

## **“Moving Information”:**

### **On Kenneth Goldsmith’s *The Weather***

Marjorie Perloff

I used to be an artist, then I became a poet; then a writer. Now when asked, I simply refer to myself as a word processor.<sup>1</sup>

Exactly thirty years ago, John Cage received a commission from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to write a piece of music in celebration of the American Bicentennial and devised his remarkable *Lecture on the Weather*, the parent text—but also the foil--of Kenneth Goldsmith’s 2005 book called *The Weather*.<sup>2</sup> *Lecture on the Weather* is, of course, no lecture at all: the composer subjected Thoreau’s *Essay on Civil Disobedience*, *Walden*, and his *Journal* to *I Ching* chance operations to obtain collage texts to be performed simultaneously by twelve vocalists. While these passages were recited, according to strict instructions as to text choice and time-length, Cage introduced, again using numerical constraint, recordings of breeze, rain, and finally thunder, and in the last (thunder) section, a film, representing lightning by means of briefly projected negatives of Thoreau’s drawings.

The resulting “lecture” is thus a systematic, constraint-based “verbivocovisual” (Joyce’s term) performance. It varies, as I have noted elsewhere,<sup>3</sup> according to the time and place of its venue. At the California Institute of the Arts (Valencia) performance in March 1984, the “theatre” was a large empty room with bare floorboards and a platform at one end on which the vocalists were placed; in the course of the performance, the

audience, milling around the room, gradually formed a huddle, so as to keep out of the “storm. ” At the Strathmore Hall “Cagefest” in Rockville, Maryland (May 1989), in contrast, the performance space was a much smaller conference room, in which the audience was seated conventionally in rows, with open French windows to one side. Halfway into the piece, a storm took place, its thunder claps blending nicely with the recorded storm signals, much to the delight of the composer and his audience. But whatever the venue, Cage’s is essentially a *mimetic* text, one that simulates “weather,” as we know it in the “real” world. It wants, at least for the time span of its performance, to *enact* weather, the atmosphere in which we live. As such, Cage’s *Lecture on the Weather* presents itself as an *opening* to the natural world, even though its creation and production are, of course, the very opposite of natural.

Like Cage’s *Lecture*, Goldsmith’s *The Weather* is a constraint-based, constructed composition. Since Goldsmith’s source text, the hourly weather bulletins on 1010 WINS, New York’s all-news radio station, last exactly one minute, he has recorded a year’s worth of weather reports, one paragraph per one-minute report. Like Cage’s *Indeterminacy*, whose one-minute segments demand that some stories will be speeded up, others slowed down by “er” and “um” interjections so as to satisfy the constraint, the WINS time frame provides the form. In a 2003 statement, Goldsmith tells us that he began to record the radio weather forecasts on December 21, 2002 and continued for exactly a year. And, logically enough, the book has four chapters for the four seasons—Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall.

Within its Cagean framework, however, Goldsmith’s little book manages to turn the phenomenology of *Lecture on the Weather* inside out. Whereas Cage uses the most elaborately artful means (the “writing through” of Thoreau’s journals and their vocalization, the recorded weather sounds, the intermittent visual images) to simulate the *feel* of weather in all its

uncertainty and changeability, for Goldsmith, discourse is all: the transcription and reproduction of a year's worth of radio weather reports, left intact. Nothing, one surmises, is invented or added or even altered (although Goldsmith evidently left out a few asides and jokes): what you see (or in the case of Goldsmith's reading on MP3, what you hear) is what you get. And, after all, Goldsmith himself has repeatedly insisted that his aim is to be as "uncreative" as possible, indeed downright "boring."<sup>4</sup>

But wait a minute! Take up *The Weather* as you might any other book, and you will soon find that what seems to be boring, straightforward, and incontrovertible fact is largely fiction. The book's division into four chapters, one for each season, is already an artifice, for of course we don't experience the seasons this way. Nothing happens on December 21<sup>st</sup> that couldn't just as well happen on December 20<sup>th</sup>, the last day of fall. The seasonal cycle, moreover, is, as David Antin notes in his jacket comment, presented as "a classical narrative," moving from the bitter freeze of Winter 2002 through a moderate New York spring, to the summer season of thunderstorms and hurricanes threatening the coast, to the autumn of World Series weather (fortunately, fairly dry), back to a winter that seems, at least so far, not as cold as the previous one. The larger narrative thus mimes the familiar myth of "in like a lion, out like a lamb"

