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If I were to raise my children the way I write my books, I would have been thrown in jail long ago

by KENNETH GOLDSMITH

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[responding to Alan Gilbert, Mark Nowak, Linh Dinh, and Martin Earl]

A common accusation hurled at Conceptual Writing is that it is elitist and out of touch, toiling away in its ivory tower, appealing to the few who are in-the-know. And I'd agree that a lot of "difficult" work has been made under the mantle of populism only to be rejected by their intended audience as indecipherable, or worse, irrelevant. But **Conceptual Writing is truly populist**. Because this writing makes its intentions clear from the outset, telling you exactly what it is before you read it, there's no way you can't understand it. My books make a case for this: who, for example, cannot understand a book that is a transcription of every word broadcast during a complete baseball game? Or a day's newspaper that has been transcribed word for word? Or a record of what one man said over the course of a week? It's very simple. Anyone can understand these books. But then the real question emerges: why? And with that question, we move into conceptual territory that moves us away from the object and into the realm of speculation. At that point, we could easily throw the book away and carry on with a discussion, a move Conceptual Writing applauds: the book as a platform to leap off into thought. We move from assuming a readership to embracing a *thinkership*. **Conceptual Writing is, indeed, a form of Documentary Poetics**, a school of writing that we feel very sympathetic with.

This is a poetics of realism, reminiscent of the documentary impulse behind Zola's *Les Rougon-Macquart* series where in the guise of dime-store potboilers, Zola took on a massive project on how best to fully describe in full French life during the Second French Empire. From the farmer to the priest to the food markets to the department store, Zola claimed that these books transcended mere fiction; his intention was "strictly naturalist, strictly physiologist," a claim closer to de Certeau than to Balzac. Inspired by Zola, Conceptual Writing is a realism beyond realism: it's hyperrealist, a literary photorealism, an embodied and enacted simulacrum. Charles Reznikoff and Frank O'Hara strove for realism, but they were too constructed, too precious and still too invested in authorial subjectivity; we prefer the repulsive Documentary Poetics of Vanessa Place and the

ugliness of real speech in Andy Warhol's *a, A novel*.

Conceptual Writing is a political writing; it just prefers to use someone else's politics. All language is pre-encoded with political, historical, and social DNA. We feel that writers try too hard to construct meaning when words are already so loaded, so meaningful. Instead, it's the framing of someone else's words and thoughts that create meaning for us. By pre-loading — constructing a flawless writing machine before the writing starts — it alleviates the burden of success or failure, ego or the mere small-mindedness of authorship that comes with conventional evaluations of writing. So that, as Craig Dworkin states, 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.

In the self-reflexive use of appropriated language, uncreative writing embraces the inherent and inherited politics of the borrowed words: far be it for conceptual writers 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?). No matter what we do with language, it will be expressive. How could it be otherwise? In fact, we feel it is impossible working with language not to express oneself. If we back off and let the material do it's work, we might even in the end be able to surprise and delight ourselves with the results.

Conceptual Writing is a-ethical and wouldn't dare make the presumption that it has the power to affect the world for better or worse. Conceptual Poetry makes nothing happen. Conceptual Writing is the Switzerland of poetry. We're stuck in neutral. **We believe in the moral weightlessness of art;** If I were to raise my children the way I write my books, I would have been thrown in jail long ago. Life and art are different things and the preservation of this precious space is one of our most important missions. Art is the only place left in culture where you try on various salacious attitudes without fear of reprisal. When artists become accountable for ethics in their practice, they fall under the same scrutiny — and are held to the same moral standards — as politicians and bankers, a regrettable situation.

Conceptual Writing is identity-based; it just prefers to use someone else's identity.

Conceptual Writing is democratic, utopian, multi-cultural, and transnational. By relinquishing the burden of reading — and thereby a readership — we can begin to think of Conceptual Writing as a new Esperanto, a body of literature able to be understood by anyone without having to be saddled with the act of translation. If you get the concept (and the concepts

are blindingly simple) — regardless of your geographic location, income level, education or social status — you can engage with this writing. It's open to all.

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. What we're doing has been done decades ago in the art and music worlds. We're just bringing those ideas, for the first time, into the writing world. And, yes, Brion Gysin's statement that writing is fifty years behind painting, still holds true.

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