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Kenneth Goldsmith

CHELSEA, MANHATTAN

"I am sitting in a room."

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Conceptual Poetics

. . . i had always had mixed feelings
about being considered a poet "if robert lowell is a
poet i dont want to be a poet if robert frost was a
poet i dont want to be a poet if socrates was a poet
ill consider it"

—David Antin

A poet finds a grammar book from the late 19th century and, inspired by Gertrude Stein's confession, "I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences," proceeds to parse the entire 185 page book—every word and letter, from the table of contents to the index—by its own system of analysis.

Another poet teams up with a scientist to create an example of living poetry by infusing a chemical alphabet into a sequence of DNA, which is then implanted into a bacterium. Thousand of research dollars later, they are in the process of creating an organism embedded with this poem, strong enough to survive a nuclear holocaust, thereby creating a poem which will outlast humanity and perhaps even the lifespan of the planet earth.

Yet another poet decides to retype an entire edition of a day's copy of the *New York Times*.

Everywhere there is a letter or numeral, it is transcribed onto a page. Like a medieval scribe, the poet sequesters himself for over a year until he is finished. The resulting text is published as a 900 page book.

Sounds like something out of a Borgesian fantasy? No. These works are key examples of conceptual poetry, a broad movement that has been receiving a fair amount of attention lately. Conceptual writing or uncreative writing is a poetics of the moment, fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, one that proposes an expanded field for 21st century poetry. Not satisfied to exclusively be bound between the pages of a book, this new writing continually morphs from the printed page to the webpage, from the gallery space to the science lab, from the social space of the poetry reading to social space of the blog. It's a poetics of flux, one that celebrates instability and uncertainty. And although its practitioners often come from disciplines outside of literature, the work is framed through the discourse and economy of poetry: these works are received by, written about, and studied by readers of poetry. Freed from the market constraints

Kenneth Goldsmith's writing has been called some of the most "exhaustive and beautiful collage work yet produced in poetry" by *Publishers Weekly*.

Goldsmith is the author of eight books of poetry, founding editor of the online archive UbuWeb (<http://ubu.com>), and the editor *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, which is the basis for an opera, *Trans-Warhol*, premiering in Geneva in March of 2007. Goldsmith is also the host of a weekly radio show on New York City's WFMU. He teaches writing at The University of Pennsylvania, where he is a senior editor of PennSound, an online poetry archive. More about Goldsmith can be found on his [author's page](#) at the University of Buffalo's Electronic Poetry Center.

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of the art world or the commercial constraints of the computing & science worlds, the non-economics of poetry create a perfectly valueless space in which these valueless works can flourish.

Conceptual writing's concerns are generally two pronged, as manifested in the tensions between materiality and concept. On the materiality side, traditional notions of a poem's meaning, emotion, metaphor, image, and song are subservient to the raw physicality of language. On the conceptual side, it's the machine that drives the poem's construction that matters. The conceptual writer assumes that the mere trace of any language in a work—be it morphemes, words, or sentences—will carry enough semantic and emotional weight on its own without any further subjective meddling from the poet, known as *non-interventionalist* tactic. To work with a machine that is preset is one way of avoiding subjectivity. It obviates the necessity of designing each work in turn; thus, it is the plan that designs the work.

In his introduction to the *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*, Craig Dworkin posits, "What would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion? One in which the substitutions at the heart of metaphor and image were replaced by the direct presentation of language itself, with 'spontaneous overflow' supplanted by meticulous procedure and exhaustively logical process? In which the self-regard of the poet's ego were turned back onto the self-reflexive language of the poem itself? So that the test of poetry were no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise."

If it all sounds familiar, it is. Conceptual writing obstinately makes no claims on originality. On the contrary, 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.

Language as material, language as process, language as something to be shoveled into a machine and spread across pages, only to be discarded and recycled once again. Language as junk, language as detritus. Nutritionless language, meaningless language, unloved language, *entartete sprache*, everyday speech, illegibility, unreadability, machinistic repetition. Obsessive archiving & cataloging, the debased language of media & advertising; language more concerned with quantity than quality. How much did you say that paragraph weighed?

Conceptual writing's primary influences are Gertrude Stein's densely unreadable texts, John Cage & Jackson Mac Low's procedural compositions, and Andy Warhol's epically unwatchable films.

Conceptual writing adds a 21st century-prong to a constellation of certain 20th century avant-garde movements that were concerned with the materiality of language and sound: Mallarmé's spatialist concerns, the Futurist page, Zaum's invented languages, concrete & sound poetry, Musique concrète, plunderphonics, sampling, and rap. On the conceptual side, it claims allegiance to the works of 'pataphysics,' Marcel Duchamp, James Joyce, process & conceptual art, as well as aspects of 1980s consumerist-based appropriation in the fine arts.

In its self-reflexive use appropriated language, the conceptual writer embraces the inherent and inherited politics of the borrowed words: far be it for the conceptual writer to morally or politically dictate words that aren't theirs. The choice or machine that makes the poem sets the political agenda in motion, which is often times morally or politically reprehensible to the author (in retyping the every word of a day's copy of the *New York Times*, am I to exclude an unsavory editorial?). While John Cage claimed that any sound could be music, his moral filter was on too high to accept certain sounds of pop music, agitation, politics, or violence. To Cage, not all sounds were music. Andy Warhol, on the other hand, was a model of permeability, transparency, and sliver reflectivity; everything was fodder Warhol's art, regardless of its often unsavory content. Our world turned out to be Andy's world. Conceptual writing celebrates this circumstance.

With the rise of appropriation-based literary practices, the familiar or quotidian is made unfamiliar or strange when left semantically intact. No need to blast apart syntax. The New Sentence? The Old Sentence, reframed, is enough. How to proceed after the deconstruction and pulverization of language that is the 20th century's legacy. Should we continue to pound language into ever smaller bits or should we take some other approach? The need to view language again as a whole—syntactically and grammatically intact—but to acknowledge the cracks in the surface of the reconstructed linguistic vessel. Therefore, in order to proceed, we need to employ a strategy of opposites—unboring boring, uncreative writing, valueless speech (these will all be explored this week in depth)—all methods of disorientation used in order to re-imagine our normative

relationship to language.

David Antin's sentiments in the epigraph are correct: conceptual writing is more interested in a *thinkership* rather than a readership. Readability is the last thing on this poetry's mind. Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good; often, the idea is much more interesting than the resultant texts.

And yet . . . there are moments of unanticipated beauty, sometimes grammatical, some structural, many philosophical: the wonderful rhythms of repetition, the spectacle of the mundane reframed as literature, a reorientation to the poetics of time, and fresh perspectives on readerliness, but to name a few. For an ethos claiming so much valuelessness, there's a shocking amount of beauty and experience to be siphoned from these texts.

Further reading:

UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing

"Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics"

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Uncreative Writing

I teach a class at the University of Pennsylvania called "Uncreative Writing," which is a pedagogical extension of my own poetics. In it, students are penalized for showing any shred of originality and creativity. Instead, they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering, and stealing. Not surprisingly, they thrive. Suddenly, what they've surreptitiously become expert at is brought out into the open and explored in a safe environment, reframed in terms of responsibility instead of recklessness.