Within this frame, the struggle to survive, as defined by the daily weather within which, rich or poor, young or old, citizens of the New York area function, is dramatized in all its boring detail: rare is the week that there isn't an unexpected shower, a crust of frozen snow, a swollen river, or some other impending disaster. Listen to the weather forecast and you cannot avoid the beginnings, middles, and ends of Aristotelian narrative: "The storm is approaching! (beginning). . . The storm is getting closer! (middle). . . The storm is here!" (climax) "Oh, boy, what a storm that was!" (dénouement).

But in 2003, quite by coincidence, given Goldsmith's original design, the structure of his narrative was heightened by an unanticipated event. On the first day of spring (in fact, though it isn't cited here, March 20, 2003 or the evening of March 19, Baghdad time) the U.S. launched its war against Iraq. Military experts had warned that the attack should not be delayed until the hot season (which comes in early May in Iraq and is long and intense), and late March was already borderline. Baghdad weather bulletins, in any case, suddenly infiltrate the New York weather news, even as our troops were infiltrating Iraqi soil:

Oh we are looking at, uh, weather, uh, across, uh Iraq obviously here for the next several days, uh, we have, uh actually some good, good weather is expected. They did have a sandstorm here earlier, uh, over the last twelve to twenty-four hours those winds have subsided and will actually continue to subside. Uh, there will be enough of a wind across the southern portion of the country that still may cause some blowing sand tomorrow. Otherwise we're looking at clear to partly cloudy skies tonight and tomorrow, uh, the weekend, uh, it is good weather and then, we could have a storm, uh, generating some strong winds, uh, for Sunday night and Monday, uh, even the possibility of a little rain in Baghdad. Uh, currently we have, uh, uh, increasing cloudiness, uh, forecast locally night, uh, its gonna be brisk and chilly, temperatures getting down into the middle-thirties, and then some uh, intermittent rain is expected tomorrow and tomorrow night. It'll become steadier and heavier late in the day and, uh, actually a pretty good soaking tomorrow night. It'll become steadier and heavier late in the day, and, uh, actually a pretty good soaking tomorrow night. Uh, temperatures getting into the mid-forties tomorrow, and then staying in the forties tomorrow night. Friday it's a breezy and warmer day but, uh, still a few more showers maybe even a thunderstorm, the high of sixty degrees. Currently we have sunshine and forty-four with an east wind of ten. Repeating the current temperature forty-four, going up to forty-six in midtown. (39)

This passage nicely exemplifies the powers of "mere" transcription, mere copying, to produce new meanings. From the perspective of the weather forecaster, Iraq is experiencing some "good good weather"—good visibility, no doubt, for bombing those targeted sites, and not too much wind. The

risk of “blowing sand” is slight. After the reference to “a little rain in Baghdad,” the “we” shifts back to the New York area, as if the Baghdad rain or wind were merely a brief diversion from everyday life in the Tri-State area where it’s a nice average day with temperature in the forties and a chance of rain.

In the next report, “Middle East weather . . . continues to be favorable for military operations, and that’ll remain the case through Sunday, but Monday and Tuesday, there may be another episode of strong winds, poor visibilities, and, uh, even some sandstorms” (39-40). And a few days later, the weather is turning “nasty” in Baghdad, with “strong winds . . . kicking up the sand and making for poor visibility.” Within a week, the region is “sunny and hot,” highs in the “middle-to-upper nineties” (43). Perhaps, it seems, the U.S. waited too long after all, what with “one hundred degrees plus, in the southern and eastern deserts.” But, whatever the realities of military strategy, within less than three weeks, Iraq weather literally disappears from the WINS radar screen. No further mention of sandstorms or rain or the sizzling heat in Kuwait is made, no doubt because on April 9, the fall of Baghdad is announced: for weather purposes, the “war” is over.

