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Always Almost Obsolete, Always Almost New

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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Conceptual Writing is automatic. It operates most efficiently when machines perpetuate it subconsciously. Conceptual Writing is infinitely flexible. It is obvious yet discreet, insidious yet desirable, powerful yet pathetic. It is despised, yet sought after. It is ubiquitous yet specific. It is both centralized and dispersed. The medium for Conceptual Writing is information, which is a mere receptacle for quantification — a domain within which information is both extracted and deployed. It is the grid again — the return of the Cartesian, but with a vengeance. This time, roving crosshairs — not unlike those of missile guidance systems — have been included. Conceptual Writing doesn't have the pretense to find poetry all that important; in subsuming literature to the statistical, it announces the obsolescence of expression.

Conceptual Writing is evaluated through an entirely modernized vocabulary; no longer is it a matter of versification or enjambment, but instead is now computed, calibrated, assessed, predicted, optimized. Conceptual Writing is mobile. Like a roaming searchlight, Conceptual Writing brings certain linguistic regions to visibility depending on particular informational categories while others are suppressed, invisible, or ignored. It is a literature in continuous flux, diligently recording the fulminating processes of the web: Borges' map of infinite information, only set in motion.

Conceptual Writing is the desire to make literature simultaneous with the irrationalities and vicissitudes of the literary establishment. It is the aspiration to a type of stability assured by mechanisms that enable immediate retaliation or response to sudden change, suited to the digital environment which grows increasingly flexible, increasingly ephemeral, increasingly mutable.

The network forms the cognition of Conceptual Writing, determines its vision, seeps into its subconscious. It is so basic as to be literature's assumed, uncritically deployed mode of operation, its instinctual reflex, its aspiration.

Conceptual Writing is engineered and totally artificial, serving simultaneously as reassurance, therapy and panacea for literary paranoias. It is the solution to a desperation born of the constant threat of terminal decline.

Conceptual Writing signifies the need to understand, quantify, record, regurgitate, manipulate, and coerce the process, circumstances, and flow that determine thinkership. It is a meticulously assembled apparatus. In order to make its processes intelligible and useful, it has canonized data. Conceptual Writing inaugurates the triumph of the statistical.

Conceptual Writing deforms what used to be considered The Literary. Not only have the traditional distinctions between public / private, inside / outside, and near / far been eclipsed by this far more efficient, rapid, ubiquitous, and “invisible” literature of informational analysis, saturation, and regulation; in the wake of Conceptual Writing, poetry has been surreptitiously mutated, topologically reconfigured, systematically coerced, while still (innocently) believing in “Literature’s” former authority.

Just as industrial production discharges effluent by-products, so does the Conceptual Writing generate its own type of residue. As language is increasingly treated as a resource to be exploited, processed, and manipulated, and as the forces of measurement become increasingly accelerated, non-expressive, and non-locale based, so must language be discarded, abandoned, expended. Much of the new writing is generated by default rather than intent, creating a new literary landscape, comprised of residual words. The most visible and obvious manifestation of this residuum is the generation of an unfamiliar literary landscape that, when viewed under more traditional criteria, appears dissolute, attenuated, entropic, and amorphous. As it operates through logistical networks, mechanized protocols, pre-ordained structures, Conceptual Writing becomes rapidly suffused by its own residue, resulting in a ubiquitous wasteland of boredom.

How totalizing is Conceptual Writing? Its focus is inherently short lived, inherently desperate, inherently capricious. Conceptual Writing is constantly searching for the next realm of exploitation, the next window of opportunity. In exacerbating instabilities for its own benefit, in artificially accelerating the cycles of decline and obsolescence, and in constantly shifting its focus from one domain to another, Conceptual Writing inevitably produces gaps, contradictions, perhaps even moments of freedom situated not so much outside but alongside and within control.

Conceptual Writing is still imperfect. Engineered as a type of life support system deployed with varying degrees of effectiveness, it represents the corporate desire for its own type of sustainability. Yet to what degree can this system be perfected? To what degree are the complexities and unpredictabilities of literature beyond its control?

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