Well, you might ask, what's wrong with creativity? "I mean, we can always use more creativity."¹ "The world needs to become a more creative place."² "If only individuals could express themselves creatively, they'd be freer, happier."³ "I'm a strong believer in the therapeutic value of creative pursuits."⁴ "To be creative, relax and let your mind go to work, otherwise the result is either a copy of something you did before or reads like an army manual."⁵ "I don't follow any system. All the laws you can lay down are only so many props to be cast aside when the hour of creation arrives."⁶ "An original writer is not one who imitates nobody, but one whom nobody can imitate."⁷

When our notions of what is considered creative became this hackneyed, this scripted, this sentimental, this debased, this romanticized . . . this *uncreative*, it's time to run in the opposite direction. Do we really need another "creative" poem about the way the sunlight is hitting your writing table? No. Or another "creative" work of fiction that tracks the magnificent rise and the even more spectacular fall? Absolutely not.

One exercise I do with my students is to give them the simple instructions to retype five pages of their choice. Their responses are varied and full of revelations: some find it enlightening to become a machine (without ever having known Warhol's famous dictum "I want to be a machine"). Others say that it was the most intense *reading* experience they ever had, with many actually embodying the characters they were retyping. Several students become aware that the act of typing or writing is actually an act of performance, involving their whole body in a physically durational act (even down to noticing the cramps in their hands). Some of the students become intensely aware of the text's formal properties and for the first time in their lives began to think of texts not only as transparent, but as opaque objects to be moved around a white space. Others find the task zen-like and amnesia-inducing (without ever having known Satie's "Memoirs of an Amnesiac" or Duchamp's desire to live without memory), alternately having the text lose then regain meaning.

In the act of retyping, what differentiates each student is their choice of *what* to retype. One student once retyped a story about a man's inability to complete the sexual act, finding the perfect metaphor for this assignment. Another student retyped her favorite high school short story, only to discover during the act of retyping it, just how poorly written it was. Yet another was a waitress who took it upon herself to retype her restaurant's menu in order to learn it better for work. She ended up hating the task and even hating her job more. The spell was broken when purposefulness and goal-orientation entered into the process.

The trick in uncreative writing is airtight accountability. If you can defend your choices from every angle, then the writing is a success. On the other hand, if your methodology and justification is sloppy, the work is doomed to fail. You can no longer have a workshop where people worry about adjusting a comma here or a word there. You must insist that the procedure was well articulated and

accurately executed.

We proceed through a rigorous examination of the circumstances that are normally considered outside of the scope of writing but, in fact, have everything to do with writing. Questions arise, among them:

What kind of paper did you use? Why is it on generic white computer paper when the original edition was on thick, yellowed, pulpy stock? What does it say about you: your aesthetic, economic, social, and political circumstances?

Do you reproduce exactly the original text's layout page by page or do you simply flow the words from one page to another, the way your word processing program does? Will the texts be received differently if it is in Times Roman or Verdana?

For a task so seemingly simple, the questions never end.

A few years ago I was lecturing to a class at Princeton. After the class, a small group of students came up to me to tell me about a workshop that they were taking with one of the most well-known fiction writers in America. They were complaining about her lack of imagination. For example, she had them pick their favorite writer and come in next week with an "original" work in the style of that author. I asked one of the students which author they chose. She answered Jack Kerouac. She then added that the assignment felt meaningless to her because the night before she tried to "get into Kerouac's head" and scribbled a piece in "his style" to fulfill the assignment. It occurred to me that for this student to actually write in the style of Kerouac, she would have been better off taking a road trip across the country in a '48 Buick with the convertible roof down, gulping Benzedrine by the fistful, washing 'em down with bourbon, all the while typing furiously away on a manual typewriter, going 85 miles per hour down a ribbon of desert highway. And even then, it would've been a completely different experience, not to mention a very different piece of writing, than Kerouac's.

Instead, my mind drifted to those aspiring painters who fill up the Metropolitan Museum of Art every day, spending hours learning by copying the Old Masters. If it's good enough for them, why isn't it good enough for us? I would think that should this student have retyped a chunk—or if she was ambitious the whole thing—of *On The Road*. Wouldn't she have really understood Kerouac's style in a profound way that was bound to stick with her? I think she really would've learned something had she retyped Kerouac. But no—she had to bring in an "original" piece of writing.

At the start of each semester, I ask my students to simply suspend their disbelief for the duration of the class and to fully buy into uncreative writing. I tell them that one good thing that can come out of the class is that they completely reject this way of working. At least their own conservative positions become fortified and accountable; they are able to claim that they have spent time with these attitudes for a prolonged period of time and quite frankly, they've found them to be a load of crap. Another fine result is that the uncreative writing exercises become yet another tool in their writing toolbox, upon which they will draw from for the rest of their careers. Of course, the very best result—and the unlikeliest one—is that they dedicate their life to uncreative writing. Later in the week, we will actually look at works of uncreative and conceptual writing by mature writers who, in fact, have dedicated their oeuvre to this type of practice.

-
- ¹ Marc Chagall
 - ² Philip Yeo
 - ³ Richard Florida
 - ⁴ Dr. Wayne Dwyer
 - ⁵ Kimon Nicolides
 - ⁶ Raoul Dufy
 - ⁷ Gail Sheehy

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Information Management

I am a word processor. 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.

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." I've come to embrace Huebler's ideas, though it might be retooled as, "The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." It seems an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists.

Contemporary writing requires the expertise of a secretary crossed with the attitude of a pirate: replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, and reprinting, along with a more clandestine proclivity for bootlegging, plundering, hoarding, and file-sharing. We've needed to acquire a whole new skill set: we've become master typists, exacting cut-and-pasters, and OCR demons. There's nothing we love more than transcription; we find few things more satisfying than collation.

There is no museum or bookstore in the world better than our local Staples.

The writer's solitary lair is transformed into a networked alchemical laboratory, dedicated to the brute physicality of textual transference. The sensuality of copying gigabytes from one drive to another: the whirr of the drive, intellectual matter manifested as sound. The carnal excitement from supercomputing heat generated in the service of poetry.

The weight of holding a book's worth of language in the clipboard waiting to be dumped: the magic is in the suspension.

The grind of the scanner as it peels language off the page, thawing it, liberating it. The endless cycle of textual fluidity: from imprisonment to emancipation, back to imprisonment, then freed once more. The balance between dormant text warehoused locally and active text in play on the Web. Language in play. Language out of play. Language frozen. Language melted.

The text of a newspaper is released from its paper prison of fonts and columns, its thousands of designs, corporate, political decisions, now flattened into a nonhierarchical expanse of sheer potentiality as a generic text document begging to be repurposed, dumped into a reconditioning machine and cast into a new form.