At this writing in July 2005, with the postwar (often more deadly than the war itself) dragging on day by day, this weather tale could hardly be more ironic. Yet it is perfectly accurate: as soon as the statue of Saddam Hussein was pulled down amid jubilation, “Iraq” was presumed to be no longer a primary concern to residents of the Tri-State Area, tuning in to the Weather Forecast on their morning commute or weekend get-away. Within days, the “real” news— an item of April 15, for example, that daytime TV was about to get “its first lesbian kiss” -- was competing with Iraq for airtime, and that meant that, so far as weather reports were concerned, it would be all weather, all the time. Not Baghdad but Bergen, New Jersey,

not Kuwait, but Danbury, Connecticut (55). And it has remained that way ever since.

In the wake of such “consumer minimalism,” as Goldsmith calls the mode of these one-minute weather reports, those sound bytes that “take our most complex, life-sustaining environment, and simplify it in a way that either aids or abets your commute” (email 14 July), the poet need provide no moralizing on the horrors of war; the actual discourse of the day says it all. The Baghdad thread is thus the clinamen that gives the “classical narrative” of *The Weather* its piquancy. But this is not to say that Goldsmith needed such outside interference to enhance the intrigue of his tale. For the transcriptions themselves, the “mere” retypings of the daily reports, have their own poetic force—a force that relates them to science fiction rather than to the boredom of everyday fact.

First, how daily is our experience of the daily weather report? In theory, it is constant, but in practice, it all depends on the listener. There should, for example, be 365 reports in this annual record, but I count only 293 entries, with summer being the shortest season (sixty-four entries) and winter the longest with eighty-four. What can this mean? And how can the reader, trying to “date” individual weather reports, know where s/he is? Is Goldsmith suggesting that summer *feels* shorter than winter? But that hardly seems likely, given that the summer of 2002 was a special weather challenge, what with terrible hurricane Isabelle coming in from the Carolina coast and the storms plaguing the New York Area. What is more plausible is that Goldsmith was out of town—say, at Christmas time, which has a paucity of entries, or for the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. Then, too, sometimes there seem to be two or more weather reports for the same day, so similar are the descriptions in question.

The neat four-season cycle thus turns out to be anything but neat; the text assembles, not *the* weather but Kenny’s weather, witnessing his

comings and goings in the course of a year. Goldsmith is the first to admit this. "The act of transcription," he remarks, "as a hands-off, bone-dry act of coldness is a fallacy; no matter what we do, we leave our imprint—and a very personal imprint at that—on our work" (email 7/14). Central to this "imprint" is the poet's decision to provide no dates or even the month in question (is entry x made in January or February?) —a decision that challenges the reader to find logic and coherence in what turns out to be a curiously illogical and incoherent narrative. For try to establish the actual sequence of these weather reports and you will be startled to find that the 1010 Weather Forecast is mostly wrong or at least confusing!

In mid-February, for example (about fifteen entries past Groundhog Day, which falls on February 2), we read:

We're gonna get a break in the weather, not only for today but for the next, uh, well, three days as clouds, uh, thin out for partial sunshine today. We'll get the temperature up close to forty this afternoon, certainly above freezing and well into the thirties. Might be a sprinkle or flurry this evening then clearing tonight. Tomorrow a mostly sunny day, I'll tell ya, if you're outside tomorrow afternoon, there won't be much of a breeze, the sun will be out, temperatures into the forties, it will feel good. And then a, uh, nice day Friday but increasing clouds. Rainy and windy Saturday, and that combination of rain and melting snow can cause street and highway flooding Saturday. Dry Sunday but blustery and colder. Right now it's thirty-two and partly sunny in Central Park, temperature today going up to thirty-eight. (25)

But the next entry announces "arctic air tonight, some clouds, thirty-four in midtown, we're heading down to twenty-four. We'll be hard pressed to get, uh, close to the freezing mark tomorrow." And then the forecast looks ahead to "single digits in many suburbs" coming "tomorrow night" (25). What's happened to the "feel good" weather with its "mostly sunny day" predicted above?

