

July 2008

Poet Kenneth Goldsmith encourages his students to plagiarize. Maybe that's because stealing is making him famous By Jason McBride



Truman Capote famously slammed Jack Kerouac's On the Road, claiming, "That's not writing; that's typing." It's an insult that New York–based conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith would take as a compliment. His work, which has been praised by *Publishers* Weekly for its "near-hypnotic pleasures," depends almost exclusively on appropriation, plagiarism and recontextualization. For Day, he retyped every single word-including ads and stock tables—from the September 1, 2000, edition of *The New York Times*. His most recent book, 2007's Traffic, is a compilation of N.Y.–area radio traffic reports. Like some impossible spawn of Andy Warhol, Gertrude Stein and William Gibson, Goldsmith abhors the very idea of traditional imaginative fiction: "Do we really need another 'creative' poem about the way the sunlight is hitting your writing table?" Guess not.

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You teach Uncreative Writing at the University of Pennsylvania. What's on the syllabus?

How to plagiarize, appropriate, steal, lie and cheat—things the students are already good at.

They're marked down if they show a shred of creativity or originality. They love it.

Why do you think other writers are so hung up on originality?

I don't know. It's something the music and art worlds dealt with long ago. Nobody wants Britney to really sing. She lip-synchs and everyone's happy. Marcel Duchamp put the question of what art is to rest almost 100 years ago. But literature is always 50 years behind painting.

Your work *Soliloquy* is a transcription of every word you said in the span of a week. Aren't your books tedious to produce?

I find them very pleasurable to produce. It's relaxing to retype and transcribe. I absolutely adore it. It's easy. I'll never have writer's block.

Do you ever miss more conventional literary pursuits, such as crafting the perfect metaphor?

No, but then I wasn't trained as a writer. That's like asking Matthew Barney, "Do you ever miss drawing a beautiful face?"

What are you working on now?

Rewriting Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*. I'm transposing the whole thing onto the New York of the 20th century.

How long do you think that will take?

About 15 years.

Kenneth Goldsmith performs as part of the Scream Literary Festival on July 10.

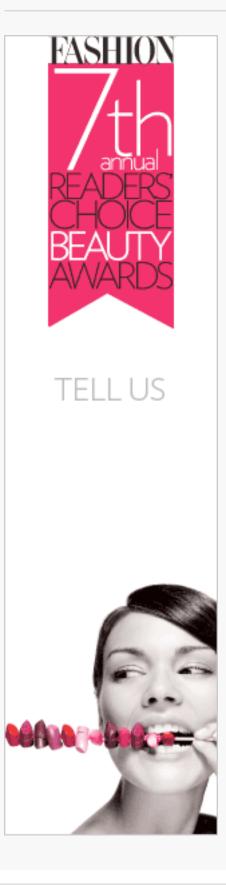


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