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Uncreative but certainly not uninteresting

There are enough words out there, Kenneth Goldsmith believes. Better to spend your time re-organizing them than writing more

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From Saturday's Globe and Mail

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New York artist Kenneth Goldsmith is pursuing a career of postmodern paradoxes and cultural collisions. He's a highly original poet who only uses other people's words; he's the publisher of UbuWeb, a digital archive featuring the cream of the international avant-garde, and he's the collector of a very analog art form created by anonymous crazies, those scraps of paper offering apocalyptic visions and homophobic diatribes pasted on city telephone poles.

"People walk right by these things," he said in a recent interview, gesturing at a gallery wall covered in hand-scrawled or roughly printed notices denouncing fashion as fascism, accusing New York police of rape and bird watchers of voyeurism, urging passersby to "Adopt Me," or looking for such missing items as a dog head and some Torah scrolls. Goldsmith has brought the ephemera to Toronto for a display at the Mercer Union Centre for Contemporary Art on Bloor Street, papering a whole wall with these bizarrely humorous and frighteningly lunatic bits of paper. The effect is one big dose of urban ferment, a great welling up of sorrow, creativity and anger.

"They are very hard," Goldsmith says of the works. "I find this work very challenging and very draining. I don't have any of this work up in my house. ... It's too powerful."

Goldsmith began collecting the ephemera 25 years ago when he first became intrigued by classified ads posted on supermarket bulletin boards. He offers a small, oddball group of these "Good Neighbour Free Ad" notices, now made obsolete by Craig's List, in the Mercer Union show. They include someone offering to swap a VHS tape of *Faces of Death II* for four home-cooked dinners or the ironing of 15 shirts, and someone offering a size 40 bush jacket or a new microwave oven for rides between Manhattan and Brooklyn at 2 p.m. or midnight.



Enlarge Image
New York poet and artist Kenneth Goldsmith by his exhibition at Mercer Union. (Charla Jones/The Globe and Mail)

Goldsmith then broadened the field to include odd messages posted on telephone poles or in other public spots. They are often poetically worded and exotically designed, carefully hand-lettered or collaged: Goldsmith considers them a form of outsider art, and in this show juxtaposes them with the visual poetry of David Daniels, who died last May at 74. Daniels was a former abstract painter who had discovered Microsoft Word was the perfect tool for creating picture poems (in which the layout of the text forms an image of the subject matter) but whose work in this area began to get exposure only very late in his life. In these delightfully inventive pieces, Daniels recounts his sprawling memoirs while conjuring up a freighter sitting on the ocean, a squirrel, a pair of lungs, a heart and some flowers, using dexterous shifts in line length, font, spacing and colour.

"The Daniels are an example of what happens when you focus. You can still be on the outside but you can create a body of work," Goldsmith said, positioning the visual poetry as counterbalance to the angry chaos of the street material.

Goldsmith is himself a poet and, just as he collects the anonymous words of the street notices, he relies entirely on collecting other people's words to create his own work. Most famously, he once retyped sequentially every word (including ones appearing in ads and in photographs) of one single edition of the daily New York Times, compiling it into an 836-page book.

"There are so many words out there it is more interesting to organize them than to create new ones. The way I organize something will be different from the way you organize it. It is unique; it can be creative," he said, although elsewhere he has dubbed his process uncreative writing.

His recent conceptual poetry includes his so-called American trilogy entitled *Weather*, *Traffic* and *Sports* and using word-for-word transcriptions of radio reports. *Traffic*, for example, features 24 hours of traffic reports from a busy long weekend in Manhattan. Goldsmith has said he does not expect people to read every word of conceptual texts such as these, but even skimming *Traffic*, a reader can discover an apocalyptic black comedy set in some hellish metropolis of perpetual gridlock where evening rush hour doesn't clear until 2 a.m. and morning rush hour begins at 4 a.m.

Meanwhile, *Weather*, which covers a year's worth of one-minute meteorological reports from 2002-2003, has a more meditative effect as the seasons slowly change, but also features the oddly political interruption of "battlefield" reports on the weather in Baghdad. The recently released *Sports* is the long, desperate burble of the commentary on the longest nine-inning baseball game ever, a 2006 contest between the Yankees and the Red Sox.

Currently, Goldsmith is working on a New York version of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, the German critic's fragmentary collection of quotations from writers discussing Paris's glass-covered passageways, unfinished at his death in 1940.

"It's a massive project of note-taking," Goldsmith said. "... I guess I am a collector of language."

His collecting habit also takes the form of the much respected UbuWeb, a carefully curated digital archive Goldsmith began in 1996 as a place to post conceptual poetry, including visual, concrete and sound poems, and which has expanded to include other forms of conceptual writing, experimental film, video and music, radio and sound art, and criticism. (The website's name is a reference to Alfred Jarry's 1896 play *Ubu Roi*, whose infantile title character is often considered the progenitor of absurdism.) Thanks to bandwidth donated by Art Mob, an experimental Canadian arts archive and server based at York University, the site includes everything from poems by Pablo Picasso to Samuel Beckett's radio plays and sound art pieces by Fluxus, Vito Acconci and Michael Snow, providing a remarkable public source of both historic and contemporary avant-garde material.

"Some people have said regardless of what books I write, the site Ubu is my greatest work. I can live with that," Goldsmith said.

"It uses methods I use in my work, categorizing, organizing. ... Today we are all organizers. We have more files, we have more language and suddenly we all become information managers. We all become kind of like databases ourselves, infatuated with data structure. Organizing it is more important than the data itself," said Goldsmith, who portrays his inventive artistic practice as a version of everyone's daily life, spent busily moving bytes from one pile to another.

Street Poets & Visionaries: Selections from the UbuWeb Collection continues at the Mercer Union, 1286 Bloor St. W., Toronto, until Feb. 14 (416-536-1519 or <http://www.mercerunion.org>, alsoUbu.com).

Taken from telephone poles

Some examples from the UbuWeb collection of anonymous street ephemera:

Pepsi Blue will be cold at 12:00 noon Mon 8/19

William! Black! Can I please have my computer back!? I'll give you the best price for it. Please. You have nothing to gain \$\$\$

My phone number has been changed to ...

I apologize for the inconvenience.

WHERE IS THAT NUTTY ONE-LEGGED SLOB WHEEL CHAIR FREAK NOW???

According to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service 48 million people watch birds. A private research group, the Good Conduct Society, has discovered that certain demographics of Bird Watchers are more sexually active than others. The elderly find that bird watching is not strenuous. And this erotic experience can be enjoyed privately through binoculars. "Most disturbing," said the Society's director Anaida Krok, "are the groups of Bird Watchers seeking vicarious sexual gratification in the woods. Shamelessly, they blatantly observe God's defenceless creatures mating."

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YOU ARE BEING MANIPULATED BY THE MEDIA!!! DON'T BELIEVE WHAT YOU SEE/HEAR/READ!!!

Taken from the airwaves

From Traffic, by Kenneth Goldsmith, Make Now Press, Los Angeles, 2007

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.

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