Again and again the elaborate and laborious five-day forecast turns out to be incorrect. Or is it just that the omission of an entry or two makes nonsense of the forecast? In the extract above, it should be Thursday, since the forecast looks ahead to Friday and then to the weekend. But in the very next entry there is talk of "precipitation Thursday, Thursday night, early Friday." Does this already refer to the next Thursday, the report coming on Wednesday? Or does Goldsmith skip a number of forecasts? Give two or three for a single day? Again and again, talk of upcoming days of the week conflicts with prior "evidence," and so the book begins to feel like the elaborate fantasy, which in fact it is.

For even though Goldsmith *invents* nothing and merely transcribes, there are constant «artistic» decisions to be made, beginning with the omission of the date, time of day, day of the week, and month. It is an omission that makes it impossible to orient oneself vis-à-vis actual weather events, and, without changing a single word of a given report, it heightens a particular phenomenon: the chanciness of the weather. «Chance» is, of course, one of the most common words in any weather report: a chance of showers, a chance of rain, a chance of a thunderstorm, a chance of snow flurries. The tension that animates weather discourse is thus a tension between number and chance. After an announcement that «we could see some snow by the weekend» (22), the next sentence tells us, «Right now it's partly sunny, thirty-one in Central Park, humidity forty-one percent, a west wind gusting to thirty-one, gives us our RealFeel temperature of about nineteen.»

Whose RealFeel is this? Does everyone *realfeel* 19° when the temperature is 31°, the humidity 41%, and winds gusting thirty-one miles per hour? Who decides, and doesn't specific predisposition, location, or clothing have anything to do with it? More important, how do we process all this accurate information, given the continuous references to chance, to

the *possibility* of this or that happening? Indeed, the further we read into *The Weather*, the more we note that the only certainty has to do with *present* time and place (but whose present?), whereas the forecast is always, so to speak, under a cloud. Consider the last day of «Summer,» whose Weather Report concludes as follows:

And a chance of showers lingers into Tuesday, high on Tuesday seventy-two degrees. Currently seventy-two degrees at LaGuardia, sixty-eight at Newark, in Central Park a cloudy sky, seventy degrees, relative humidity eighty-four percent, and we have a calm wind. Repeating the current temperature seventy going up to eighty-two in midtown. (90)

There's *chance* again, but reassuringly linked to a particular day and those wonderfully precise temperatures at LaGuardia, Newark, and Central Park. Numbers and place names: these circumscribe weather discourse and make it seem nothing of not informative. But when the current temperature is repeated just seconds after its first mention, the data is confusing because the location—Central Park, where it is 72°--is not the location which was the original point of departure—LaGuardia Airport. So even these numbers demand qualification.

Now suppose that, as I write this, I had on my desk the necessary tools to measure weather conditions: thermometer, barometer, anemometer, etc. Obviously, I could determine, without listening to WINS or any other station, precisely what «my» weather is. Indeed, the newer automobiles all register on their dashboards the outside temperature, and soon, no doubt, they will be able to register the humidity and wind velocity as well. Why, then, do we continue to tune in to the weather report? What is it we enjoy about its frequently fabulist narrative?

Here pronouns play a major role. Consider the following, from «Summer»:

Well, you can already feel that heat and humidity out there as the sun, uh, has been really warmins us up and, uh, we'll stay that way today. Some clouds and

parts of the area could get a thunderstorm this afternoon or early tonight, as a cold front passes through, but not all of us seeing any shower activity. (71)

What rapport! We're all in this weather game together, right? And the wise reporter knows that «not all of us» are «seeing any shower activity. S/he knows «we» feel that «heat and humidity.» Then, too, this impersonal voice has insight:

We're going to have very strong winds today. The winds are going to gust past fifty miles per hour at times and this is going to bring down some tree limbs, power lines. Already thousands of people as close as Philadelphia are without power, across parts of New Jersey as well. This all spreading north-eastward (108)

Again, what wisdom! The godlike weather forecaster seems to be witnessing those trees coming down: he (on radio, it usually is a he) is a prophet who «already» knows the fate of Philadelphia, where thousands are without power!