A radio broadcast is captured and materialized, rendered into text. The ephemeral made permanent; every utterance made by the broadcaster—every um and uh—goes onto the ever-increasing textual record. The gradual accumulation of words; a blizzard of the evanescent.

Cruising the Web for new language. The sexiness of the cursor as it sucks up words from anonymous Web pages, like a stealth encounter. The dumping of those words, sticky with residual junk, back into the local environment; scrubbed with text soap, returned to their virginal state, filed away, ready to be reemployed.

Sculpting with text.

Data mining.

Sucking on words.

Our task is to simply mind the machines.

Andy Warhol: I think everybody should be a machine. I think everybody should like everybody.

Interviewer: Is that what Pop Art is all about?

Warhol: Yes. It's liking things.

Interviewer: And liking things is like being a machine?

Warhol: Yes, because you do the same thing every time. You do it over and over again.

Interviewer: And you approve of that?

Warhol: Yes, because it's all fantasy. ^{1a}

Writing is finally catching up to Warhol. And it's just the beginning. Soon we will not have to be bothered minding the machines for they will mind themselves. As poet Christian Bök states:

We are probably the first generation of poets who can reasonably expect to write

literature for a machinic audience of artificially intellectual peers. Is it not already evident by our presence at conferences on digital poetics that the poets of tomorrow are likely to resemble programmers, exalted, not because they can write great poems, but because they can build a small drone out of words to write great poems for us? If poetry already lacks any meaningful readership among our own anthropoid population, what have we to lose by writing poetry for a robotic culture that must inevitably succeed our own? If we want to commit an act of poetic innovation in an era of formal exhaustion, we may have to consider this heretofore unimagined, but nevertheless prohibited, option: writing poetry for inhuman readers, who do not yet exist, because such aliens, clones, or robots have not yet evolved to read it. ^{2a}

^{1a} G. R. Swenson, "What is Pop Art? Answers from 8 Painters, Part I", *ARTnews*, November 1963.

^{2a} Christian Bök, "The Piecemeal Bard Is Deconstructed: Notes Toward a Potential Robopoetics," *Object 10: Cyber Poetics*, Kenneth Goldsmith, ed (2001), http://www.ubu.com/papers/object/03_bok.pdf.

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Boredom

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 10 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.

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.

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.

The 20th century avant-garde liked to embrace boredom as a way of getting around what it considered to be the vapid "excitement" of popular culture. A powerful way to combat such crap was to do the opposite of it, to be purposely boring.

By the '60s and '70s in art circles this type of boredom—boring boring—was often the norm. I'm glad I wasn't around to have to sit through all of that stuff. Boredom, it seems, became a forced condition, be it in theatre, music, art, or literature. It's no wonder people bailed out of boredom in the late '70s and early '80s to go into punk rock or expressionistic painting. After a while, boredom got boring.

And then, a few decades later, things changed again: excitement became dull and boring started to look good again. So here we are, ready to be bored once more. But this time, boredom has changed. We've embraced unboring boring, modified boredom, boredom with all the boring parts cut out of it. Reality TV, for example, is a new kind of boredom. An American Family, broadcast in the early '70s—strutting its ennui—was the old boredom; *The Osbournes*—action-packed boredom—is the new. There's no one more tedious than Ozzy Osbourne, but his television presence is the most engagingly constructed tedium that has ever existed. We can't take our eyes off the guy, stumbling through the dullness of his own life.

Our taste for the unboring boring won't last forever. I assume that someday soon it'll go back to boring boring once again, though for reasons and conditions I can't predict at this time.

I don't expect you to even read my books cover to cover. It's for that reason I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence. For instance, there's the book of every word I spoke for a week unedited. Or the book of every move my body made over the course of a day, a process so dry and tedious that I had to get drunk halfway through the day in order to make it to the end. Or a book in which I retyped a day's copy of the *New York Times* and published it as a 900 page book. I've transcribed a year's worth of weather reports and a 24-hour cycle of one-minute traffic reports every 10 minutes, resulting in textual gridlock.

Now you know what I do without ever having to have read a word of it.

I think that there were a handful of artists in the 20th century who intentionally made boring work, but didn't expect their audiences to fully engage with it in a durational sense. It's these artists, I feel, who predicted the sort of unboring boredom that we're so fond of today.

Andy Warhol, for instance, said of his films that the real action wasn't on the screen. He's right. Nothing happened in the early Warhol films: a static image of the Empire State Building for eight hours, a man sleeping for six. It is nearly impossible to watch them straight through. Warhol often claimed that his films were better thought about than seen. He also said that the films were catalysts for other types of actions: conversation that took place in the theatre during the screening, the audience walking in and out, and thoughts that happened in the heads of the moviegoers. Warhol conceived of his films as a staging for a performance, in which the audience members were the Superstars, not the actors or objects on the screen.

Gertrude Stein, too, often set up a situation of skimming, knowing that few were going to be reading her epic works straight through. (How many people have linearly read every word of *The Making of Americans*? Not too many, I suppose.) The scholar Ulla Dydo, in her magnificent compilation of the writings of Gertrude Stein, remarked that much of Stein's work was never meant to be read closely at all, rather she was deploying visual means of reading. What appeared to be densely unreadable and repetitive was, in fact, designed to be skimmed, and to delight the eye (in a visual sense) while holding the book. Stein, as usual, was prescient in predicting our reading habits.

John Cage proved to be the avant-garde's Evelyn Wood, boiling down dense modernist works into deconstructed, remixed Cliff Notes; in his *Writing Through "Finnegans Wake"* he reduced a 628-page tome to a slim 39 pages, and Ezra Pound's 824-page *Cantos* to a mere handful of words.

At a reading I gave recently, the other reader came up to me after my reading and said incredulously, "You didn't write a word of what you read." I thought for a moment and, sure, in one sense—the traditional sense—he was right; but in the expanded field of appropriation, uncreativity, sampling, and language management in which we all habit today, he couldn't have been more wrong. Each and every word was "written" by me: sometimes mediated by a machine, sometimes transcribed, and sometimes copied; but without my intervention, slight as it may be, these works would never have found their way into the world. When retyping a book, I often stop and ask myself if what I am doing is really writing. As I sit there, in front of the computer screen, punching keys, the answer is invariably yes.

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A Gallery of Conceptual Writing

So, "What would a non-expressive poetry look like? A poetry of intellect rather than emotion?"^{1c} For my final post this week, I'd like to present 11 works by younger writers that are emblematic of conceptual writing. Many others could have been included here—both historical and contemporary—but the selected works seem to most clearly articulate the tenets of conceptual writing as put forth in this week's posts.

Like much of this new writing itself, the writing process used to generate these texts is self-reflexive and, as such, becomes part of the textual apparatus of the whole. Often times, the author will give an accounting of the process and I have included this where it exists.

