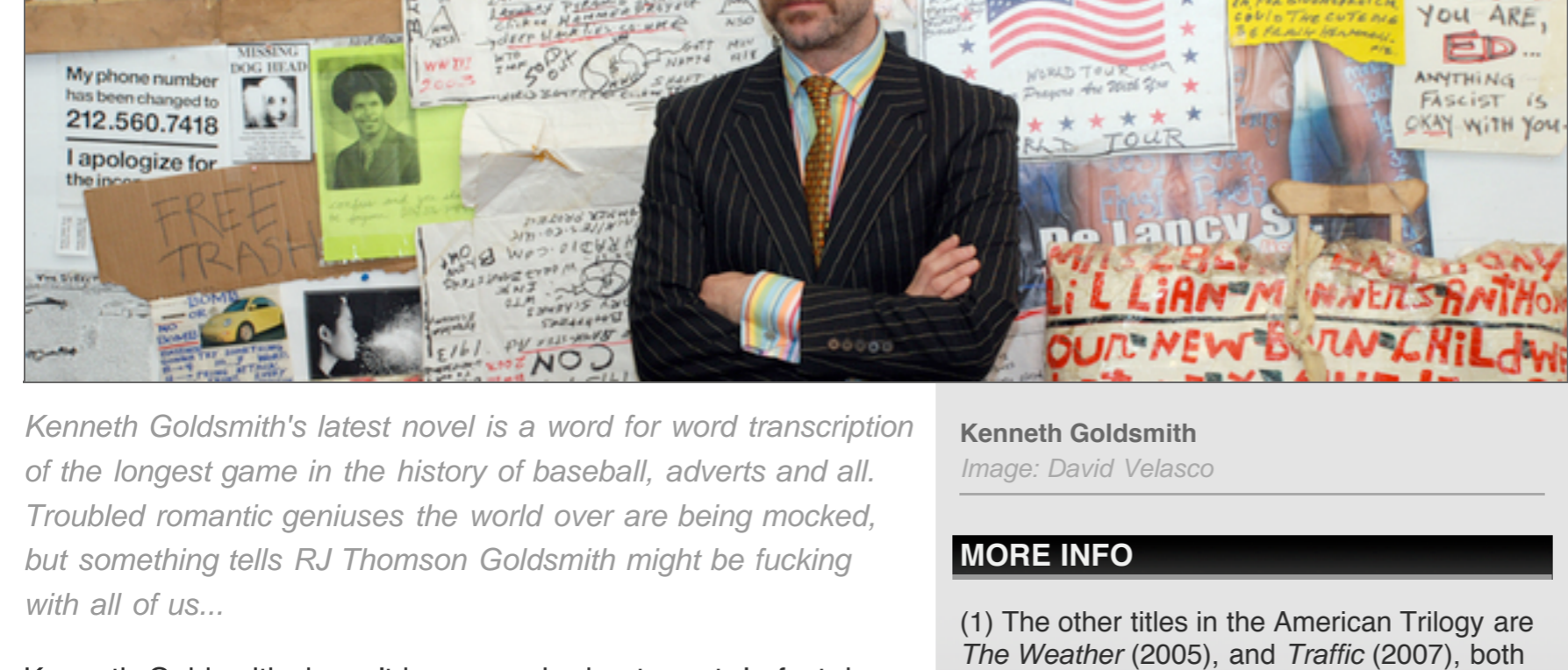


KENNETH GOLDSMITH ON UNCREATIVE WRITING

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Kenneth Goldsmith's latest novel is a word for word transcription of the longest game in the history of baseball, adverts and all. Troubled romantic geniuses the world over are being mocked, but something tells RJ Thomson Goldsmith might be fucking with all of us...

Kenneth Goldsmith doesn't know much about sport. In fact, he tells me 'I know nothing about sport'. So how did he come to be writing an epic tome titled *Sports*, as part of his ambitiously-titled American Trilogy?(1)

The explanation lies in years of building a career at the very forefront of literary practice. Goldsmith trained as a sculptor, but after using more and more text in his work he made a clean break in the mid-nineties and became a full-time writer. He says he was quickly accepted as working with 'a new kind of literature', and it's not hard to see why people saw his work as being a departure from established modes.

His first full-length work was the not-so-catchily-titled *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* (1997), for which, wait for it, he recorded every word or phrase he heard that rhymed with 'r' over a three-year period. It's a big book.

Reading this you could be forgiven for thinking Goldsmith's approach is incredibly dry, but there are a couple of things I should signpost to do him justice. The first is that this is billed as 'conceptual writing', so the idea behind the text is as important as the text itself. That's not to say his stuff isn't for reading, but certainly a great deal of its value is in allowing people to riff on the very thought that someone actually did this stuff.

But the works are also highly invested with Goldsmith's personality. I first encountered Goldsmith reading from *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* at the excellent Instal festival in Glasgow in February, and his easy-going sense of irony added considerably to the enjoyment of the performance, and the impression that these accumulated fragments hold up as rather wonderful poetry. Cheekily, the last 'phrase' in *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* is an entire DH Lawrence short story that just so happens to end on an 'r'.

