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## Introduction to Focus: **Uncreative Writing: What Are You Calling Art?**

**Doug Nufer, Focus Editor**

Conceptual writing has been thought of as an afterthought to conceptual art. And yet, writers deployed strategies of appropriation and re-contextualization long before Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal as sculpture. Centos made up of fragments of other works, poems built on the pure meaninglessness of sight or sound, and procedure-riddled texts where language play trumps sense anticipated and developed this tradition. In their anthology *Against Expression*, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith take a broadly inclusive view to present this genre. For this *ABR* Focus, I would also like to concentrate on a subset of the genre that is sometimes used interchangeably with the term for the whole: uncreative writing. Uncreative writing is the appropriation of previously produced material, taking something out of its original context and putting it forth as art by reproducing it in another context.

More than anyone, Goldsmith has made a career of making work that defines what conceptual writing can be, and of defining it with incisive essays and catchy remarks. A former visual artist who has advertised himself as “being boring,” he is the author of several books that have been branded as Poetry, even though there may be not a line in any of these typically recognized as poetry. After the very creative *No. III 2.7.93-10.20.96* (1997) and *Fidget* (2000), he plunged full-bore into uncreativity with *Soliloquy* (2001), a transcription of everything he said in a week. Then came *Day* (2003), a reproduction of one issue of *The New York Times*. His trilogy, *The Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007), and *Sports*, (2008), re-published radio broadcasts. Aside from the anthology with Dworkin and his essay collection *Uncreative Writing*, he’s the founder and editor of UbuWeb. Critical writing about his work abounds, despite a rather astonishing phenomenon: his books are, in most cases, impossible to read all the way through. They may be more fun to write about than to read, but what distinguishes them for me is a sequence of responses: first, the idea is intriguing (e.g., a re-publication of the accounts of a product

of Major League Baseball without the express written consent of the commissioner of baseball), but then the idea seems unlikely to stick beyond a few minutes, until, hours later, I’m still reading. Finishing is beside the point. It’s possible to appreciate what he’s doing and to think and, well, fight about these works without reading every last word.

This quality of being ultimately unreadable or readable in the conventional way doesn’t apply to all conceptual or uncreative writing. The books considered here by Robert Fitterman and Simon Morris may defy conventions, but I would have felt cheated if I hadn’t finished them. As for Mathew Timmons’s credit history (if not his search engine-engineered work), well, that’s another story, as is Vanessa Place’s compendium of criminal case histories.

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### ***The arrival of these critical volumes comes at a critical time for conceptual and uncreative writing.***

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I’m pleased to welcome recent publications by Fitterman and Place, whose *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009) must have set some kind of record for garnering reviews: so many more words were written about it, compared to how many words were in it. *Notes* is a provocative introduction to *Against Expression*, Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius*, and *Uncreative Writing*. Even though followers of the genre read much of this material when it appeared on blogs, websites, and elsewhere, the arrival of these critical volumes comes at a critical time for conceptual and uncreative writing. For one thing, despite the reality of art being subject to influence and the technology that facilitates the sharing of works, practicing artists have rarely been so threatened as they are now by non-artists who, by hook or crook or inheritance, hold a copyright. For another, despite the availability of information on this (or any) subject, there’s a tendency for cultural movements to be unrecognized or simply ignored until they are

documented by a university press, commercial house, or even some so-called “paper of record.”

Consider the reception of the citation-built *Reality Hunger* (2010) by David Shields. Review after review made no mention of David Markson, whose novels set the contemporary standard for works that are composed as mosaics from lines of other books. Shields himself acknowledged Markson in an interview, but in the parallel universe of daily newspapers and glossy magazines, appropriation was something new. *The New York Times* might notice Kenneth Goldsmith for a day, but for *Day*?

Meanwhile in my parallel universe, the people who write about conceptual and uncreative writing tend to be those who have some stake in it. Although this may be common for any field of endeavor, I looked for people from a variety of backgrounds to respond to the peculiar challenges that this writing poses, including reviewers who are new to the game with those who are well aware of it. Above arguments of fair use vs. copyright infringement and the problems of sorting out a genre that puts work done by an intense level of constraint-driven creative thought (e.g., *Eunoia* [2001] by Christian Bök) in the bin with work done by an arduous process of scanning and cutting and pasting (e.g., *Day*), looms an essential question for anyone who would explain this stuff: isn’t it just bullshit?

What is art? Is that urinal a sculpture just because Duchamp says it is? These are questions that have been around forever, and now, thanks to a new burst of activity that strikes many as blatantly fraudulent if not merely preposterous, issues that visual artists have long dealt with have come to the world of creative and uncreative writing.

*Doug Nufer knows and likes many of these people in the conceptual writing world, and although he’s flattered to have had his novel Never Again identified as conceptual in the appendix of Notes on Conceptualisms, he’s not so sure about that.*

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## **Looking at Blindness: The Double Ascendancy of Conceptual Art and Writing**

**Jen Graves**

Last year, I decided *not* to visit Robert Smithson’s classic work of land art, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), before writing about it. Instead, I substituted a visit with a story, told to me by a curator friend over dinner on a sidewalk café in Seattle. She went to *Spiral Jetty* several years ago in an exhausted state; her father had recently died, and at the end of the trip to his funeral, she tagged on a drive out to the *Jetty*, which is notoriously difficult to find. Right on cue, she found herself lost. She had a hard time distinguishing jetties; there are real, non-art ones in that same area on the Great Salt Lake, and the ground is rough and unmarked. She got out of the rented SUV and still wasn’t sure she was in the right place—until she found a camera lens cap in the dirt at the mouth of the path, the unmistakable mark of an art tourist.

I embedded this appropriated story in my own essay rather than my own memoir of pilgrimage because it characterizes *Spiral Jetty* as aptly, and in its elliptical way, is maybe more faithful to the spirit of

Smithson’s piece. Smithson knew *Spiral Jetty* would be rarely visited but widely photographed—he made it that way—and he knew too that the *Jetty* could disappear under the water of the lake’s naturally changing level only to reemerge years later (which it did after his death). In his work, he was always concerned with the tension between seeing and not seeing; as the scholar Thomas Crow has pointed out, his famous “non-sites”—piles of earth taken from remote sites and arranged in gallery settings—might also be seen as “non-sights,” conjuring the notion of everything you missed in this lopped-off environment.

I felt free to non-sight *Spiral Jetty*. While Smithson is not a conceptual artist per se—as in, an artist who is strictly grouped with Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and others of the purist ilk—he was certainly conceptually driven, and given the dematerialization of the art object under conceptualism, deferring the physical object with a linguistic one seems to be just

carrying out what the art trained me to do. Conceptual art has always been about language, or about what Roland Barthes termed the transformation of “the work” into “the text,” or a field of inquiry rather than an object of delectation. Conceptualism in art was one among many attempts in twentieth-century art to move the proxy body of the art object to the side so that the primary bodies—author and viewer—could rise and come together for a dance with nothing but a slim negative space between them.

While conceptual art didn’t get going until the 1960s, its first object is obviously Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), the readymade urinal, which doesn’t need to be seen to be appreciated and understood, and which, as Duchamp put it, did nothing more than take an existing object and add a new idea to it. And yet, conceptualism is unfixed, almost from the beginning. The readymades that Duchamp lost at the start of his career (including *Fountain*) were reproduced later.

————— *Graves continued on next page*