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Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith

by DAVE MANDL IS A PRODUCER/DJ AT WFMU AND MUSIC EDITOR AT THE BROOKLYN RAIL. HIS WRITING HAS APPEARED IN THE WIRE, MUTE, THE VILLAGE VOICE, AND YETI. HE COEDITED THE BOOKS *RADIOTEXT(E)* (WITH NEIL STRAUSS) AND *CASSETTE MYTHOS* (WITH ROBIN JAMES).

Some books better thought about than read:

Finnegans Wake

The Making of Americans

The works of Kenneth Goldsmith

Conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith's work is simultaneously among the most mundane and the most maddeningly provocative writing being done today. In books like No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96, a massive compendium of words and phrases ending with the r sound, alphabetized and sorted by length; Soliloquy, which documents every word he uttered in a week; The Weather, a transcript of an entire year's worth of weather reports on news station WINS; and Day, for which he retyped the entire contents of an issue of the New York Times, Goldsmith has produced monumentally "boring" texts that shun all frills and artfulness. Yet on his radio show—where he broadcast for fifteen years as "Kenny G.," a subtle shot across the bow of the easy-listening saxophonist who uses the same moniker—he aired audio performances of this very same work as the "Hour of Pain," a direct challenge to the tolerance of the station's listeners.

Goldsmith's work forces a drastic rethinking of what a book or text can be. Incorporating elements of surrealism, concretism, and sound poetry, his writing takes pleasure in words as things of beauty (or manipulable items of data) in and of themselves. His texts—filtered and itemized—go well beyond traditional "list poems," betraying an almost Asperger's-like attraction to organization and categorization on a grand scale. His enthusiastic use of the advanced copy-and-paste techniques of the internet age pushes the limits of the postmodern remix or Situationist-style détournement. At the same time, his work is a comment on (and an undisguised cheering-on of) the obsolescence of authorship and originality.

Goldsmith teaches poetic practice and the art of plagiarism at the University of Pennsylvania. He is the editor of I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews, and was a curator for the Whitney Museum of American Art's The American Century, Part II: Soundworks. He has been awarded an Anschutz Distinguished Fellowship in American Studies at Princeton University. He is also the founder and publisher of UbuWeb, a vast online archive of avant-garde

music, writing, and film, for which he won a Quartz Electronic Music Award in 2009. A collection of his essays, Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in the Digital Age, was recently published by Columbia University Press.

Though Goldsmith and I are both producers at WFMU, and our children attend the same elementary school in Manhattan, I conducted the interview by email rather than face-to-face so we would have more time to mull over our questions and answers.

—Dave Mandl

THE BELIEVER: You say that your books don't need to be read. What do you mean by that?

KENNETH GOLDSMITH: My books are better thought about than read. They're insanely dull and unreadable; I mean, do you really want to sit down and read a year's worth of weather reports or a transcription of the 1010 WINS traffic reports "on the ones" (every ten minutes) over the course of a twenty-four-hour period? I don't. But they're wonderful to talk about and think about, to dip in and out of, to hold, to have on your shelf. In fact, I say that I don't have a readership, I have a *thinkership*. I guess this is why what I do is called "conceptual writing." The idea is much more important than the product.

BLVR: What do you think makes them wonderful? To me they've got a quality that's similar to a vast catalog or reference book, or one of those shops with cases and cases of buttons sorted by color, size, etc.—all things that I find completely riveting. Do you think there's something inherently appealing to the human mind about information sorted and structured in these kinds of ways?

KG: My favorite books on my shelf are the ones that I can't read, like *Finnegans Wake*, *The Making of Americans*, Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, or *The Arcades Project*. I love the idea that these books exist. I love their size and scope; I adore their ambition; I love to pick them up, open them at random, and always be surprised; I love the fact that I will never know them. They'll never go out of style; they're timeless; they're always new to me. I wanted to write books just like these. I think you hit it just right when you spoke of reference books. I never wanted my books to be mistaken for poetry or fiction books; I wanted to write reference books. But instead of referring to something, they refer to nothing. I think of them as 'pataphysical reference books. The moment we shake our addiction to narrative and give up our strong-headed intent that language must say something "meaningful," we open ourselves up to different types of linguistic experience, which, as you say, could include sorting and structuring words in unconventional ways: by constraint, by sound, by the way words look, and so forth, rather than always feeling the need to coerce them toward meaning. After all, you can't show me a sentence, word, or phoneme that is meaningless; by its

nature, language is packed with meaning and emotion. The world is transformed: suddenly, the newspaper is *détourned* into a novel; the stock tables become list poems.

