot of that language is being recycled, and being managed, and being shoved and pushed around. So it really is a management of information sort of a movement now. You’re not going to tackle tactics of moving information by putting a few sparse words on a page. Most of this work is being done by pushing a great deal of text into some sort of form.

KE: Bruce Andrews was on this show two weeks ago and he was talking about how using a paper cutter really changed his work—it made his writing break up into a modular process, and you’ve talked a lot about cut-and-pasting, OCR’ing, all the new technologies available with the Internet and networks. It seems like both Language writing and conceptual writing are movements that emphasize the materiality of language. And this is something that has been coming up for a long time in writing, but what seems different to me about conceptual writing is the *fluidity* that comes with this new idea of language as matter, how everything can drip much more easily. So I was wondering if you saw that difference, or thought that was something that was also technologically rooted?

KG: Well, I think every movement is right for its time. Certainly, these types of ideas that are currently being informed by all the technology that’s around us couldn’t have possibly made any sense 30 years ago, 20 years ago when a type of writing like Language writing was in process. Of course, a paper cutter is what you had to work with then; back then, words were locked onto a page and the only way to get them off was not really to get them off, but you could Xerox them, and you have a new page with words still imprisoned on them. And the difference, I think, is that the language that we’re working with today is completely *fluid*; it’s lifted off the page and therefore able to be poured into so many different forms and take so many different shapes and really be molded and scripted in a way that wasn’t possible before. So it strikes me that the move of conceptual writing is a writing for this moment, and 20 years from now, it too will seem tied to its time, and to its technologies, which of course will be obsolete by then.

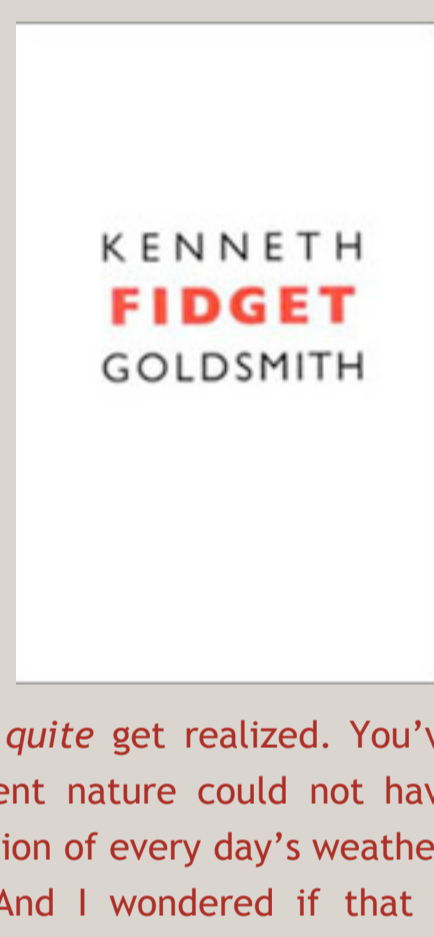
KE: Which is great because your works do very much concretize a moment; looking at a work like *Soliloquy*, which was coming at the moment of the Internet’s arrival, everything there seems so dated and at the same time, you’re there in the book saying, “10 years from now, this is going to look so, so primitive.” There are a lot of temporal dimensions to your work and a constant negotiation with time and especially how that affects art and movements’ passings.

KG: I think that it’s sort of great that things get dated, because five years after something’s done it looks terribly dated, but 10 or 15 years later, it looks really cool and nostalgic and very hip. It gains this sort of patina of time. So you’re writing in the moment, you’re recording the moment, but it moves beautifully into the future - the moment gets better as we get further away from it.

KE: I wanted to bring up one of the aspects that separates conceptual writing from OuLiPo, which proposed many similar ideas based on constraint. And you’ve said elsewhere that you like the idea of realizing a work and seeing how it’s transformed by becoming more than simply potential literature. At the same time, though, you say that people don’t need to read your books and you offer “wrappers” instead, which are short summaries of the books’ concepts. So in that case, why move beyond the wrappers? There seems to be some kind of paradox there, both maintaining that you only need to know the idea of the work, but at the same time wanting to do more than the idea.

KG: I think that there is something to making a commitment and actually realizing the piece even if the results are identical from a mere cut-and-paste. Having gone through this, I think, adds almost an invisible dimension of credibility to the work. I once had a pottery teacher in art school and she said, “If you’re making a sealed jar”—that’s a jar with a lid that will not come off, you know, a decorative thing—she said, “you have to make the inside as perfect and as beautiful as the outside even though no one will ever see it, because it will radiate its aura through the outside. You will feel it.”

