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# Kenneth Goldsmith at the White House

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by VANESSA PLACE

## Open Door

By Vanessa Place



**Who:** Kenneth Goldsmith

**What:** The White House Poetry Reading

**When:** Wednesday, May 11, 2011

**Where:** Washington D.C.

*“Open Door” features audio, video, and online media to document dynamic interactions between poetry and its audience. “Open Door” showcases performance, scholarship, and engagement outside the usual boundaries of slams, workshops, and book publications. This week: “The Death of the Text”: Kenneth Goldsmith at the White House.*

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In the fore- and after- play of the recent White House poetry reading, what’s been missed is aesthetics. That is, a serious conversation about whether this was a significant aesthetic event—bearing in mind our friend Wittgenstein, who knew that  $1 + 1 = (1) 2$ , *i.e.*, there’s no aesthetics sans ethics, and versa is always vice. That it was a political event is blindingly obvious, from the banal objection to Common’s exhorting the disaffected to be less so, to the equally empty argument that it is the duty of the avant garde not to “play minstrel” for the Man, both evidencing the kind of essentialism that makes ideology a game everyone can play, given they bring their own sock-puppet. I don’t have to bother with those who would read Common as subversive, for they are the same ones who still seem gobsmacked that the President is still black. The ones who cry “Tom” turn a strangely deaf ear both to the historically parodic and complex role of the American minstrel and to the way their accusation plays its own sad scripted part. For is not one of the basic rules of American ideology that one must always maintain that one does not have to play the game—that one can step outside as a critical act of critique, as if critique were not a selling-point, as if there were an outside to which to step. We are all of us driven by the prospect of the Great Outdoors and the conceit of free will, including Mr. Stepin Fetchit, who was, as you know, a complicated character who failed to fetch. Whether the White House poetry reading was a significant aesthetic event depends on what one wanted to be delivered. Or whether. The latter, those who wanted to be delivered, were perhaps given this via the odoriferous wisdom emanating from Rita Dove or the exhortations to uniform individualism—each of us a precious snowflake—trumpeted by Collins and Common. This is the language of the lyric, that paean to the one that is also the predicate unit of capital and Resurrection. The former, those who wanted delivery, could do no better than Kenneth Goldsmith, who did the defter move of eviscerating the conversation. His reading was a self-described “three ways of looking at The Brooklyn Bridge—before & after—spanning a century and a half,” beginning with Walt Whitman’s 1856 poem, “Crossing Brooklyn Ferry,” moving to Hart Crane’s 1930 work, “To Brooklyn Bridge,” and concluding with excerpts from his 2007 book, *Traffic*, transcribed radio traffic reports. To excerpt from the excerpts:

“ What is it, then, between us?

What is the count of the scores or hundreds of years between us?  
 Whatever it is, it avails not—distance avails not, and place avails not.  
 —Whitman

O Sleepless as the river under thee,  
 Vaulting the sea, the prairies dreaming sod,  
 Unto us lowliest sometime sweep, descend  
 And of the curvship lend a myth to God.  
 —Crane

Right now you've also got jam-ups on the Brooklyn Bridge, bumper-to-bumper  
 to Brooklyn but the lower roadway is wide open. The Brooklyn Bridge is  
 swamped.  
 —Goldsmith

From to river as bridge to bridge as river to bridge as bridge, the movement in the triptych goes from Man as nature's capital to the capital of Nature to the nature of Capital. In Whitman, the poet is God like Nature is God, the one that sees each in each, and in each, the same multifarious reach. In Crane, the poet serves, like the bridge, to tether earth and air, the breath that is here arching out-there. In Goldsmith, it is just the bridge that is. There is no ontology beyond facticity. Words are things like people are things. Things to be counted, if not weighed. Put another way, the singular soul that collectively appears to Whitman is sublimated in the symbology of Crane and gutted in Goldsmith's gutter-work. I have written elsewhere about the discourse of the slave found in conceptual poetry being the literal reverse of the Lacanian master's discourse, wherein pure repetition is the failure of communication, and the failure of communication is the end-game of the language game. In other words, each of these texts is about something other than what it is about, they are, loosely, allegorical, but two of them are allegorical of specific things and one is allegorical *of*. You tell me of what, which will tell me what of you. Again, remember Wittgenstein: "The proposition is a picture of reality." Put another way, *as if*.

The easiest thing to comment upon here was the immediate institutionalization of conceptualism. By casting a piece of conceptual poetry in its thematic lineage, Goldsmith deftly made issues of form, etc., seemingly (or seamlessly) immaterial—this is a poem about the Brooklyn Bridge like that is a poem about the Brooklyn Bridge, we are all of us poems about the Brooklyn Bridge, or at least its geography. Epic poems, as a matter of fact, which are so very American, at least in their ontological sentiment. Like our continent, we do go on. (This is the common aspiration of every soul and institution.) And this is where it gets even more interesting, not because of this immediate act of institutionalization (as such, Goldsmith's White House performance could be looked at as a

piece about institutionalization itself—for the question is never whether one can dodge the bullet, but rather where one chooses to catch it), not even because that after the White House poetry performance, the question whether conceptual poetry is poetry *qua* poetry can no longer be asked by those in long pants, but because the reading displayed the death of the text. For although the Author's been bones for forty-four years now, we still saw the little-c creator—the one that peeps through page and poem—revivified by Alison Knowles reading barefoot from a dot-matrix printout and Rita Dove chewing syllables like salted caramels, oh, the sweet irrelevancy of any picturesque existence. And then there was Kenny, not being ironic, for irony is a foolish and sentimental gesture, betraying as it does, belief, and although we Americans are a foolish and sentimental people, pinning our hopes on hope and salvation (ethical or ethereal) via the singular soul, but not textually *being* at all. The text is dead. It is incapable of being read, though it lends itself to contemplation. Contra Barthes, there's no text that is an imitation of lost signification, no tissue to be tatted or tattooed, apropos of Bernard of Clairvaux, there's no need for *imitatio*, which is the cheaper (and consumptive) act of modeling oneself after something else. There is only radical mimesis. Radical meaning root. It is the thing itself that speaks as the thing itself (the traffic report) that is not itself (a traffic report). What you make of it depends on you, not it. At best, it is a Rorschach test without a codex. Better than best, it is nothing more than dumb materiality, a mute object that can serve, like other hunks of stuff, our man-made need for talismans. In other words, the text says nothing but what is fed through it. The text is machine, not mirror. In this sense, text is screen: not a mirror *of* us, but *for* us, and thus, us for it.

We currently live a sculpted existence, fashioning ourselves the way we consider fashionable, but only in the language game that is not received, like in most lyric, but is purely received, like in Goldsmith's work, like the work itself. There's no way out, no above from which to judge, no Baudelairean below—Facebook is not a metaphor. It is, and it is likeness. I like this. These are my interests, my dates of graduation, my friends, my family, where I've been and where I come from, what's my weather, how's my kitten, how cute are my kids, how was my run, do I like it like that, 25 random things about me, calculated algorithmically. So I can interface with more texts like me. The text is dead. It is a thing without qualities. Though it does reveal the obscenity of the special soul. And once we see this lack of subjective significance, we can perhaps begin to think about the subjective nature of our word objects. Moving, maybe, from critique to analysis, to, maybe, something else. Because bridges are also for burning. Finally, Wittgenstein: "The proposition is a model of the reality as we think it is." Finally, Goldsmith: "Remember how bad it was yesterday? It's starting again."

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*Who is Vanessa Place? "Vanessa Place is writing terminal poetry." —Rae Armantrout*

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