A full anthology of conceptual writing, entitled *Against Expression*, edited by myself and Craig Dworkin will appear in 2008 from Make Now Press (Los Angeles)

List of Works**1. Craig Dworkin***Parse* (forthcoming Atelos Books)**2. Caroline Bergvall**"Via: 48 Dante Variations" (from *Fig* (Salt, 2005))**3. Leevi Lehto***Päivä (Day)* (Kirja kerrallaan, 2004)**4. Emma Kay***Worldview* (Book Works, 1999)**5. Darren Wershler-Henry and Bill Kennedy***Apostrophe* (ECW Press, 2006)**6. Robert Fitterman***Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (Edge Books, 2004)**7. Fiona Banner***The Nam* (Frith Street Books, 1997)**8. Claude Closky***The First Thousand Numbers Classified In Alphabetical Order* (Self-published, 1989)**9. Christian Bök***The Xenotext Experiment* (forthcoming)**10. Kenneth Goldsmith***Traffic* (Make Now, 2007)**11. Simon Morris***re-writing Freud* (Information as Material, 2005)

* * *

1. Craig Dworkin*Parse* (forthcoming Atelos Books)Amongst the most extreme and impressive works of conceptual writing is Craig Dworkin's *Parse*.Craig Dworkin edits the online literary archive [Eclipse](#).Here's Dworkin's statement about how *Parse* was made:

Parse is a translation of Edwin A. Abbott's *How To Parse: An Attempt to Apply the Principles of Scholarship to English Grammar*. First published in 1874, the book played a leading role in the pedagogic debate over whether English should be analyzed as if it were Latin, and thousands of copies were printed as textbooks in the last quarter of the 19th century.

When I first came across the book I was reminded of a confession by Gertrude Stein (another product of 1874): 'I really do not know that anything has ever been more exciting than diagramming sentences.' And so, of course, I parsed Abbott's book into its own idiosyncratic system of analysis.—Craig Dworkin

This is except from p. 19-20 of *Parse*:

solicitude positive degree adjective of qualification positive degree adjective of qualification genitive preposition implied definite article plural direct objective case noun genitive preposition definite article Singular Noun comma conjunction of exception third person singular masculine subjective case pronoun intransitive passive voice indicative mood indefinite past tense singular verb adverb of negation and passive incomplete participle as part of a passive voice verbal construction preposition third person singular neuter deictic pronoun semicolon singular subjective case noun preposition of negation definite article positive degree adjective of enumeration singular collective noun intransitive active voice conditional auxiliary verb transitive active voice indicative mood indefinite present tense third person singular verb third person singular masculine pronoun direct objective case period

Conjunction Used As An Introductory Participle comma active incomplete participle relative pronoun indefinite article positive degree adjective of qualification singular collective noun intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb adverb of negation adverb of extent preposition third person singular masculine pronoun objective case comma preposition definite article comparative degree adjective of definition singular noun genitive pronoun definite article Proper Place Name Used As An Adjective singular noun comma copulative coordinate conjunction intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb adverb of negation adverb intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb preposition third person singular masculine pronoun objective case comma definite article singular subjective case noun transitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb preposition of the infinitive intransitive active voice infinitive mood indefinite present tense verb third person neuter objective case pronoun period positive degree adjective of qualification singular collective noun comma relative subjective case pronoun intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb preposition positive degree adjective of enumeration positive degree adjective of definition plural noun dash Proper Place Name comma Proper Place Name comma Proper Place Name comma copulative coordinate conjunction positive degree adjective of enumeration plural noun dash intransitive passive voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular auxiliary verb and passive incomplete participle used as part of a passive verbal construction adverb comma preposition definite article singular noun genitive pronoun marks of quotation Proper Collective Name period marks of quotation Positive Degree Adjective Of Enumeration genitive preposition implied definite article Plural Collective Proper Name adverb comma adverb third person plural subjective case pronoun transitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person plural verb positive degree adjective of enumeration genitive preposition implied third person plural possessive pronoun active incomplete participle used as a positive degree adjective of definition plural noun comma intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person plural auxiliary verb adverb of negation intransitive active voice indicative mood definite past tense third person plural verb preposition indefinite article noun noun comma adverb Proper Personal Name intransitive passive voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular verb and passive incomplete participle preposition comparative degree adjective of enumeration asterisk preposition of comparison indefinite article singular collective noun genitive preposition plural noun period Adverb comma definite article Plural Collective Proper Name intransitive passive voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular auxiliary verb adverb of frequency passive incomplete participle adverb third person plural neuter objective case pronoun comma positive degree adjective of enumeration singular noun active incomplete participle adverb pronoun comma adverb conjunction third person plural neuter pronoun subjective case intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person plural verb preposition of the infinitive transitive active voice infinitive mood indefinite present tense verb adjective of negation singular noun objective case adverb definite article Positive Degree Adjective Of Qualification Singular Noun dash conjunction third person singular neuter deictic pronoun subjective case intransitive active voice indicative mood indefinite past tense third person singular appositional verb definite article singular noun adverb relative pronoun definite article Singular Noun genitive pronoun Proper Place Name intransitive passive voice indicative mood incomplete past tense third person singular auxiliary verb and verb period

The book continues on this way for 172 more pages until we reach the index:

Alphabetic Letter period

Noun comma compound arabic numeral comma compound arabic numeral period
Noun comma compound arabic numeral comma compound arabic numeral comma
compound arabic numeral period

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The index alone goes on for nearly 10 pages, double columned, challenging Louis Zukofsky's *A* as the most obsessive index ever written. Zukofsky's index is a work of conceptual writing in and of itself, cataloguing every instance words such as "the" and "a" appear in his massive 826 page tome.

2. Caroline Bergvall

"Via: 48 Dante Variations" (from *Fig* (Salt, 2005))

Bergvall, a French-Norwegian poet living in London, bases her work in sound as much as she does on the page. Most of her page-bound texts have audio components that in some way were derived from slips of the tongue or other deviations in the texts that she encountered while speaking / processing them.

Here's an excerpt from Bergvall's description of "Via":

Ever since the Rev. Cary's translation of 1805, translating Dante into English has become something of a cultural industry. Some 200 translations in less than two hundred years. Faced with this seemingly unstoppable activity, I decided to collate the opening lines of the *Inferno* translations as archived by the British Library up until May 2000. Exactly 700 years after the date fixed by Dante for the start of the Comedy's journey.

By the time I closed the project, two new translations had reached the shelves. In all, 47 versions were gathered—once the two editions archived as missing, the one archived as under restoration and the multiple unaltered editions by the same translators had been disregarded. A fortuitous number that promised a musical structure to the list of entries and helped determine the alphabetical logic of the list's shifting cadences. In the summer 2000, a reading of the variations was made with Ciarán. Using calculations set up via his software, he unearthed an added line, an imperceptible grain, my voice's fractals, and we let it run, hardly audible, underneath the structure of the reading voice, inextricably tied to it, yet escaping it, releasing from it a surprising beauty, magnified shrapnel of interior sound. The 48th variation.