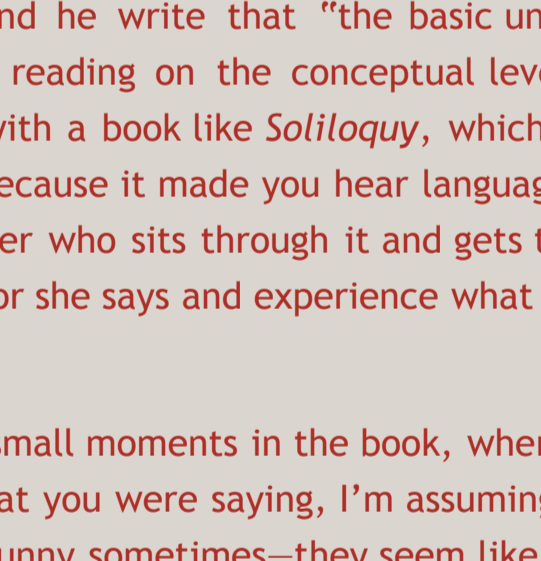
So in a sense, these things are very important to be doing. And actually, this is one of the ideas behind a *realized* text. Also, today because we are in the process of learning how to manage information as a writing practice, we need practice. We actually need to get our hands on massive amounts of this stuff and push it around and really see what it can do. To theorize about it, it’s an approach. . . . I think Rob Fitterman often talks about a post-conceptual writing, which I find very interesting, and I think one of the strategies of post-conceptual writing will be a return back to a gesture, a suggestion, no need to realize it, and I look forward to that as well.



KE: That’s an interesting idea, and, not to out you here, but I also think it’s worth mentioning that many times the concepts don’t *quite* get realized. You’ve talked often about how *Fidget* failed in a way, or by its inherent nature could not be talked about, but also *The Weather*, for example, is not a transcription of every day’s weather, there are actually about 200-some if I’ve counted correctly. And I wondered if that is something that happened consciously with you, if you kind of savor these moments where the realized book differs from the concept and if that’s a worthwhile point of discussion.

KG: One typo will change an entire book. . . if there’s one typo in it or one purposely misspelled word, it becomes an entirely new text. So the books are filled with errors, absolutely—because it’s absolutely impossible to read these things, nobody will sit down and properly proofread these things—they’re absolutely *riddled* with human error, which is fine because I am doing these things.

So I actually don’t have a problem with that—in terms of *The Weather*, I mean, I travel a lot and how in the world would I have done that back then, and I’m not going to not travel, so yes, the wrapper is different than the text. There are a number of surprises in the text and shorthand is shorthand—it can’t possibly say what a text can say. And people tell me, who have read these things, that in fact there’s great satisfaction from actually reading these texts. I wouldn’t know. I haven’t read them.

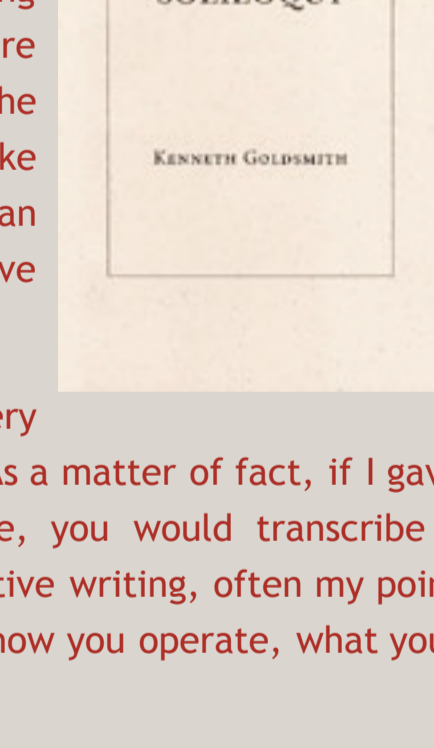


KE: I think I fall on that side of things, actually. What’s interesting is in “Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing,” which is of course a moment of stealing from Sol LeWitt’s “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” and you and he write that “the basic unit should be deliberately uninteresting”—and this suggests a reading on the conceptual level rather than say, the level of the sentence. But especially with a book like *Soliloquy*, which I think you’ve talked about as a kind of transformative work because it made you hear language in a different way, there is the same experience for a reader who sits through it and gets to then afterwards walk around and hear the words that he or she says and experience what it would be like to be recording that.

And at the same time there are also some really interesting small moments in the book, where you have a line where you couldn’t understand the words that you were saying, I’m assuming, in transcribing. And the moments they happen are pretty funny sometimes—they seem like a moment you’re going to admit something that might be controversial or they seem like a moment where you would be embarrassed to admit what you were saying, and I love this kind of moment where you say, is he holding something back from us? There’s a lot of referring back to your performance of the books. So I was wondering what it’s like for you to perform a book like *Fidget* and *Soliloquy*, what it’s like during that day of *Fidget*, during that week of *Soliloquy*, to know *this is going to end up as a book?*

KG: Well, I would only do a little test for each one. For example, before I did *Soliloquy*, I would do some tests over maybe the course of a couple of hours and type it out.

You see, we don’t know what the books are going to look like, because how does one transcribe? This is why it’s important to realize these books. What decisions are made to make this book look this way? How are you going to punctuate this thing or *are you going to punctuate this thing?* Will it flow, will it be justified. . . there are thousands of decisions to writing the book outside of the performance. I don’t know what the books are going to look like until I sit down and I actually transcribe. In other words, I can theorize the work of literature but until it’s realized, I have absolutely no idea, and it’s always a surprise.



