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JUNE/JULY/AUG 2008

Uncreative Writing

To write the unreadable book may seem a strange quest, but for poet and archivist Kenneth Goldsmith, it's the future of literature.

BY RADHIKA JONES



If Kenneth Goldsmith were writing this column—well, for starters, he wouldn't write it; he'd turn in a piece of found art that had nothing to do with anybody's book collection, or he'd transcribe our conversation, with all the *ums* and *uhs* (mostly mine—he's on the Oscar Wilde end of the articulateness spectrum), or he'd plagiarize some other column and transform it into a sound poem by singing it and then post it to UbuWeb, the online repository for the avant-garde arts that he founded in 1996. His position on writing is as follows: Modernism and postmodernism are over, and the literary arts have entered a new technology-driven paradigm. Originality is out the window. "Writers don't need to write anything more," he says. "They just need to manage the language that already exists."

There is something utterly intoxicating about this idea. At least, that's how I felt hearing it from Goldsmith on a recent visit to his Chelsea loft, where he lives with his wife, the video artist and painter Cheryl Donegan, and their two sons. Perhaps what sold me was the realization I had, in the midst of Goldsmith explaining his monumental tome *Day* (2003)—for which he retyped an entire edition of the *New York Times*, including all the ad copy, cover to cover—that to be Kenneth Goldsmith is to have vanquished writer's block, because there are countless texts just waiting to be retyped. It's just as reassuring to hear that Goldsmith doesn't actually expect anyone to read *Day* or his recently completed American trilogy, *Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007), and *Sports* (2008)—transcriptions of, respectively, a year's worth of radio weather reports; a twenty-four-hour traffic cycle, every ten minutes from 1010 wins; and the radio broadcast of a long and dull Yankees game, ads included. "You can't read these books," he says, with ebullience. "I can't read them. People tell me they do, but they're absolutely impossible." He just wants us to think about them. "These are the things we don't think about," he says, "and they're very profound when we do." In Goldsmith's projects, the conception of the work also inscribes its meaning—together with the way each time-consuming endeavor changes him. He imparts similar lessons in his Uncreative Writing class at the University of Pennsylvania, where students are directed to transcribe, plagiarize, thief, and appropriate, all in the name of learning to write. "If we retyped Kerouac," he says, "we'd learn much more about Kerouac than by writing in the style of Kerouac."

It might seem that this devotee of the digital age, whose oeuvre is freely available online, would be the last person to keep technological dinosaurs like books and LPs in his home. Not so. "I'm forty-seven," Goldsmith protests. "I love things." Plus, he says, inhabiting the new paradigm does not require that we get rid of all our stuff. "The twenty-first century is invisible," he says. "It's wireless. We thought we'd be living in *The Jetsons*, but no, all the changes are invisible. So we need to live with our books and our old furniture." His collection of vinyl—thousands of records ranging from *Neil Young*, which he once rolled joints on, to boxed sets of opera—has its own saga of acquisition, deaccession, and resurrection. "When I was in junior high, I loved Black Sabbath," Goldsmith says. "And then in high school, I loved the Grateful Dead, so I sold all my Black Sabbath records. At the end of high school, I loved punk, so I sold all my Grateful Dead records. And then in college, I got into experimental stuff and new music, so I sold all my punk records. And then I had to go back and rebuy everything, because I love them all so much."

Goldsmith's current reading is focused on his work in progress, a rewriting of Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* for twentieth-century New York. The parallels abound—he's using Robert Moses for Haussmann and Robert Mapplethorpe for Baudelaire. But it was his encounter in the early '90s with Stein, Joyce, and Pound, followed by his discovery of the Language poets, that turned him from a career in visual art (he trained as a sculptor at risd) to a focus on innovative writing. His shelves tell the tale: The modernists are well represented, along with James and Zola, writers Goldsmith prizes for their documentary qualities. In keeping with his own artistic practice, he cherishes most those texts that court their readers least. "My favorite books are the ones I don't read," he says. "*The Making of Americans*. Who's ever read that whole thing? But I love it. If I had to get rid of every book on the shelf, I would keep *Finnegans Wake* and *The Making of Americans* because I know they'll last forever."

The gems of Goldsmith's collection, however, are the volumes he inherited from his grandfather, an attorney who went bankrupt investing in Cuban sugar fields but never sold his books. Among them are gorgeous leather-bound editions of Shakespeare and *The Canterbury Tales*; Obelisk editions of Henry Miller, marked "Not to be imported into England and the U.S.A.," which Goldsmith's grandfather smuggled into the country; and a small stash of erotica, including the Grove edition of *My Secret Life*—just hundreds and hundreds of pages of Victorian erotica," Goldsmith laughs, "as intense and wildly useless as my books." He also has his grandfather's copy of *Finnegans Wake*, complete with the bill of sale. "He bought it on September 9, 1965, at Doubleday on Fifth Avenue, when he was absolutely reduced to being a drunk and packing a gun and collecting rents," Goldsmith says. "I love the idea that he went on his lunch hour—I'm sure it must have been lunch hour—and bought a copy of *Finnegans Wake*."

Goldsmith's own collecting focuses on found posters and flyers, which he's been gathering for the past twenty-five years. It started with a series of "Good Neighbor Free Ads" he found at a Citibank on Grand Street—slips of paper with typed messages advertising swaps. His favorite, dated 1990, reads: "Are you a good cook who needs a ride to Kennedy or LaGuardia? For three dinners with prime rib, loin of lamb, or filet mignon and one selection of vegetable, I'll take you to LaGuardia. Five gets you to Kennedy."

"No one should collect anything," reads another of Goldsmith's found texts. Nevertheless, he's still adding to his trove. As for his own books, despite his repeated warnings against them, he's eloquent on the subject of their aesthetic appeal. *Soliloquy* (2001)—a record of his every utterance for a week during 1996—he describes as "pretty juicy" and potentially of sociological interest down the line: "Imagine having a week of a normal person's language from 1850. Wouldn't that be great?" *Traffic* is "absolute textual gridlock. It's all about things not moving," while *Weather*, "a classical narrative of the seasons," is movement incarnate. And *Day* all the news the *Times* saw fit to print on a slow summer Friday back in 2000—is, Goldsmith says, quite simply "the greatest book ever written. It's got everything in it. It's got passion, it's got love, it's got war, it's got hate, it's got victory, it's got defeat, it's got murder, it's got lust. And it's got stock charts. Remember? They used to publish the stock charts."

Radhika Jones is managing editor of the *Paris Review*.

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