Weather is thus the most intimate and yet the most impersonal of «news.» On the one hand, it draws «you» into the magic circle of «us,» who have insight into the air movements of far-away Philadelphia. On the other, the weather forecast is wholly non-judgmental. Not for the forecaster to tell us how to feel about the Iraq War, the fate of Kuwait, or even the outcome of the World Series. The weather cycle is, after all, the same in war and peace; it is wholly independent of our human attempts to control it or steel ourselves against it. And precisely because it *is* thus independent, we marvel at its excesses: year in and year out, we express surprise and outrage over ninety-five degree heat in July and subzero temperature in January. Amazing! Who would have thought it? Let's listen to the weather forecast and find out what happens next! Maybe.

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Like Goldsmith's word-for-word reproduction of a single day's *New York Times* in *Day* (2003) or his transcription of his every spoken word during a given week in *Soliloquy* (2001), *The Weather* is a work of radical defamiliarization. It forces the reader to think about weather in entirely new ways. Whereas Cage could still find it useful to «create» a weather situation that would seem «real» and alive, that would force us to open our ears to the sounds we actually hear, Goldsmith is responding to a later, rather different situation—an electronic environment where appropriation and sampling are simply par for the course. Nothing in our environment can now be «natural,» not even the weather over which we have no control, because it is transmitted to us through particular channels that are continuously packaging and monitoring meteorological events.

For many artists and writers, this situation spells the endgame of art. Here we are, so the pessimists would claim, the victims of the consciousness industries, of a relentless commercial and political spin that controls our every action and denies our freedoms. But Goldsmith knows better. «Suddenly,» he remarks in a discussion of *Soliloquy*, «the familiar or quotidian is made unfamiliar or strange, without really blasting apart the sentences. Forget the New Sentence. The Old Sentence, if framed properly, is really odd enough.» Or again, «Writing needs to be as simple as possible—just put a net up and catch it.»<sup>5</sup>

The notion of putting up a net to «catch it,» of framing the «old sentence» is not as absurd as Goldsmith's detractors would have us think. I doubt that the author of *The Weather* has spent much time poring over Wordsworth's famed «*Preface to Lyrical Ballads*,» but much of Wordsworth's case for defamiliarization applies nicely to Goldsmith's work. Consider the following passage:

It is supposed, that by the act of writing in verse an Author makes a formal engagement that he will *gratify certain known habits of association*; that he not only thus apprises the Reader that certain classes of ideas and expressions will be found

in his book, but that others will be carefully excluded. . . . they who have been accustomed to the *gaudiness and inane phraseology of many modern writers*, if they persist in reading this book to its conclusion, will, no doubt, frequently have to struggle with feelings of strangeness and awkwardness: they will look round for poetry, and will be induced to inquire by what species of courtesy these attempts can be permitted to assume that title.<sup>6</sup> (my italics)

Wordsworth famously goes on to explain that his «principal object» was «to choose incidents and situations from common life, and to relate or describe them . . . in a selection of language really used by men; and, at the same time, to throw over them a certain colouring of imagination, whereby ordinary things should be presented to the mind in an unusual way» (869).

But, the skeptical reader will ask, how can the «colouring of imagination» Wordsworth speaks of so eloquently be thrown over words that were not invented by the poet, how can it transform sheer *copying*?

Goldsmith recalls that a student once approached him and complained, «Your poem doesn't contain a single word of your own!» Here a comment in a recent Goldsmith interview on «uncreativity» may be apposite:

Creativity as we've come to know it is bankrupt. . . . Think of the flood of worn-out narratives, passing for originality, be it novels, films or music, and you'll find that what we term creative is nothing more than repetitious formulas, spun over and over. Should something appear that's truly "creative" it doesn't stand a chance of selling and as such, is rendered culturally insignificant and marginalized to the point of invisibility. By opposing creativity as commonly accepted -- in a sense by constructing a negative notion of creativity -- perhaps we can breathe new life into this practice. Hence, my concept of the uncreative.<sup>7</sup>

The «flood of worn-out narratives» reminds me of Wordsworth's strictures on writing that merely «gratifies certain known habits of association.»