BLVR: With the vast amount of written and recorded material now available online for the taking, is there no need to create any original content? Can we get by with only remixing from here on? Has everything there is to say really been said?

KG: We're living in a time when the sheer amount of language has exponentially increased. As writers, if we wish to be contemporary, I think we need to acknowledge that the very nature of the materials that we're working with—the landscape of language—is very different than it was a few decades ago. It seems to call into question the way we write and the environment into which we're writing and distributing our works. Not only that, but our entire digital world is made up of alphanumeric language (the *1s* and *0s* of computing). You know sometimes when you receive a JPEG in an email and it comes in wrong, appearing as garbled text instead of an image? It's a reminder that all of our media now is made of language: our films, our music, our images, and of course our words. How different this is from analog production, where, if you were somehow able to peel back the emulsion from, say, a photograph, you wouldn't find a speck of language lurking below the surface. The interesting thing is that now you can open a JPEG in a text editor, dump in a bunch of language, and reopen it as an image, and you'll find that the image has completely been changed—all as a result of active language. This is so new, and the implications for writing are so profound and paradigmatic. Suddenly, language is material to shape and mold, not only a transparent or invisible medium for communication, business contracts, or telling stories. Language has many dimensions; we're seeing the materiality of words emerge in new and interesting ways. But I don't wish to be prescriptive here. Of course, wonderful stories remain to be told and new ideas to be written. After all, for all my talk of “uncreativity” and “unoriginality,” isn't what I'm pointing out here in conventional language something new and original? Paradoxes abound.

BLVR: Well, it's really a historical accident that when we look inside a JPEG, the visual representation of the file is a long string of letters. But this reminds me of Hebrew, where the same characters are used to represent numbers and letters, and that chance relationship (I guess some people would question whether it's really chance) has been explored or exploited by mystics and numerologists. Do you see similar possibilities here for hybrid texts—images that have verbal messages encoded in them, or texts that also form images or pictures when viewed with the right software?

KG: Absolutely. It's a favorite method of encryption: chunking revolutionary documents inside a mess of JPEG or MP3 code and emailing it off as an “image” or a “song.” But besides functionality,

code also possesses literary value. If we frame that code and read it through the lens of literary criticism, we will find that the past hundred years of modernist and postmodernist writing have demonstrated the artistic value of similar seemingly arbitrary arrangements of letters. For example, here's three lines of a JPEG opened in a text editor:

“ ^?Îj_ÔL_flyd4 †À,†_ÑÎóajËqsöëY”_ ~ / å)1Í.šÿÄ@’_JCGOn aa\$ë¶æQÍ ~5ô’5å
 p#n>=ÃWmÃflÓàüü*Êœi”>_ \$îÛµ}TB<æ ´[“Ò*ä_~ §s}é_{_ Í=äÖ_;Í”_Ö
 çøY}è&£S `Æ_>ëÉk©1=/ Á ~ /” ûöÈ>_ad_ïÉúö Ì-éÆ_’aø6äÿ-

Of course, a close reading of the text reveals very little, semantically or narratively. Instead, a conventional glance at the piece reveals a nonsensical collection of letters and symbols, literally a code that might be deciphered into something sensible. Yet what happens when sense is not foregrounded as being of primary importance? Instead, we need to ask other questions of the text. Now, here are three lines from a poem by Charles Bernstein, called “Lift Off,” written in 1979:

“ HH/ ie,s obVrsxr;atjrn dugh seineocpcy i iibalfmgmMw er,,me”ius
 ieigorcyçjeuvine+pee.)a/nat” ihl”n,s ortnsihcldseløøpitemoBruce-
 oOiwvewaa39osoanfJ++r”P

The poem is intentionally bereft of literary tropes and conveyances of human emotion, and Bernstein chooses to foreground the workings of a machine, rather than the sentiments of a human. In fact, the piece is what its title says it is: a transcription of everything lifted off a page with a correction tape from a manual typewriter. Bernstein's poem is, in some sense, code posing as a poem.

BLVR: For conceptual writing, do you feel that one source of material is as good as any other? Will the choice of material, or for that matter the form of recontextualization, become the new artistry?