Despite his laid-back manner, Goldsmith clearly considers his practice to be about the most relevant currently being produced. His work has evolved rapidly over the past ten years, consistent mostly in its uncompromising approach. *Soliloquy* (2001) is a record of every word Goldsmith spoke for a week, but none of those he heard. You can interpret the concept as far as you like, but one of *Soliloquy's* enduring qualities is that it is frequently hilarious – the scene in which Goldsmith tries to persuade his wife to give him a blowjob despite the running dictaphone particularly comes to mind. On another tack, *Day* (2003) transcribed every word (again, including all the ads) of the *New York Times* from 10 September 2001; love and loss, tragedy and comedy, the universal and the personal are all there in force, along with a fair selection of discount furniture offers.

In conversation Goldsmith maintains the good-natured humour of his stage persona, and gives no impression of being a 'tortured artist'. It's possible that this is because times have changed, and our clichéd expectations of writers with them, but it could also simply be because Goldsmith is enjoying being an artist at the top of his game.(2)

RT: Literature has often been said to have been overtaken by other forms of art in terms of its experimental qualities. Do you see the work you're doing as reclaiming that vanguard position for literature?

KG: Absolutely. In 1959 Brion Gysin said that poetry was 50 years behind painting.(3) And I think that's even more true today. Whereas other forms of art accepted sampling, appropriation and tactics like that, literature is still invested in prioritising the 'true' and 'subjective' self – which of course other artists did away with a century ago.

With that context in mind, to what extent is there a political dimension to your approach to poetics?

Absolutely. It says that anybody can do this. John Cage was attacked.(4) They said: 'John Cage, anybody can do what you do.' And John Cage said, 'Yes. But nobody does it.' So I think it's a similar thing: Cage said that all sound is music; I say all words are poetry – to be made by anybody, not just somebody with a Masters in Fine Arts.

Are you ever tempted to get help transcribing?

Oh, there's no money in this. I can't pay anybody. And in a sense, in transcription everyone has their unique style. If you and I were to transcribe an identical conversation we would transcribe it completely differently. And so this is a validation of this kind of writing: people say that this isn't writing; it's merely transcription; but in fact it is very unique and individual writing.

How do you feel about your position within literature?

Literature is a field that's so dusty it needs to be brought up to date. Somebody's got to do it. It's not very hard, but I don't really see anybody out there doing it. So look, let's bring literature up to date with the rest of the world. We're very far behind.

I love literature; that's why I'm so invested in making it contemporary. It just needs a bit of a... loving push.

Are you optimistic for the state of culture?

Oh absolutely. I'm so optimistic; it's such an incredible time to be living in. I think postmodernism really tried to get into a lot of the things we're into now. But what's really moving the thing is technology, and the true wonder of the technological moment we're in, the true power.

Now, if writing doesn't reflect the influence of technology, I don't think that writing can be called contemporary. It has to address this radically new environment we're in, and I think quite frankly we're at the most profound moment and the most important moment for culture since modernism. Suddenly writing has met its equivalent to when painting met photography.

What do you feel are the greatest challenges facing artists in 2008? Is it all technology? Is it not so much a challenge as an opportunity?

Well I think everything's been changed. I think artists now have to renegotiate distribution and representation of their own work: every artist is a post-production studio, for the first time ever. Geographic displacement: it doesn't seem to matter where you live. God, everything's up for grabs right now.

You've spoken about the importance of getting the concept right. I've personally found reading your work to be very stimulating on a word-to-word basis, but is there a danger it will lose some of its shock value as people become more accustomed to similar forms? And is it even meant to be shocking?

I think an artist is obliged to reflect the time in which they're living. An attitude like that implies obsolescence, and I'm sure ten years from now my rhetoric will sound incredibly dated. And you know, that's a trade-off I'm willing to make: I leave eternity for somebody else. [The way Goldsmith managed to put this last line, dripping with irony yet somehow sincere, isn't something I'm going to be able to replicate here, but needs to be acknowledged.]

Your own practice has developed considerably over the time you've been working; I imagine the same will happen over the next ten years. Do you have any areas of interest for the foreseeable future; have you got any projects on the horizon?

In a broader sense, I come from a culture of paper, books, vinyl; I come from a culture of things. Quite frankly, I'm just a bridge. Although I say my works are appropriated, they're all authored – they've got my name on it. They're still published in books. I think there are a lot of problems between what I say and what I do, and that reflects my age. The future really belongs to anonymous writers writing for anonymous readers: people who are writing programmes for machines to read, for other machines to read; I think this whole thing is going to be pushed much further. I'm just a bridge between the old and the new.

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(1) The other titles in the American Trilogy are *The Weather* (2005), and *Traffic* (2007), both of which were also 'uncreative' transcription exercises. Together they form what Goldsmith described to me as 'a linguistic portrait of the banality of Western civilisation'.

(2) There's even more to Goldsmith than his fascinating written output. He teaches at the University of Pennsylvania, and is the editor of [UbuWeb](#), the most comprehensive collection of avant-garde poetry video and music online. It's massive, and filled with great stuff, so you're advised to take a look. He has also had a weekly show on free radio station WFMU since 1997. The show serves as an extension of his writing projects (though he also plays killer tunes), and his DJ name is Kenny G. I don't think you can footnote a footnote, so I guess I have to say here that Kenny G is also the name of a god-awful yet internationally famous saxophone player. Goldsmith is in on the joke.

(3) Brion Gysin was a painter and writer, and a major influence on the Beat Generation and their successors. William S Burroughs identified Gysin as the inventor of the cut-up technique, a kind of literary collage-making many others including Burroughs have since used.

(4) John Cage was an experimental American composer, probably best known for '4'33", a work named after its duration, during which time no notes are played. There's a great vid of it being performed on [UbuWeb](#), you can see it [here](#).

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