But I always find a sort of *style* in the transcription, I’ve got a very consistent style of transcription, it’s my *very own way* of writing. As a matter of fact, if I gave you the same exact tape to transcribe, say of the *Sports* game, you would transcribe it extremely differently than I would. So even though this is uncreative writing, often my point is that no matter how hard you try, you can’t stop who you are, how you operate, what your tastes are and what your decisions are.

Sometimes people in my classes come to me fearful that if I ask them to retype something they are going to become robots—but in fact, in the typing everybody somehow manages to very much express themselves.

KE: Since we brought up the class, how are they going? How are students reacting to the idea of uncreative writing and to doing this kind of work?

KG: I think that they are very, very good at this. They are very well-practiced at plagiarism, fraud, identify theft, repurposing papers. . . the question is *what happens when you bring those practices out into the open* and you say it’s OK to do that, as a matter of fact you must do that, and let’s examine what you’re doing and what choices you’re making. Suddenly the whole game changes and there’s all sorts of accountability that starts to happen for certain gestures that were never considered before, and it’s the same type of accountability that anybody who’s writing anything has to engage with. Certain questions need to be asked and certain questions need to be answered, and you need to be very smart, you can’t simply say “well, I don’t know.” You need to know exactly why you’re doing it and how you’re doing it, so it’s actually terrific, and I think that once one engages in a considered manner of all of these *negative*—or what the culture calls *negative*—dialectics, for lack of a better word, they find that their writing and their approach to language is forever changed.

KE: Since it really is a very strenuous process to come up with this kind of concept that you can defend from all angles, I was wondering, do you have a way that goes unrealized precisely because you dispose of the idea, thinking *this won’t come out in a way that I’ll be satisfied with*. How often are you brainstorming and throwing things away?

KG: No, I have very few ideas. I have very few ideas, and I simply commit to doing that idea. You know, this trilogy is five years of my life, writing these three books. It takes a long time to do each one and the thing about books is they just have an incredibly long life that people don’t forget. A career builds, one upon another, particularly with books like this that are very easy to reference with a wrapper. *Soliloquy* was done, was recorded in 1996, so that’s 12 years ago. And yet it’s still, you know, you talk about it as if it happened fairly recently. In the art world, you don’t get this sort of thing. People can’t possibly remember what you did three years ago. And so, these very definitive gestures, if I’m going to make a gesture, to do a book, I’ll have to sort of feel that it was worth all that time, which can be up to 12 years of one’s life and possibly much longer.

KE: Since we’re on WNYU, I wanted to ask you a little bit about your shows on WFMU, what you’ve done on there and how it overlaps with your writing.

KG: Well, it’s my Dionysian side. [laughter] There’s a lot of shows that I do on FMU that are readings of my books: I think I spent two three-hour shows back-to-back reading *Traffic*, reading *The Weather*, and they’re also just insane conceptual gestures that happen during the course of the show. And a lot of stuff that comes out of radio ends up sort of becoming the corpus of my own work—for example, singing theoretical texts is something that came up out of a radio practice and now is viewed as part and parcel of what I do.

You see, my work is multi-pronged, and one prong of course is writing, another prong is pedagogy, which is the teaching that I do at Penn, which is really the same gesture as the writing, which is really the same gesture as the radio show, which is really the same gesture as UbuWeb, and they’re all one big piece of the pie. As a matter of fact, people have been saying that maybe UbuWeb really is the best work I’ve done. I haven’t framed it as an art work, but I’m ready and very happy to accept that as an art work, maybe they’re right.

KE: Yeah, it seems kind of like the direction that Lucy Lippard took. She often would exhibit works with many of the same strategies that the conceptual artists did, and at one point in Six Years, she says “critics are the original appropriators,” which I thought was great. In a lot of ways, the art of UbuWeb is speaking through the things posted on there and in a sense, is a form of exhibition-as-art.

KG: Well, it’s a new approach. Never before has a sort of general rubric or umbrella of the avant-garde been proposed and maintained of this volume. You’ve had fragments, you’ve had collections of things, but never has such an enormous amount of material that is tied together only by a vague idea of *avant-garde*. . . and by the way, the idea of what is *avant-garde* is always changing.

And yet these works are sort of living with each other and dialoguing with each other, often very, very low works and very, very high works all living in the same space dialoguing with each other in a very natural and organic way. So I think, again, it’s our technology and our time that permits us to create something like UbuWeb.

KE: Do you see UbuWeb as a kind of community for people who are talking about some of the same things? There’s a listserv, is it somewhere that you’re discussing your work? Is there creative work coming out of it, or uncreative work coming out of it?

KG: I don’t know. I mean, the usership is worldwide, it’s so vast. You can’t possibly imagine how much bandwidth and traffic this site draws. I really don’t know how it’s being used and I don’t foster community around it. It creates its own community, simply because as some sort of an institution on the web, it exists and draws certain like-minded people in large numbers to it. I think that constitutes an ideal community.

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