During this entire process, some two years in all, it was as if the many systematic acts of counting and collating were carrying with them a motive interior as much as ulterior to the work being generated. The minutia of writing, of copying out, of shadowing the translators' voicin of the medieval text, favoured an eery intimacy as much as a welcome distance. My task was mostly and rather simply, or so it seemed at first, to copy each first tercet as it appeared in each published version of the *Inferno*. To copy it accurately. Surprisingly, more than once, I had to go back to the books to double-check and amend an entry, a publication dat a spelling. Checking each line, each variation, once, twice. Increasingly, the project was about keeping count and making sure. That what I was copying was what was there. Not to inadvertently change what had be printed. To reproduce each translative gesture. To add my voice to this chorus, to this recitation, only by way of this task. Making copy explicit as an act of copy.—Caroline Bergvall

You can listen to Bergvall read this text [here](#).

Here's an excerpt from Bergvall's "Via: 48 Dante Variations":

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita

mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita

The Divine Comedy— Pt. 1 Inferno - Canto I -

1.

Along the journey of our life halfway
I found myself again in a dark wood
wherein the straight road no longer lay
(Dale, 1996)

2.

At the midpoint in the journey of our life
I found myself astray in a dark wood
For the straight path had vanished.
(Creagh and Hollander, 1989)

3.

HALF over the wayfaring of our life,
Since missed the right way, through a night-dark-wood
Struggling, I found myself.
(Musgrave, 1893)

4.

Halfway along the road we have to go,
I found myself obscured in a great forest,
Bewildered, and I knew I had lost the way.
(Sisson, 1980)

5.

Halfway along the journey of our life
I woke in wonder in a sunless wood
For I had wandered from the narrow way
(Zappulla, 1998)

3. Leevi Lehto

Päivä (Day) (Kirja kerrallaan, 2004)

The Finnish writer and translator Leevi Lehto works with information management, often using media and internet feeds as his sources. His book *Päivä (Day)* is a meticulous reorganization of the entire Finnish News Agency media feed from August 20, 2003.

You can find out more about Leevi Lehto [here](#)..:

Here's Lehto's description of his process:

- take all the news releases of the Finnish News Agency of Aug., 20, 2003
- sort alphabetically by sentence
- divide into chapters per first letter of sentence: "A," "B" . . .
- divide into paragraphs per second letter of sentence (a sentence starting "Kenny" after one starting "Kabooze" would trigger a paragraph break
- locate all the statements ("Blah blah blah', the CEO says.") and treat them as parts of dialogue.

Let me add that with the "A" chapter first, the book begins, adequately, with the word "Aamu" ("morning") ("begins in dark," as Charles Bernstein says in his blurb). There are lots of these kinds of happy coincidences all along; thus, on page 173 (of 234), you'll find the sentence: "The author tells that two thirds of the book is now finished."

An excerpt from *Päivä (Day)* (translated by the author):

He added that the stability of the public economy will be carefully maintained at the same time. He admits that putting his soul to the life of the male couple was a challenge in many ways. He baptized the budget as one of work, stability, and confidence. He beat Green easily every time last year, and only very narrowly lost to Tim Montgomery in his WR run. He borrowed his own agony to the protagonist in the novel. He broke through the defence lines, but the low shot failed to have power to it,

and Sörensen easily caught the ball. He cleared 232 and had one very good go at 237. He cleared 478 in US Championship Games, and held the Indoors World Record for a short time. He could do no more than 186 in the Swedish Championship Games, and 195 in the DN Gala in Stockholm. He died, possibly in a children's disease, the day before the Christmas Eve, as his brother had done ten years earlier. He directed, however, part of his criticism toward the occupation administration led by the United States. He does not want to be a pessimist regarding the passive adult population, either. He does not want to reveal the exact plans at this stage, but confirms the company has started building a chain of special stores. He easily cleared two World Championships, won once at the Olympic Games, and also held the World Record. He emphasized that the customers' savings, loans, or personal information data were not in jeopardy at any stage. He emphasizes that the entire cabinet has now during the budget negotiations committed itself both to lowering of the income taxes and to restrictive public spending. He emphasizes that the entire cabinet has now committed itself both to lowering of the income taxes and to restrictive public spending.

4. Emma Kay

Worldview (Book Works, 1999)

Emma Kay is a British conceptual artist whose process requires that monumental works of art, geography and histories be reconstructed from unaided memory. Her books include *The Bible from Memory* 1997, *Shakespeare from Memory* 1998, and *Worldview* 1999.

"Without any recourse to reference material, relying solely on memory, *Worldview* draws on a variety of sources—newspapers, books, films, television, computer games, memories of school lessons, music, advertising and travels.

The neutral and authoritative style of *Worldview* admits no doubts, yet is fallible; the gaps, inaccuracies and the missing parts of history are as important to the work as the recollections themselves. It challenges you not just to correct and question, but to doubt your own account of history. How would you balance pre-history against the Black Death, the Bayeux Taperstry or Reagan's Strategic Defence Initiative?" (Book Works)

From page 12:

After all the Ice Ages, and as the Sun continued to get hotter, the Earth became a nicer place to live again. Some of the mammals had begun to try to walk on two of their legs, to reach food that was growing on trees. They were the apes. Dinosaurs gathered food this way too, but their upper limbs were quite weak in comparison to the lower ones. Apes' upper limbs were long and strong, and were known as arms. Their brains were much larger in relation to their upper body weight than the dinosaurs' brains. About a million years ago apes were multiplying rapidly, they appeared all over the Earth in pockets. They lived in social groups, which were hierarchical. They were herbivores. Most lived in trees but some had begun to live on the ground. The apes had the biggest brain in relation to their body of all the creatures so far. Their brain continually evolved, and their social interaction grew more complex. They made very rudimentary tools to assist with food-gathering. They protected each other, not just their offspring. They spent a proportion of their time in play, since they were so good at gathering food that they did not need to do it all the time. Their predators were larger mammals such as lions and tigers, wolves and bears. As they became more intelligent, they learned how to avoid being eaten. They were a very successful species, and this fact enabled them to multiply and evolve at a quick rate.

From page 53:

China was a vast empire and people often lived in extreme and remote places. The majority were peasants. The climate was very severe in places. Unwanted babies were exposed and left to die and women were sometimes sold into slavery as concubines for the warlords. The concubines and wealthier women would have their feet bound as this was deemed sexually attractive. This practice made them into

cripples as it broke all the bones in their feet, although it was very desirable to have the smallest feet possible in order to achieve the best marriage. The main garment was the kimono, a long-sleeved coat tied with a very wide sash worn by men and women. Wooden clogs were worn to elevate the person above the often muddy ground. The Chinese had a great knowledge of the medical properties of herbs and were extremely advanced in their treatment of the sick. They believed that the human body contained meridians and pressure points which corresponded to internal organs and moods. If pressure or needles were applied to these then a cure could be effected. This was called acupuncture. Chi, the life force, flowed around the body along the meridians and if it were disrupted then the person would feel unwell. Qi gong and Tai Chi were meditative exercises that were an aid to healing and wellbeing.

