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FEATURES: ON POETRY

I LOVE SPEECH

The founder of UbuWeb talks about writing after the 20th century.

BY KENNETH GOLDSMITH

[Note from the editors: We first *heard* Kenneth Goldsmith give this paper last week as part of the Presidential Forum at the 2006 Modern Language Association Convention in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Along with several other panels and programs, this Forum considered the role and meaning of sound in poetry. Goldsmith's paper is his take on the Language poetry movement of the 1970s, and includes many comments and allusions to it, nodding to Ron Silliman's essay "The New Sentence" and Robert Grenier's famous dictum from *This* magazine: "I HATE SPEECH." Also, this piece might disorient a reader unaccustomed to reading conceptual writing because it has no discernible narrative or linear sequence. Goldsmith has performed different versions of this piece the world over.]

I am an American poet, and like most Americans, I speak only one language. When asked for a piece for the Poetry Foundation's website, I figured that the last thing the Poetry Foundation (or the rest of the world) needed was more imported American culture (remember the Clash's "I'm So Bored With The U.S.A.?"?). Hence, I've decided to present this paper in English, a language that I have never spoken or written.

Most likely, you can't read a word I'm saying, even though it's your native language. So, we're even: We're both in a situation of not understanding. All we can possibly do is see to the way that the words look instead of what they mean. And by doing so we are all entering into a new relationship to language that permits us to reframe the mundane in the language of the mundane.

For years, I've been working toward a situation like the one we find ourselves in now: one where language is purely formal and concrete; like language itself, this piece is both meaningful and meaningless at the same time. This web page is now thick with sound posing as language.

I could continue and present the rest of this paper in English but I think you get the point. After this rough beginning, you can better understand what I'm trying to do with my work: to approximate the utopian situation we find ourselves in at the moment, one of willful ignorance.

I LOVE SPEECH

Recordings made of Wittgenstein's *Zettel* in German by an English speaker: a language neither read nor understood, so horribly mispronouncing the words that German speakers who it hear don't recognize it as German.

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[Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith \(mp3\)](#)



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...[More >>](#)

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Everyone, absolutely everyone, was tape-recording everyone else. Machinery had already taken over people's sex lives—dildos and all kinds of vibrators—and now it was taking over their social lives, too, with tape recorders and Polaroids. Since I wasn't going out much and was home a lot on the mornings and evenings, I put in a lot of time on the phone gossiping and making trouble and getting ideas from people and trying to figure out what was happening—and taping it all.

The trouble was, it took so long to get a tape transcribed, even when you had somebody working at it full-time. In those days even the typists were making their own tapes.

The beauty of it all is that Cage need do so little—nothing, really—to make this turning of our minds happen. He just opens the window, turns on his tape recorder. Like Thoreau, Cage is a master at simply noticing things.

In 1996, I wrote a book called *Soliloquy* which was every word I spoke and utterance I made for a week, unedited, from the moment I woke up on a Monday morning until the moment I went to bed on Sunday night. When published, it totaled nearly 500 pages.

Since transcribing the *Soliloquy tapes*, I've never heard language in quite the same way. Sometimes, when someone is speaking to me, I'll stop understanding what they're saying and instead begin to hear the formal qualities of their speech—utterances, stumbling, divergent thoughts, and sounds.

When transposed onto the page, it's an extremely disjunctive text—every bit as disjunctive as any work of high modernism. (Stumble "It's an extremely disjunctive book—every bit as disjunctive as any work of modernism"). Theater and movies after *Soliloquy* are inevitably disappointing. I now hear the studied and stilted way that the actors speak: Too clean, too directional, less complex than everyday speech.

Real speech, when paid close attention to, forces us to realize how little one needs to do in order to write. Just paying attention to what is right under our noses—framing, transcription, and preservation—is enough.

The rise of appropriation-based literary practices: Suddenly, 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.

I LOVE SPEECH

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

It is the transcription that makes the writing. How does one transcribe a radio broadcast? Since spoken language contains no punctuation, what choices go into the act of transcription? Does one decide to flow the language as a never-ending stream without punctuation or pause, or does one decide to parse it according to standard rules of grammar? David Antin, for example, never uses punctuation whilst transcribing; instead he connotes pauses and inflection, using graphical space between the words.

The necessity of bad transcription: working to make sure that the pages in the book matched the way the high-school typist had transcribed them, right down to the last spelling mistake. I wanted to do a "bad book," just the way I'd done "bad movies" and "bad art," because when you do something exactly wrong, you always turn up something.

I wish that they would graft an additional device onto the radio—one that would make it possible to record and archive for all time, everything that can be communicated by radio. Later generations would then have the chance of seeing with amazement how an entire population—by making it possible to say what they had to say to the whole world—simultaneously made it possible for the whole world to see that they had absolutely nothing to say.

I'm interested in a valueless practice, in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of "nutritionless" language; I'm also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless.

Like morality, politics seems an unavoidable condition when engaging in the framing of public language and discourse.

I LOVE SPEECH

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 the Middle Ages, composer's songs were routinely printed on broadsides and sold on the street for pennies. One minor composer, however, was clever and included beautifully hand drawn images on his scores. Over the ages, they were framed and preserved, not so much because of the music, but because of how beautiful and distinctive they were as objects.

While his peer's music—printed and distributed in the same form but without any decoration—vanished, this composer's scores remain as the only existing examples of the genre. Hence they are now considered musical classics.

The act of listening has now become the act of archiving. We're more interested in accumulation and preservation than we are in what is being collected.

Rabelais tells of a winter battle when it was so cold that the sounds created during the battle instantly froze upon hitting the air, falling to the ground, never reaching the ears of the combatants. When springtime arrived, these long inaudible sounds began to melt randomly, creating a racket by skewing their original temporal sequences of action. It was suggested that some of the frozen sounds be preserved for later use by packing them in oil and straw, when an objection was made: "Tis a folly to hoard up what we are never like to want, or have always at hand."

If every word spoken daily in New York City were somehow to materialize as a snowflake, each day there would be a blizzard.

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—all methods of disorientation used in order to re-imagine our normative relationship to language.

I LOVE SPEECH

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