

Hélène Aji  
Université du Maine

« *The Weather [to]Day* »

## Overexposure to and of the Media in Kenneth Goldsmith's Work

"All the News that's Fit to Print"

The New York Times

Late Edition

New York: Today, mostly cloudy, high 83. Tonight, warm and muggy, low 73. Tomorrow, cloudy with a few showers, high 80. Yesterday, high 83, low 7. Weather map is on Page A20. (*Day* 11)

A couple of breaks of sunshine over the next couple of hours, what little sunshine there is left. Remember, this is the shortest day of the year. Looks like the clear skies hold off till later on tonight. It will be brisk and cold, low temperatures will range from twenty-nine in some suburbs to thirty-eight in midtown. Not a bad shopping day tomorrow, sunshine to start, then increasing clouds, still breezy, with a high near fifty. (*The Weather* 3)

Over the span of nine books and some fifteen years, Kenneth Goldsmith, now in his forties, living in New York and working in Philadelphia, unfolds what he calls in turn a poetics of uncreativity and a poetics of boredom. Each text draws from the quotidian in its most minute details to produce text that is either borrowed and collaged or simply transcribed. In *Day* (2003), he types down the September 1, 2000 issue of the *New York Times* from the top left of the front page to the bottom right of the last page, thus producing an impressive volume of highly tedious thus hardly legible text of 836 pages. In *The Weather* (2005), as David Antin defines it on the back cover, four seasons of daytime all-news radio broadcasts for the city of New York make up the texture of a year which happened, after the project was started in December 2002, to be the year the war in Iraq began. David Antin thus presents the text as a transcript which turns into an epic of survival in New York:

Starting at the winter solstice, Kenneth Goldsmith by subtle framing has turned a literal transcript of a year's worth of radio weather reports into a classical narrative of New York's four Seasons. A kind of Vivaldi without the birdcalls—and more localized in space and time, as its narrator predicts and endures the frigid cold of the Winter of 2002-2003 and the snow storms bearing down on the city from the Great Lakes or from Eastern Canada or the Great Plains of the Middle West. Spring includes two weeks of weather from the battlefields of Iraq as the vernal equinox follows two days after the invasion. Summer

comes with its relentless humidity and heat and sudden squalls. Fall appears with its hurricanes boiling up from the Carolina coast, succeeded by more tranquil World Series weather and concludes with a descent into the promise of a milder Winter. New York has survived once more. (Antin in *The Weather* back cover)

Before that, in *Fidget* (2000) and in *Soliloquy* (2001), Goldsmith had respectively put down all the movements his body had performed in one day, and all the words he had uttered in one week, in a diptych of self-centered triviality. Following *The Weather*, we have *Traffic* (2007) and *Sports* (2008), which complete a trilogy of the most common, and most repetitive announcements, in radio broadcasting.

Boring and uncreative, these are the qualities Goldsmith claims for all these works and others, putting into question the demands of originality and interest that underlie the canon of poetry. What is one to do with a poet who declares that he is “spending his 39<sup>th</sup> year practicing uncreativity” (“Uncreativity as a Creative Practice” §1)? Or when he states the following as he begins a presentation at the Disney REDCAT Theatre in Los Angeles in 2004:

I am the most boring writer that has ever lived. If there were an Olympic sport for extreme boredom, I would get a gold medal. 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. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept.

Over the past ten years, my practice today has boiled down to simply retyping existing texts. I've thought about my practice in relation to Borges's Pierre Menard, but even Menard was more original than I am: he, independent of any knowledge of Don Quixote, reinvented Cervantes' masterpiece word for word. By contrast, I don't invent anything. I just keep rewriting the same book. I sympathize with the protagonist of a cartoon claiming to have transferred x amount of megabytes, physically exhausted after a day of downloading. The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself. I think it's fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers. Some of us call this writing. (“Being Boring” § 1-2)

Not inventing, but repeating, experimenting with the modes of recurrence and the conditions of boredom, trying not to add more text to the great text of literature but to draw on the existing texts to recontextualize them, Goldsmith in fact posits himself at the end of a line initiated by Gertrude Stein, from whose lectures he edited a chapbook in 2000 (*Gertrude Stein On Punctuation*), and including Jackson Mac Low to whom he writes a tribute in 2005, calling him “the king of boredom,” and John Cage, whom he quotes both in the tribute and in “Being Boring” as follows:

John Cage said, "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." He's right: there's a certain kind of unboring boredom that's fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there's the other kind of boring: let's call it boring boring. Boring boring is a client meeting; boring boring is having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading; boring boring is watching a toddler for an afternoon; boring boring is the seder at Aunt Fanny's. Boring boring is being somewhere we don't want to be; boring boring is doing something we don't want to do. ("Being Boring" § 4)

As Goldsmith starts to playfully work on the concept of "boring boring," one can easily foresee the emergence of a counter vision of boredom, one in which boredom becomes not boring, or further along in Goldsmith's reflection "unboring." With the apparently benign idea of "unboring boring," he inverts the significance of his claim to be, along with Mac Low, "the most boring writer that has ever lived": once the tedium of his text is integrated, and the method of its unboring unveiled, creativity and meaning emerge on a different level, one that makes the method programmatic, and the boredom a chosen state subverting the fake attention paid to counterfeit novelty.

Unboring boring is a voluntary state; boring boring is a forced one. Unboring boring is the sort of boredom that we surrender ourselves to when, say, we go to see a piece of minimalist music. I recall once having seen a restaging of an early Robert Wilson piece from the 1970s. It took four hours for two people to cross the stage; when they met in the middle, one of them raised their arm and stabbed the other. The actual stabbing itself took a good hour to complete. Because I volunteered to be bored, it was the most exciting thing I've ever seen. ("Being Boring" § 5)

Through the transfer of data from one medium to another, as in from the newspaper to a book (*Day*) or from radio talk to the page (*The Weather*), the exposure to speech which originally happened as part of the normal texture of daily life is turned into an overexposure, so that the title of this paper can be understood in at least two different ways. Kenneth Goldsmith's work stems from an overexposure to the media, whose discourse becomes so central to our lives as to replace self-expression: but we are in a world in which one issue of *The New York Times*, which so many pretend to read every day, amounts to more than 800 pages of text, so that "[we]'ve never really read the newspaper" ("Being Boring" § 16). However it also performs this overexposure which puts into question the very medium of the media's communication. In *Day*, "really reading" the newspaper by retyping it implies a discipline that runs against the conventional modes of its reading: strangely enough, despite its discontinuous organization, and stories cut up into a few columns on different pages, the newspaper appears as coherent, and not as the collage that it is, a collage through which

reading is channeled, and ideologically sorted. Once retyped, and turned first into a digital text, then into a book, however, the newspaper begins to crack at the seams, so that the method of this collage can be questioned, and the cracks seen for the voluntary cuts that they are. Now these cuts impair reading, analyzing, distancing from the facts, they break up discourse so that its expository choices are not evident any longer. Paradoxically, it is the suppression of hierarchic ordering which emphasizes and puts into question the organizations of both the newspaper and the book. The indistinct allows for distinction; the boring triggers the unboring; and radically it is underexposure that puts into relief the critique of overexposure and of its strategies. Of course, *Day* has its unpublished counterparts, that complete the trilogy in which Goldsmith likes to organize his work: *Month*, an issue of *Vogue*, a very thin volume, and *Week*, an issue of *Newsweek*, deemed as “definitely [falling] on the boring side of boring” (“Being Boring” § 17). Why a trilogy (like later *The Weather*, *Traffic* and *Sports*)? Maybe because the very iteration of the process shifts the focus from its products to the process itself. As Marjorie Perloff points it out in the title of her essay on *The Weather*: the very gesture of “moving information” is what generates a multi-faceted response in the reader, and performs an “exciting” subversion, but this subversion gathers power in its replications, when the exposure of the method becomes overexposure, even at the risk of falling back into the category of the “boring boring” (“Being Boring” § 17-18).

And is this writing? And is this text poetry? Or is this a novel as Kenneth Goldsmith claims it for *Day*, “filled with stories of love, jealousy, murder, competition, sex, passion, and so forth” (“Being Boring” § 16)? At least, in the most literal sense of the term, it is writing, but a perverse mode of writing which is not meant to be read, in the same way as Andy Warhol’s 24-hour film of the Empire State Building is not meant to be watched (see “Uncreativity as a Creative Practice” § 8). As Warhol’s film is entitled *Empire*, Goldsmith’s book is entitled *Day*, shifting the attention from the matter it processes to the concept hiding behind the concrete example. Similarly, in *The Weather* (the first in a trilogy of its own, but also first conceived of as fourth in the “Day” trilogy, under the title of “Year”), the title is deceptive: we are not dealing with a generic reflection on the weather, but with the very concrete transcriptions of specific weather reports, the term being symptomatically absent from the poem’s title, thus becoming both implied and operative. Including hesitations or expletives from the speakers, the reports in *The Weather* seem untouched by an author that has turned absent or erased himself:

