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# Context Is the New Content

Andrea Quaid

## UNCREATIVE WRITING: MANAGING LANGUAGE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

Kenneth Goldsmith

Columbia University Press

<http://cup.columbia.edu>

256 pages; cloth, \$67.50; paper, \$22.95

In “Composition as Explanation,” Gertrude Stein claims that people only appreciate contemporary works of culture retrospectively. Stein keenly quips, “the creator of the new composition in the arts is an outlaw until he is a classic, there is hardly a moment in between and it is really too bad very much too bad naturally for the creator but also very much too bad for the enjoyer.” Kenneth Goldsmith’s new collection of essays, *Uncreative Writing*, aims to lessen the lag, for this is a critical poetics that seeks to clarify. Donning his outlaw status as UbuWeb innovator, conceptual poetry provocateur (as evidenced in his Harriet blog posts for the Poetry Foundation, from which this collection is largely culled), and author of works including *Soliloquy* (2001), *Day* (2003), and *The Weather* (2005), Goldsmith, not quite making a claim to the classic, seeks to advance understanding of avant-garde work being done now.

Part manifesto, *Uncreative Writing*’s argument rests on the issue of the now, which, for Goldsmith, means immersion in a dominantly digital-technological landscape of unparalleled amounts of text—a “new territory” of ever proliferating textual abundance requiring “new relations to words” as it pressures and shifts our crucial inquiries: the knowledge question (or, how do we know the world?) and the being question (or, what are we in this world?). More necessary than choice, here is an imperative doubly voiced. Issuing from our contemporary moment and amplified by Goldsmith, it is an exhortation to the writer to avow and respond to the technological reality already constituting one’s day and identity. Less obstacle than opportunity, Goldsmith

urges writers and readers “to reconsider what writing is and to define new roles for the writer.”

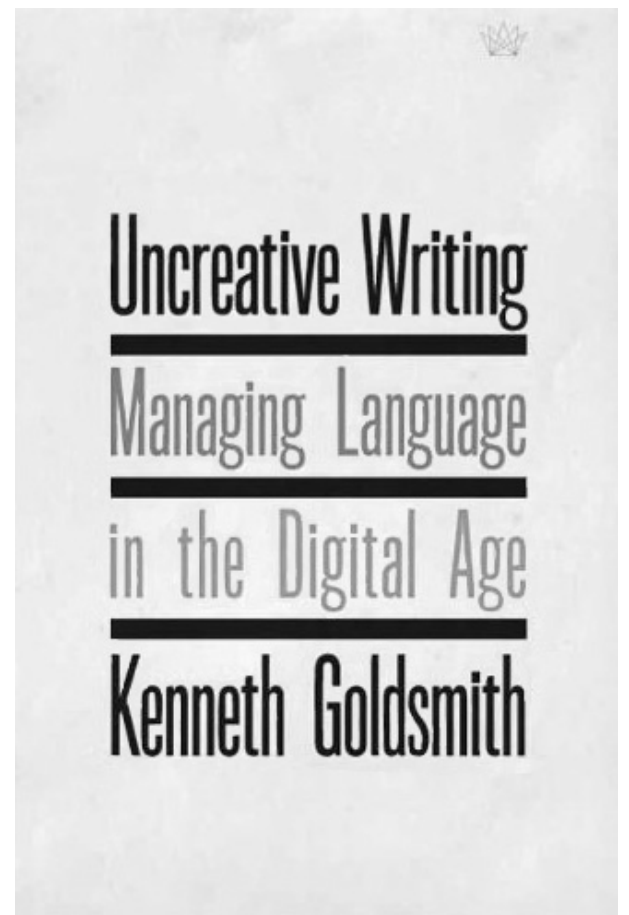
This new cultural work is uncreative writing, the use and repurposing of already existent text rather than the composing of new works, and, to Goldsmith, it is the fitting and most compelling approach to the masses of language matter at hand. Responding in kind to their conditions of possibility, uncreative writers use methods made newly or differently available by digital technology to work language in another way. Analogous to the Barthesian slide from author to scribe, the uncreative writer’s task is to collect from mounds of material, to construct rather than compose, and to repurpose appropriations by moving text into new frames.