Indeed, just as I was completing this essay, the mail brought a copy of the winner of the 2004 Walt Whitman Award of The Academy of American Poets, a slim volume by Geri Doran called *Resin*. According to the dustjacket, «the [poet's] voice . . . tells how the natural world . . . expresses and mediates

human longing.» Given these parameters, weather would seem to be involved, as it is in the first poem, «Tonight Is a Night Without Birds»:

The sky fell open to a map of the constellations.  
Earlier the snowmelt reconfigured the field.  
I tried to describe it, but the field transformed  
into the plains of the soul pressed flat.<sup>8</sup>

This is, I'm afraid, sleight-of-hand. Skies, no matter how much we strain, don't «fall open to a map of the constellations,» and, had the poet really «tried to describe it, « the field in question would not so easily morph into the «plains of the soul.» Indeed, Doran's are the «repetitious formulas, spun over and over» that Goldsmith rejects, the «gaudiness and inane phaseology» Wordsworth is determined to replace.

Reading such strained comparisons, one turns with relief to the found text of *The Weather*. Here, a given «crooked tree / small with wild spikes and a covering of snow,» is not said, as in *Resin*, to «look like a deranged bonsai»(45); trees are always and only trees. But the text has its own pleasures. Consider the «getaway day for the Memorial Day holiday weekend» (what date is that exactly?), a day on which «We're waiting, actually, on a storm system organizing in Georgia right now to bring the real rain of consequence» (58). The *real rain of consequence*: it sound ominous indeed, coming as it does all the way from Georgia. Will it really hit New York? There is no telling, but its «consequence» is everywhere to be found in this delightful and creatively «uncreative» little book.

## Footnotes

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<sup>1</sup> Kenneth Goldsmith, «I look to theory only when I realize that somebody has dedicated their entire life to a question I have only fleetingly considered,» a work in progress: version 01.2002, Kenneth Goldsmith author page, <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith>.

<sup>2</sup> See John Cage, 'Preface to 'Lecture on the Weather',» *Empty Words, Writings 73-78* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1979), pp. 3-5. There have been numerous recordings of the performance of the *Lecture*: see, for example, Cambria Records 8800: Composers' Portrait Series: 6-17. John Cage: *Lecture on the Weather* (1975).

Goldsmith's *The Weather* was published by Make Now Press (Los Angeles, 2005), and is available online, in a reading by the poet himself, on Goldsmith's author page: see note 1 above

<sup>3</sup> See my *Radical Artifice: Writing Poetry in the Age of Media* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), pp. 20-28.

<sup>4</sup> See Goldsmith, «Being Boring» (2004), on the author's home page. This lecture, delivered at the First Seance for Experimental Literature, Disney REDCAT Theatre, Los Angeles, November 2004, and again at Kelly Writer's House, University of Pennsylvania, November 2004, makes a witty distinction between «unboring boring» and «boring boring.» Interestingly, here too Goldsmith draws on Cage, specifically the famous statement in *Silence*, «If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.» See *Silence* (Middletown: CT, Wesleyan, 1962), p.

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<sup>5</sup> See Leevi Lehto, «Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith: Nude Media, or Benjamin in the Age of Ubiquitous Connectivity,» *Tuli & Savu* (Helsinki, 2002); see Kenneth Goldsmith author page; Goldsmith, email to author, 14 July 2005.

<sup>6</sup> William Wordsworth, «Preface to Lyrical Ballads, with Pastoral and Other Poems (1802), in *William Wordsworth, The Poems*, 2 vols, ed. John O. Hayden for The Penguin English Poets; Vol. One (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 866-96. see pp. 868-69.

<sup>7</sup> See Anne Henochowicz, «Petty Theft: Kenny G Gives A's for unoriginality,» *Daily Pennsylvanian*, 18 November 2004; see Kenneth Goldsmith author page.

<sup>8</sup> Geri Doran, *Resin* (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 2005), p. 3.