Well, uh, our radar continuing to show light snow scattered around the metropolitan area right now, uh, there are breaks in the snow pattern, but it extends all the way back into, uh, central and western Pennsylvania. So we've got several hours yet in which there will be intermittent light snow, certainly not piling up, uh, an inch or probably less in Manhattan and across most of the five boroughs, but there might be a little more than an inch, uh, on, in some areas, uh, west and to the southwest of the city. (*The Weather* 16)

However, the project and its achievement bear the mark of an intentionality and a decision that contradict any claim to depersonalization. The elision of the “report” gives import to the text: the missing word is interestingly paradoxical first when applied to the “weather report” since in the proper sense it points at the past, and marginally at the present, when the discourse the word points to when applied to the weather is all about some of the present, and the future—forecasting, predicting, and failing to do so accurately. What are the epistemological “reports” (or explosive consequences) of a discourse which assumes the trappings of science and which often determines our lives when it is fallible and, more importantly still, fails to acknowledge its errors? How can one accept the relevance of a “report” (an account) that could be but a “report” (a rumour)?

What links *The Weather to Day* is in fact outside the text, in its context of a subtle negotiation between prevision and a-posteriori accounting, both revolving around the before and after traumatic events for the city, the US and the world: *Day* is the transcription of the *New York Times* on September 1, 2000 (one year almost to the “day” before 9/11), and *The Weather* begins during the winter preceding the attack on Iraq. It is no coincidence then that *The Weather* initially began as a project entitled *Year*, more closely related still to *Day*, and alluding to the delay before the apocalypse... The comment goes beyond the topoi of postmodern or neo-pop-art recycling or displacement of the ordinary into the world of art. It also somehow goes beyond the Duchampian problematic of the ready-made—or rather reframes it. What is terrifyingly ready-made is the catastrophe one inevitably reads into the innocuous monolith of *Day*; or the potential debacle the climatic conditions in Iraq outline:

A mostly cloudy, cool day coming up today, the temperature will get to about fifty, or maybe or maybe in the low fifties, and that's about it, drops back to about forty with some clouds and patchy fog and drizzle tonight. Then it'll start to rain tomorrow, probably late in the day, we'll have rain tomorrow night on into Saturday, with a high Saturday into the fifties. No, uh, genuine prospects of sunshine until Sunday, but even then it'll be chilly, a high around fifty. Uh, battlefield weather is sunny and hot in, uh, Baghdad, the temperature into the low nineties at this moment, and it'll be middle-to-upper nineties tomorrow, and over the weekend with one hundred degrees plus, in the southern and eastern deserts. Some gusty winds over

the weekend could cause isolated pockets of, uh, blowing sand and reduced visibilities, but nothing near as widespread as last week. Right now it's forty-four and mostly cloudy in Central Park, temperature today going up to about fifty. (*The Weather* 43)

Reports from the war in Iraq might seem to be meshing with local reports as the result of an unexpected turn of events, and it is definitely the interpretation which Goldsmith himself promotes. Nevertheless, it so happens that both *Day* and *The Weather* bridge the before and the after of the major events to affect the US since the beginning of the new century. In *Day*, the news from before 9/11 seem puny and ignorant of what is to follow to the point of blindness, thus marking the unmanageable quality of historical time, and the possible ineffectiveness of the information age; in *The Weather*, the local, despite its share of severe weather, is dwarfed by the consequences of sand storms thousands of miles away, collapsing geographical distance and stressing the delusion that would make one believe that a war waged on foreign soil is less serious than one waged on American soil.

By being part of the *Day-Week-Month-Year* series, *The Weather* is to be read as an attempt to deal with the intersection of personal and collective time, or the time of reading and the time of writing. But as the first volume in a radio-based trilogy, with subsequent volumes entitled *Traffic* (2007) and *Sports* (2008), it is also a comment on the degrees of exposure allowed by the media: by accessing news in detail, does one really access information? Doesn't the format and medium impact the message? Not a follower of McLuhan, Goldsmith will not collapse the message onto the medium, but he is not one to forget that the paper, the radio, the book do not provide the same text, although the words might be identical, or supposedly so.

— 1 800 LAW CASH reminds you that this copyrighted broadcast is presented by authority of the New York Yankees and may not be reproduced or retransmitted in any form. And the accounts and descriptions in the game may not be disseminated without the express written consent of the New York Yankees. Have a lawsuit? Need money? 800 LAW CASH will get you money right now. Don't wait for your case to settle. You or your attorney should call 800 LAW CASH today.