The second to last entry in the book, p. 211:

Many people planned their New Year's Eve celebrations years in advance and booked up hotel and function rooms all over the world. Some opted for the point on the dateline, in the Far East, where the Sun would rise for the first time in the 21st century. But the vast majority did not and were content to stay at home and plan street parties. Fireworks factories increased their production. Governments laid plans for controlling law and order in the event of mayhem caused by computer system failure. Many bars had to offer to pay their staff four or five times the usual wages to get them to work on New Year's Eve. But for a large part of the world's population the millennium had no relevance, although it was difficult to ignore. Many religions followed a different calendar. The year 2000 AD simply marked 2000 years after the birth of Christ, which made it a Christian celebration.

5. Darren Wershler-Henry and Bill Kennedy

Apostrophe (ECW Press, 2006)

Two poet / programmers teamed up in April 2001 to create an internet engine that generated a continuous poem. The poem exists live on the Web, where it is generating content to this day, and in book form, preserving forever a snapshot of a certain place and time on the ever-changing internet.

Here is their description of their process:

The home page of the Apostrophe Engine site presents the full text of a poem called "apostrophe," written by Bill in 1993. In this digital version of the poem, each line is now a hyperlink.

When a reader/writer clicks on a line, it is submitted to a search engine, which then returns a list of Web pages, as in any search. The Apostrophe Engine then spawns five virtual robots that work their way through the list, collecting phrases beginning with "you are" and ending in a period. The robots stop after collecting a set number of phrases or working through a limited number of pages, whichever happens first.

Next, the Apostrophe Engine records and spruces up the phrases that the robots have collected, stripping away most HTML tags and other anomalies, then compiles the results and presents them as a new poem, with the original line as its title . . . and each new line as another hyperlink.

At any given time, the online version of "apostrophe" is potentially as large as the Web itself. The reader/writer can continue to burrow further into the poem by clicking any line on any page, sliding metonymically through the ever-changing contents. Moreover, because the contents of the Web is always changing, so is the contents of the poem. The page it returns today will not be the page that it returns next week, next month, or next year.

The live Apostrophe Engine can be accessed [here](#).

Here is an excerpt from the *Apostrophe Engine* generated January 18, 2007, 13:51:

apostrophe (a foreign agent who accidentally ruptured an emergency cyanide tooth cap just before your rendez-vous with a thin man in a lumber jacket)

you are forced to remain in your house during a chemical or biological release, adequate supplies could help you live through a period of danger without hardship • you are directed to evacuate instead of sheltering-in-place, the emergency supply kit can be taken with you and used to ease the transition to a shelter • you are helping • you are the best • you are cared for and our emergency workers can focus on those most in need • you are forced to remain in your home during a natural disaster or other event, adequate supplies could help you live through a period of danger without hardship • you are directed to evacuate instead of sheltering-in-place, the emergency kit can be taken with you and used to ease the transition to a shelter • you are instructed to shelter-in-place, take your children and pets indoors immediately • you are told there is a danger of explosion, close the window shades, blinds or curtains to avoid injury, stay away from windows stay in the room and listen to the radio until you are told all is safe or you are instructed to evacuate authorities may decide to evacuate an area for your protection • you are agent zero and you are a mighty sparrow!!!!"and then he is gone • you are agent zero and you are a mighty sparrow!!!!"and then he is gone • you are vice president of the united states and something like this happens it is big news, and i think he had a responsibility to try to get the information out as quickly as possible and as fully as possible," clark said, adding, "just having [armstrong] talk to the local newspaper in texas doesn't cut it •

6. Robert Fitterman

Metropolis XXX: The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire (Edge Books, 2004)

Trained in an Objectivist tradition, Fitterman has been working in a conceptual manner for the better part of the last decade. His ongoing poem, *Metropolis* incorporates many of the primary tenets of conceptual writing as read through the lens of urbanity, his great subject being New York City.

Here are Fitterman's notes on *Metropolis XXX*:

Metropolis XXX: The Decline And Fall Of The Roman Empire takes 15 basic categories of the Roman Empire, discovered through both Gibbon and elementary school textbooks, and updates them to our own American condition. For example, Roman baths become rubber ducks, Roman philosophy becomes "thinking outside the box," Roman transportation becomes bubble wrap, etc. For each of these new categories, I would then surf those related websites and plunder the language of those sites. The 2nd half of the book (the decline) takes the same 15 categories, reverses them, and then emphasizes the shopping aspect of the same item.—Robert Fitterman

Excerpt, page 41:

XV. Senate

Because my client is an immigrant, do you think you might have a problem with that? Or that he was riding a bicycle? Are there other people in your family where there were personal injury cases involved? Any close friends or family as lawyers? Have you ever suffered a knee injury? Sports related injury? Have you ever known anyone who has suffered a knee injury? Do you use cabs? What's your feeling towards New York City cab drivers? What's your feeling towards people who bicycle in the city? Do you think bicycling in the city should be restricted to designated areas? Do you think cars, buses, should share the road with bicyclists? Do you ride a bike in New York City? Do you wear a helmet? Do you think there should be a law requiring bicyclists to wear helmets? Anything about that experience that I should worry about? Is your brother's case still pending? Is it fair to say that you work mostly as a personal trainer? How do you feel about the civic justice system in this country? The jury system? Do you feel, because your husband is a doctor, do you feel this could make you prejudice in any way? Do you think anyone who has gone this far, who has hired a lawyer and filed a suit, etc., should be awarded something? Does it bother you that an illegal alien can use our legal system and walk away with money even though he or she doesn't pay any taxes? Have you or anyone you've known been sued? Do you think that there is too much suing going on in this country?

7. Fiona Banner

The Nam (Frith Street Books, 1997)

Fiona Banner is a British artist who, in addition to her gallery practice, authors enormous tomes. In 1993, she made a cinematic-scaled drawing called *Top Gun*, which was a hand-written account of the film. In 1997, she published the 1000-page *The Nam*, written as she watched several fictional films about the Viet Nam war: *Apocalypse Now*, *Born on the Fourth of July*, *Full Metal Jacket*, *Platoon*, *Hamburger Hill* and *The Deer Hunter*. Banner was literally writing through (to use John Cage's term) pop culture and media. The text makes no distinction between films or scenes, but rather just creates an epic non-stop onslaught of language.