KG: In the 1960s, Sol LeWitt said something like “Conceptual art is only good if the idea is good.” I think that conceptual writing would agree, at least the best of it would. Like anything else, conceptual writing is looking for that “Aha!” moment, when something so simple, right under our noses, is revealed as being awe-inspiring, profound, and transcendent. I think that writers often try too hard in the name of expression, when often it's just a matter of reframing what's around you or republishing a preexisting text into a new environment that makes for a successful work. Of course this is nothing new: think of John Cage's notion of silence or Duchamp's urinal. But when it comes to writing, these approaches have rarely been investigated.

BLVR: We live in a time of nearly real-time recording and documenting of everything. Do you

think there are any works or performances that should disappear into the ether immediately and be off-limits for subsequent reuse or “remixing”? Do you think something “sacred” (as Benjamin says it) is ever lost with infinite reproduction or reuse.

KG: Nam June Paik said once that the internet is for everybody who doesn't live in New York City. Living here—with its saturated wealth of concerts, readings, and events—can easily give you the illusion that everywhere is like this, but, sadly, for most people this is nowhere near reality. For instance, on UbuWeb I'm often contacted by engaged viewers who live in small towns or who are unable to travel due to economic or social circumstances, who find a place like Ubu to be an absolute cultural and educational lifeline. It would be silly and snobbish of me to claim to prioritize warm, live human interaction over what happens on the web just because I have the ability to go to Anthology Film Archives, Issue Project Room, or the Stone any night of the week. So, in short, I think that the richer and deeper documentation is on the web, the better off we all are.

BLVR: Fair enough, but do you think there's ever a need to give people the ability to say, “I'd rather not have *this* reproduced or manipulated”? This may be more of a technology question, but is there something wrong with a state of affairs where I can never say, “I'd really rather not have a hundred people commenting on (in the blog sense) or remixing this particular piece of writing”?

KG: I'm going to drop a real secret on you. It used to be that if you wanted to be subversive and radical, you'd publish on the web, bypassing all those arcane publishing structures at no cost. Everyone would know about your work at lightning speed; you'd be established and garner credibility in a flash, with an adoring worldwide readership. Shh... the new radicalism is paper. Right? Publish it on a printed page and no one will ever know about it. It's the perfect vehicle for terrorists, plagiarists, and for subversive thoughts in general. If you don't want it to exist—and there are many reasons to want to keep things private—keep it off the web. But if you put it in digital form, expect it to be bootlegged, remixed, manipulated, and endlessly commented upon. Expect spiders to pick it up and use it as ad-bait on spoof web pages. The moment you put it out there, all bets are off; it's way out of your control.

BLVR: Do you think that when “nobody” publishes or reads printed books anymore, that world might become an invisible, unpoliced place where people can say absolutely anything they want? I'm thinking of depopulated neighborhoods that have been rediscovered and transformed into artists' colonies, or maybe people chatting on ancient computer bulletin-board systems today.

KG: I don't think that the world will ever become an unpoliced place, sadly. But I do feel that there is relative freedom on the margins. David Antin beautifully addresses this situation in several of his pieces, such as *Talking at the Boundaries*. He advocates practices that exist on the edge of culture

due to the lack of “light”—I think he refers to artists as foolishly rushing toward the “white hot” light—as opposed to enjoying what happens in the shadows, where few people care to be. Cage also addressed this issue when he was attacked for paying his taxes while claiming to be an anarchist. He said something like he would do the minimum required, compliance-wise, so that he could keep doing his work in relative peace. He claimed to prefer that to being in a place where he wouldn’t be allowed to do it at all, probably referring to censorious or oppressive regimes.

BLVR: You’ve said that people don’t need to read your books to understand them. What about your radio broadcasts, which often present similar material but in a time-based form? Do you expect people to listen from beginning to end, and how do you compare that experience to that of your readers, who presumably don’t read your books from cover to cover? Do you consider your radio work to be more sensual than intellectual?

KG: I think that the special thing about radio is the off switch. If something’s not pleasing you, turn it off. How different this is than, say, a reading or a concert where you’re pretty much stuck in it till the end. As a result, I feel one of radio’s great freedoms is the ability to take risks. Sadly, commercial radio is not able to do this, but WFMU is. My job as a DJ there is to take as many risks as possible, and know that I’m not forcing anyone to sit through it. Yet some people tell me that, say, my reading nine hours of weather reports was one of the most transcendent radio experiences that they’ve ever had. I believe in putting it out there and letting folks do with it what they may.

BLVR: This begs the question: Do you think the existence of more entities like WFMU, or the small publishers that you work with, would in itself get more people to be accepting of this kind of work? Or is it something about the very fringiness of these outfits that gives what you do its power?