— Well, the pitching match-ups are as follows: for the New York Yankees Sidney Ponson. It's his third start as a Yankee. He last pitched on the 11th of, uh, August, went three innings giving up five hits and three runs. His last start was on the 23rd of July in Toronto. He only went two and a third innings, giving up six runs. (*Sports* 11)

12:01 We're over the hump and into the official holiday weekend. I want to wish everybody out there a safe and happy holiday, especially when traveling on the road this weekend. If you're trying to get out of

town now, you're in for an easy time of it. No reported delays around the metropolitan area as I see it live on the Panasonic Jam Cam. Let's head over to the East River where we've got no reported delays running the length of the river from the Battery on up to the Triboro. FDR is moving nicely as well. No reported incidents on the West Side Highway which, if you recall, oh, say about six hours ago was simply not moving at all with delays up to three hours. Now it's deserted. And here's what you need to know about the bridges and tunnels: all the East River crossings moving well. No reported incidents at the Triboro, 59th Street Bridge, Queens-Midtown Tunnel. Looking down to the Williamsburg, Manhattan and Brooklyn Bridges, it's one big green light. And over in Jersey, it's never been better with traffic flowing smoothly across the Hudson at both the Lincoln and Holland Tunnels. Even the GW Bridge which has been chocked for what seems like the last twenty-four hours is now flowing like water. Remember, alternate side of the street parking rules are in effect for tomorrow. (*Traffic* 81)

In writing, the advertisement before the match, and the first comments seem strangely at odds, so that the vacuity of the running commentary, and the irony of the ad equating a lawsuit with money gained, not lost, contaminate each other because they coexist on the page. In writing, the repeated optimism of the traffic announcer as the apocalyptic moment of a holiday weekend seems to be over contrasts with the warning about alternate side of the street parking, a measure known to all New-Yorkers to occasion major traffic jams.

The strategy folds back on the photographic, and the optical, yet overexposure does not only flatten its object or blur its details but indeed awakens the viewer (since Goldsmith does not have that many actual readers...) to both what lies around and under the overexposed artefact. About *Fidget*, Ruben Gallo follows Walter Benjamin's definition of the "optical unconscious" in "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" as all that a close-up reveals, to argue that the text "deploys a number of innovative techniques to reveal aspects of everyday reality that are unusually accessible to the naked eye" ("*Fidget's* Body" 54). But beside the revelation of usually unheeded everyday details in close-up, *Day* and *The Weather* overexpose them as textual events, that can be recast, remodeled, retranscribed, *re-mediated* so as to inflect their portent Thus the overexposure to and of the media in Kenneth Goldsmith's work entails a sudden, whimsical, and ironic focus on the mass media, not as pseudo-original matter for poetry, but as one surface of discourse, most often unprobed as texts matter-of-factly circulate, are categorized, integrated, and discarded. The change of medium for the media triggers an interrogation on what could be deemed the textual unconscious surrounding and underpinning any text.

### Works quoted

Benjamin, Walter, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" [1935], *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media*, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, Thomas Y. Levin, eds, Cambridge (MA), Harvard University Press, 2008.

Gallo, Ruben, "Fidget's Body," *Open Letter* XII 7 (Fall 2005) 50-57.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Being Boring," Presentation at the Disney REDCAT Theatre, Los Angeles, 2004, Electronic Poetry Center, University of New York at Buffalo, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith\\_boring.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html), consulted 12 Dec. 2008.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice," Electronic Poetry Center, University of New York at Buffalo, <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>, consulted 12 Dec. 2008.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Day*, Great Barrington (MA), The Figures, 2003.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Fidget*, Toronto, Coach House Books, 2000.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Gertrude Stein On Punctuation*, Jersey City (NJ), Abaton Books, 2000.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, "The King of Boredom: A Tribute to Jackson Mac Low," Electronic Poetry Center, University of New York at Buffalo, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/mac\\_low\\_boredom.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/mac_low_boredom.html), consulted 12 Dec. 2008.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Soliloquy*, New York, Granary Books, 2001.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Sports*, Los Angeles, Make Now Press, 2008.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *The Weather*, Los Angeles, Make Now Press, 2005.

Goldsmith, Kenneth, *Traffic*, Los Angeles, Make Now Press, 2007.

Perloff, Marjorie, " 'Moving Information': On Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*," *Open Letter* XII 7 (Fall 2005) 75-85.