Excerpt, page 1 of *The Nam*:

Trees, like palm trees in the distance, fill up the foreground. They hardly move, maybe the tops are swaying a bit, the sky behind is dull and pale blue. A wispy bit of cloud floats across the bottom. A slow rotating sound from somewhere else gets louder but still sounds distant as a heavy looking grey copter moves across the sky in front of the trees. It moves slowly but is gone quickly. Some yellow dust floats up in the wind and follows behind it, then fades back into the green. There's some music, just strobing away, about to get to something. A bit more yellow dust smokes up, leaving a huge silence behind it. Then the music kicks in. Nothing happens but dust. Then the trees behind turn the dust green, you can only see their tops. The rotor sounds fades in again, another copter flies higher up this time, you can only see the bottom rails. It's passed, leaving the same misted-out background. So quietly, silently, three fires flare up into the trees. They roll upwards, blinding orange, then three more explode, one, two . . . three. They roll into one ginormous billowing ball, it's so huge, it's everything. Then it disappears into its own smoke, deep, murky, impenetrable, poisonous green. Just a small fleck of orange flame shows through. The music, it's singing, comes through too, it's all slow and building, ". . . this is the end . . ." it's like the first time. It's so deep, all that smoky green. The green copters float past, left to right, right to left, like shadows. The scene sort of slips past, but doesn't change much. The fire gets tugged off in the copters' wind. The picture fades into murky colours, it's impossible to work out what's next. Everything's sort of revealing itself, slowly—it's the slowest. Gradually, in the end, a face comes through. Both eyes stare straight ahead, just looking out at you. I can't tell the face cos it's upside down, but the music's getting hotter and the face is hot too. Something whirrs inconspicuously in in front of it. The eyes blink, and I think they flick left. The background still passes behind, faded out behind the face. More copters, big, faded ones.

8. Claude Closky

The First Thousand Numbers Classified In Alphabetical Order (Self-published, 1989)

Closky uses shockingly simple methods of transformation and translation in his work. Deceivingly straightforward propositions result in rich and resonant texts such as the excerpt below. All of Closky's online projects and texts can be accessed [here](#).

The piece begins:

Eight, eight hundred, eight hundred and eight, eight hundred and eighteen, eight hundred and eighty, eight hundred and eighty-eight, eight hundred and eighty-five, eight hundred and eighty-four, eight hundred and eighty-nine, eight hundred and eighty-one, eight hundred and eighty-seven, eight hundred and eighty-six, eight hundred and eighty-three, eight hundred and eighty-two, eight hundred and eleven, eight hundred and fifteen, eight hundred and fifty, eight hundred and fifty-eight, eight hundred and fifty-five, eight hundred and fifty-four, eight hundred and fifty-nine, eight hundred and fifty-one, eight hundred and fifty-seven, eight hundred and fifty-six, eight hundred and fifty-three, eight hundred and fifty-two, eight hundred and five

And 4000 words later ends:

two hundred and thirty-three, two hundred and thirty-two, two hundred and three,

two hundred and twelve, two hundred and twenty, two hundred and twenty-eight, two hundred and twenty-five, two hundred and twenty-four, two hundred and twenty-nine, two hundred and twenty-one, two hundred and twenty-seven, two hundred and twenty-six, two hundred and twenty-three, two hundred and twenty-two, two hundred and two.

9. Christian Bök

The Xenotext Experiment (forthcoming)

Bök is best known for *Eunoia*, which won the prestigious Griffin Prize, helping to make it the fastest selling book of poetry in Canadian history. Bök, whose practice has long been rooted in science fiction, takes a concept that one thinks could only exist between the covers of a science fiction book, into reality.

Since this is a work-in-progress, Bök's procedural text is reprinted here. You can expect to see the entire project in its many manifestations—biological, artistic, literary—within three or four years.

The Xenotext Experiment is an artistic exercise to be undertaken by the poetic technician, Christian Bök, and the expert geneticist, Stuart Kauffman—two innovators who propose to create an example of "living poetry." The researchers plan to generate a short verse about language and genetics, whereupon they plan to use a "chemical alphabet" to translate this poem into a sequence of DNA for subsequent implantation into the genome of a bacterium (in this case *Deinococcus radiodurans*). The researchers plan to compose this poem in such a way that, when translated into the gene and then integrated into the cell, the text nevertheless gets "expressed" by the organism, which, in response to the inserted, genetic material, begins to manufacture a viable, benign protein—a protein that, according to the original, chemical alphabet, is itself another text. The researchers are, in effect, hoping to engineer a life-form so that it becomes not only a durable archive for storing a poem, but also a useable machine for writing a poem.

The two researchers plan to document the progress of their experiment for publication in a poetic manual that showcases the text of the poem, followed by an artfully designed monograph about the experiment, including, for example, the chemical alphabet for the cipher, the genetic sequence for the poetry, the schematics for the protein, and even a photograph of the microbe, complete with other apparatus, such as charts, graphs, images, and essays, all outlining the results. The collaborators also expect to include, at the end the book, a slide with a sample of the microbe for scientific inspection by the public, and both researchers hope to patent the gene as part of the artistic exercise. The two also foresee creating related artwork for subsequent exhibition, including, for example, a limited edition of "multiples" inspired by the charts and graphs, plus a set of large-scale works, including not only a sculpture of the gene made from toy molecules, but also a diptych of giclée images generated through the DNA-fingerprinting of the organism.

The researchers hope that their unorthodox experiment might serve to integrate biology and poetics—two domains that might not have otherwise had any reason to interact, except under the innovative conditions of this artistic exercise. Not only do the two thinkers hope to explore the aesthetic potential of a "literary genetics," but they also hope to refine methods for the biological encryption of data—methods that might be applied to domains as varied as cryptography, epidemiology, and agrobusiness. The researchers hope to demonstrate that, if scientists can perfect the process for implanting lengthy, textual information into an organism, we might not only provide a secure method for delivering secretive documents, but we might also "watermark" cells, attaching explanatory information to them, in order to track the movement of microbial diseases or botanical products. In the future, genetics might lend a possible, literary dimension to biology, granting every geneticist the power to become a poet in the medium of life.—Christian Bök

10. Kenneth Goldsmith

Traffic (Make Now, 2007)

In both form and content, Kenneth Goldsmith's *Traffic* recalls nothing so much as the extended tracking shot in Jean-Luc Godard's 1967 film *Week-End*, and the book's audacious sustain elicits the same series of responses: surprise, admiration, amusement, incredulity, horror, recognition, terror, boredom, impatience, awe . . .

An uneasy combination of farcical comedy and hopeless tragedy, *Traffic* is a drama of Aristotelian proportions. Goldsmith's book unfolds like all classic narratives, tracing the beginning, middle and end of the action on a single day. In this case, the worst driving day of the year—replete with wanderings and errors, chance encounters, subplot snarls, and very real life-and-death results. But in the end, for all the horrific implications of this cultural catastrophe, *Traffic* has a happy ending: the midnight dream of the open road.

Traffic thus steers into the spin of the long tradition that includes Steinbeck's *The Grapes of Wrath* and Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*, McCarthy's *The Road* and Kerouac's *On The Road*. At the same time, *Traffic* takes its logical place in what might be called Goldsmith's 'American Trilogy,' a series that began with *The Weather* (MakeNow, 2005) and will conclude with *Sports*. Like *The Weather*, *Traffic* exhibits Goldsmith's signature mode: remediating found texts and crossing artifice with everyday life by metrically regulating the flow of the quotidian through 'pataphysically measured intervals.