KG: Again, such gestures always begin at the margins, where there is freedom. But these strategies quickly move into the center. In a time when the amount of language is rising exponentially, combined with greater access to the tools with which to manage, manipulate, and massage those words, appropriation is bound to become just another tool in the writer’s toolbox. For example, when recently accused of “plagiarism” in his latest novel, which was called a “work of genius” by the newspaper *Libération*, the best-selling author Michel Houellebecq claimed it as such: “If these people really think that [this is plagiarism], they haven’t got the first notion of what literature is... This is part of my method... This approach, muddling real documents and fiction, has been used by many authors. I have been influenced especially by [Georges] Perec and [Jorge Luis] Borges... I hope that this contributes to the beauty of my books, using this kind of material.” When such authors begin speaking like that, you know attitudes are changing. It’s a thrilling time.

BLVR: Clearly the standards for what constitutes fair use or “homage” are always in flux, but do

you think the idea of plagiarism is outright obsolete at this point? Or maybe that the kinds of cutting-and-pasting that are possible today make it difficult to define exactly what plagiarism is? One example that comes to mind is the battle over music sampling, where the parties involved had to come to an arbitrary agreement on how many seconds are legally allowed before copyright infringement has occurred. There were just no rules governing those kinds of cases at that point.

KG: What tamed sampling culture was the fact that people were actually making money by using those samples. How fortunate we are to exist in the moneyless economy of poetry! When you take money out of the equation, anything goes and nobody cares. It's truly free. Anyway, it's all ass-backward. One of my favorite quotes comes from Tim O'Reilly, who wrote that "being well-enough known to be pirated [is] a crowning achievement." Most artists want first and foremost to be loved, secondly to make history, and money is a distant third or fourth.

BLVR: How does your reframing of information like weather and traffic reports compare to the reframing done by "industrial" musicians like Throbbing Gristle, who presented the sounds of the industrial world in a musical context?

KG: In 1959, the writer Brion Gysin claimed that writing was fifty years behind painting. I think that can still be applied to today. What I'm doing in writing has been thoroughly and exhaustively explored in other fields like visual art, music, and cinema, yet somehow it's never really been tested on the page. Take appropriation, for example. While there have been numerous examples of pastiche and collage in writing—taking a few lines here, a few words there, and incorporating them into your own work—we haven't seen an exploration of wholesale lifting of preexisting texts. Yet suddenly, within the past few years, we have projects like Simon Morris's retyping of *On the Road* into a blog, one page a day until it's finished; or my own *Day*, which is a transcription of a day's copy of the *New York Times*; or Vanessa Place's *Statement of Facts*, where she republished court transcriptions in their entirety as literature. But why now? I think that the act of transcription in a pre-digital age was so laborious as to be off-putting. Yet now the simple ability to cut and paste, say, the entire works of Shakespeare with a few keystrokes radically changes the way we think about textuality. The power of holding that oeuvre on your clipboard, ready to be repurposed, makes us consider words and writing in really new ways.

BLVR: Do you think all these kinds of "information" (environmental sounds, traffic reports, the text of *On the Road*) are equal, or would you say there are different intentions in reframing them? For example, one artist's goal may be to reveal the beauty of everyday objects that we don't normally give any thought to, while another may see his or her work as more purely "structural."

KG: Your question reminds me of a conversation that John Cage and Morton Feldman had in

1967. Feldman was complaining about being at the beach, annoyed as hell by transistor radios “blaring out rock and roll,” and Cage responded, “You know how I adjusted to that problem of the radio in the environment? Very much as the primitive people adjusted to the animals which frightened them, and which, probably as you say, were intrusions. They drew pictures of them on their caves. And so I simply made a piece using radios. Now whenever I hear radios—even a single one, not just twelve at a time, as you must have heard on the beach, at least— I think, Well, they’re just playing my piece.”

BLVR: Because the kind of cutting-and-pasting you mentioned above is such a readily automatable process, do you think we’ll inevitably see more people writing programs (or eventually buying off-the-shelf software) to do it? If so, what are the implications of that? Would it help people break out of the kinds of behavioral ruts that they inevitably fall into, or would removing the human element from the process defeat the purpose of this kind of work.