One of the book’s main strengths is the way it elaborates on these strategies through a series of compelling close readings. Goldsmith historicizes his survey by locating traditions of appropriation on firm modernist ground. Ezra Pound’s found and assembled language into verse in *The Cantos* and Walter Benjamin’s catalog of notes in *The Arcades Project* provide antecedents for the cut, copy, and paste work done today. What becomes of interest here is where Goldsmith clips the then-and-now comparison to differentiate modernism’s appropriated and compiled fragments from uncreative writing’s plagiarized wholes. Today’s books tend to import information in total. Goldsmith’s own *Day* is a 836-page retyping of a single day’s entire *The New York Times*. Mathew Timmons’s 800-page *Credit* collects and reproduces every credit card offer and debt notice the author received over the period of one year. *Issue 1*, an initially anonymous anthology, is a compilation of computer-generated poems misattributed to 3,164 poets in a 3,785-page PDF file.

### **Uncreative Writing traces a trajectory of evolving thought and practice.**

How to read the heft and theft of these uncreative works? Here Goldsmith extends his analysis outside the strictly literary and points to visual art practices that have tread this ground before. Honoring their different scenes of emergence, Goldsmith effectively draws on conceptual art and uncreative writing’s similar oppositional stances against traditional ideas of inspired artists creating original works. Situating uncreative writing in a slant corollary to conceptual art, he looks to Sol LeWitt and Andy Warhol for what their respective art practices offer the writer. The analysis begins with LeWitt’s well-known manifestos that list key tenets of conceptual art. Most especially, the idea of a work takes priority over the object. The concept’s realization is accomplished through exacting plans strictly adhered to by the artist prior to its actualization. Focusing on LeWitt’s wall drawings, a series of directions conceived of and written by him to be executed by others, Goldsmith shows how such shifts from privileged visual object to idea, from romantic impulse to mechanized process, affect not only the artist but the viewer as well. For as the writer goes, so goes the reader. Building further on LeWitt, Goldsmith emphasizes how uncreative writing demands different reading practices and signals a move from readership to thinkership. It isn’t necessary to read Goldsmith’s *Day* or Timmons’s *Credit* in their entirety, or at all. Instead, a book becomes “a platform to leap off into thought” that requires the reader to ask different questions of a text.

With context “the new content,” meaning making moves from reading for artistic expression



to thinking about how a text’s reframing opens to alternative and often oppositional purposes. A new context emerges, one that allows us to “see documents in ways impossible before.” And, by extension, to see the motivated and circumscribed connotations that cleave to literature, author, text, reader. Throughout *Uncreative Writing*, these categories are jostled and remade, some more than others, as he productively allows contradictions to remain just that. In a thoughtful reading of Craig Dworkin’s *Parse* (2008), a text composed of a grammar book parsed by its own rules, Goldsmith shows how the work challenges literary categories as a “material investigation of a philosophical inquiry” in presenting itself as literature. At the same time, this most “uncreative,” methodical, and systematized work is nonetheless always, paradoxically, a work of self-expression, an assertion Goldsmith returns to throughout his essays, as writers make decisions about what language to assemble, manage, and reshape.

To explore the extraliterary challenges of uncreative writing, Goldsmith turns to the “hyper-realism” of Vanessa Place’s *Statement of Facts*. Place, an appellate criminal defense attorney who specializes in sex offense cases, presents her own cases’ legal documents as poetry. If, as Goldsmith suggests, the “noninterventionists reproduction of texts” may more effectively illuminate cultural and political issues than standard modes of critique, then Place’s challenging work presents the opportunity for him to test this claim as legal and literary discourses collide. He momentarily suspends attention from the intense content to focus on how the representation of these cases as literature exposes the inequitable and contingent social, political, and legal “matrix of apparatuses surrounding it.” Returning to the content, he convincingly argues that through this reframing of testimony the labor of writer and reader is transformed.

*Uncreative Writing* traces a trajectory of evolving thought and practice, and the dynamic possibilities of conceptual and uncreative work, accomplishing Goldsmith’s goal to provide a site from which to continue the conversation.

Andrea Quaid lives and writes in Oakland and Los Angeles.

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