Moreover, by remapping the roadways around Manhattan onto networks of desire and frustration, attention and boredom, leisure and labor, commodity and death, Goldsmith engages in a distinctive politics. Indeed, *Traffic* proves the last of Guy Debord's "Positions Situationnistes Sur La Circulation [Situationist Theses on Traffic]":

Les urbanistes révolutionnaire ne se préoccuperont pas seulement de la circulation des choses, et des hommes figés dans un monde de choses. Ils essaieront de briser ces chaînes topologiques, en expérimentant des terrains pour la circulation des hommes à travers la vie authentique.

[Revolutionary urbanists will not limit their concern to the circulation of things, or to the circulation of human beings trapped in a world of things. They will try to break these topological chains, paving the way with their experiments for a human journey through authentic life.

—Craig Dworkin

12:01 Well, in conjunction with the big holiday weekend, we start out with the Hudson River horror show right now. Big delays in the Holland Tunnel either way with roadwork, only one lane will be getting by. You're talking about, at least, twenty to thirty minutes worth of traffic either way, possibly even more than that. Meanwhile the Lincoln Tunnel, not great back to Jersey but still your best option. And the GW Bridge your worst possible option. Thirty to forty minute delays, and that's just going into town. Lower level closed, upper level all you get. Then back to New Jersey every approach is fouled-up: West Side Highway from the 150's, the Major Deegan, the Bronx approaches and the Harlem River Drive are all a disaster, the Harlem River Drive could take you an hour, no direct access to the GW Bridge with roadwork. And right now across the East River 59th Street Bridge, you've gotta steer clear of that one. Midtown Tunnel, Triboro Bridge, they remain in better shape. Still very slow on the eastbound Southern State Parkway here at the area of the, uh, Meadowbrook there's a, uh, stalled car there blocking a lane and traffic very slow.

12:11 Oh, one of the nastiest nights we've had in a while across the Hudson River. Holland Tunnel can be up to a half an hour in either direction, it's repairs and only one lane available. Lincoln Tunnel, which was a good way out is a bad way out now. Now we've got troubles back to Jersey it looks like, uh, now, mmm, watching here on the WINS Jam Cam, it's double trouble. The north tube all traffic's grinding to a halt going back to Jersey, that'll impact the 41st and 40th Street approaches. The center tube, that's another problem: you got a stuck bus in the tube. We just got a call from Dennis who, um, a member of our traffic team, who said that there was only one lane open, the right lane in that tube back to Jersey, with a, uh, bus stopped there, Port Authority police crews are on scene. Right now traffic stacking up, Lincoln Tunnel Jersey-bound, GW Bridge can easily take you thirty to forty minutes to go either way, even worse off the Harlem River Drive with no direct access to the G. W. Bridge because of repairs going on and the 59th Street Bridge, still an absolute must to

avoid. You've got roadwork there and delays on both decks either way.

12:21 Well, we could spend an hour talking about the Hudson River right now because that could be the delay going back to New Jersey on the Harlem River Drive approach to the GW Bridge. It's all because of repairs. Bronx approaches are an absolute sickening ride at this point and, uh, going into New York City the, uh, GW Bridge with a thirty to forty minute delay. They're doing repairs in each direction tonight on the lower level. Meanwhile, the Lincoln Tunnel, nobody's coming back to New Jersey. Remember Dennis phoned in, our traffic team member, the last report said there was a stalled bus inside the Lincoln Tunnel? Well, now they're holding all traffic back on the way back to Jersey so right now you're at a dead stop. And, uh, and looks like here on the Panasonic Jam Cam nobody getting through as yet. As you, uh, make your way at the, uh, Holland Tunnel, thirty minute delays either way, that because of repairs. Whitestone Bridge, that's where Bobby phoned in, at least a half an hour delay to Queens with roadwork, stick with the Throgs Neck or the Triboro. Avoid the 59th Street Bridge either way, use the Midtown Tunnel to avoid repairs there.

12:31 Unbelievable what's happening out there tonight: midnight gridlock. Where do we begin? There is a stalled bus inside the Lincoln Tunnel that is refusing to move, blocking all access to New Jersey. That means we're jammed-up deep on the Manhattan side. All approaches to the Lincoln are packed, spilling over into the midtown grid: Times Square, Columbus Circle, Eighth Avenue up to the Park, nothing is moving, just a lot of angry drivers at the point. Well, you might think, hey, why not head up to the GWB? But nope. That's jam-packed due to repairs. We're looking at at least forty-five minutes to an hour up there. And remember there's no access off the Harlem River Drive, gumming things up all the way to Riverdale, even bumping up to the Tappan Zee. Wow! Now, the Holland Tunnel is still looking better, but still you're going to hit nearly a half an hour getting in and out of town. On the East River crossings it's no better with the Whitestone out with, uh, roadwork. And the 59th Street Bridge is mobbed both ways in and out of town. You'll want to avoid that. We've got a smoother ride into the Midtown Tunnel, with scattered ten to fifteen minute delays there, but it might be your best bet.

11. Simon Morris

re-writing Freud (Information as Material, 2005)

Riding the crest between conceptual art, psychoanalysis and poetry, Simon Morris has created a number of projects realized by his press, Information as Material. He might be best known for his *Bibliophile*, where he asked hundreds of artists, writers and philosophers, which involved interventions into commercial bookstores, based on lists of books submitted by the participants. Also notable, is his project *The Royal Road to the Unconscious*, where students from York College cut out every single word from Sigmund Freud's 'Interpretation of Dreams'. Morris then threw the words out of the window of a car, traveling at speed of 90mph, approximately 122 miles southwest of Freud's psychoanalytical couch. According to Morris, "The action freed the words from the structural unity of Freud's text as it subjected them to a random act of utter madness." *re-writing Freud* takes a similar concept and applies it to the bound book.

Information as Material can be accessed online [here](#).

Simon Morris' procedural statement follows:

The text from Sigmund Freud's *Interpretation of Dreams* is fed into a computer programme. The programme randomly selects words, one at a time from Freud's text and begins to reconstruct the entire book, word by word, making a new book with the same words. When one word is placed next to another, meaning is suggested, and even though the syntactical certainty of Freud's sentences have been ruptured by the aleatory process, flashes of meaning persist, haunting the text.

If I say to a patient who is still a novice: 'What occurs to you in connection with this dream?', as a rule his mental horizon becomes a blank. If, however, I put the dream before him cut up into pieces, he will give me a series of associations to each piece.—Sigmund Freud

The work is displayed in an interactive touch screen kiosk with attached printer. As the text is randomly re-written, it can be re-printed and published. The programme uses algorithms in order to carry out the processing of Freud's 223,704 word text. By subjecting Freud's words to a random re-distribution, meaning is turned into non-meaning and the spectator is put to work to make sense of the new poetic juxtapositions. The world of dreams is subject to the laws of the irrational and re-writing Freud gives the spectator the chance to view Freud's text in its primal state.

Page 489 from *re-writing Freud*:

MY DREAM, SATISFYING. SLEEP, IS US

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^{1c} Craig Dworkin, *Introduction to the UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing*.

Kenneth Goldsmith: 01.22.07-01.26.07 | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(32\)](#) | [Back to top](#)