KG: Automation and technology don’t cure behavioral ruts: they just create new instances of them. For instance, I won’t let my students write any more poems based on Google searches. It’s been done to death, always resulting in the same type of poem. It’s an old story. In 1726, Jonathan Swift imagined a writing machine whereby “the most ignorant person, at a reasonable charge, and with a little bodily labour, might write books in philosophy, poetry, politics, laws, mathematics, and theology, without the least assistance from genius or study.” He described a primitive grid-based machine with every word in the English language inscribed upon it. By cranking a few handles, the grid would shift slightly and random groups of half-sensible words would fall into place. Crank it again and the device would spit out another set of non sequiturs. These resulting broken sentences were jotted down by scribes into folios that, like pieces of a giant jigsaw puzzle, were intended to be fit together in an effort to rebuild the English language from scratch, albeit written by machine. The Swiftian punch line, of course, is that the English language was fine as it was and the novelty of reconstructing it by machine wasn’t going to make it any better. It’s a great warning for us today and a pointed satire of our blinding belief in the transformative potential of technology, even if in most cases it’s sheer folly.

BLVR: It’s funny how Google seems to be the cause of so many academics’ headaches. For history teachers it’s kids cribbing their reports wholesale from the web, and for you it’s students using search results as an easy way to produce conceptual poetry. Dyed-in-the-wool technophile that you are, do you find it funny that you have to play Luddite to these kids who grew up thinking all questions can be answered by a Google search?

KG: Shockingly, I’m much more technologically savvy than most of them are! I admire their ability *not* to be infatuated by it the way I am. I still can’t get over the fact that it even exists, whereas for

them it's just another way of being in the world. They have this fluidity that I admire, moving easily between oil paint this moment and Photoshop the next; they download MP3s *and* have huge vinyl collections.

But I've made a move in the Luddite direction recently by trying to remove UbuWeb from Google. I want the site to be more underground, more word-of-mouth. The only way you'll be able to find it is if someone links to it or tells you about it, just like music used to be before MTV. But you'll still find UbuWeb on all the bad search engines that no one uses: AltaVista, Dogpile, and Yahoo! Again, everyone wants to rush toward the center: they even write books about how to get your Google ranking higher. We're headed in the opposite direction. We want to get off Google.

BLVR: Do you see a connection between UbuWeb as an archival project and the bricolage you make use of in your writing? Is one of your goals with UbuWeb making this material available for reuse and recontextualization by future generations of artists and writers?

KG: UbuWeb and its ethos are extensions of my writing. There are certain economies which allow us to play with the utopian notion that copyright might not really exist. It's enormous—thousands of full-length avant-garde films, music [recordings], and books—and most of it isn't permissioned. It's not a surreptitious RapidShare-like site; instead, it's all out in the open, free to all to access without passwords or fees. I wanted to create a warehouse for the avant-garde, proposing the idea that not all economies are the same. This is a very special situation, where almost everything on the site never made money and therefore can be distributed freely. In turn, we refuse to touch money. We won't take donations or grants, all the work is done on a volunteer basis, and our server and bandwidth space are donated without strings attached. If we had to ask permission, we wouldn't exist.

BLVR: The politics of this are interesting: You decided to technically break the law by going ahead and posting this material, and found that virtually none of the artists on UbuWeb have a problem with that. If you'd been more cautious and proposed "working within the system," you would have heard a million arguments for why the idea was crazy and possibly never gone ahead with it. But have there been any cases where you were asked to take something down.

KG: Yes, it does happen, but not very often from artists themselves; it's mostly estates or galleries who keep Google alerts on names and pounce on them without ever investigating what the circumstances, politics, or economics surrounding it are. But what's happened over time is that by doing things *wrong*, UbuWeb has become canonical, and we now have artists—sometimes shockingly prominent ones—offering us materials, begging to be on the site. What started out as a little outlaw enterprise is still outlaw but has somehow gotten established. It's odd: I always

wonder why there aren't one hundred UbuWebs, and the answer is that institutions tremble when they hear the word *copyright*, and as a result err on the side of extreme caution, not understanding that there is a great deal of gray area and play. For example, MoMA's collection of artifacts far outweighs Ubu's, but MoMA's website is nothing more than a glorified catalog, telling you about when they're open and what's on display. There's nothing to download! But I understand why: if they were to put up downloadable artists' recordings, films, artifacts, poetry, ephemera, and so forth, they'd have to negotiate contracts, royalty agreements, broker deals with galleries and estates, etc. The legal fees and paperwork alone would cost a fortune, and then it would take an eternity to get the works online. And then they'd have long-term archive issues to resolve regarding format and retrieval systems. Ubu, on the other hand, operates on no money, acts instantly, and couldn't give a damn about formatting, archiving, or the future. The result is a wildly robust and plentiful archive, but it's extraordinarily unstable, put together with tissue paper and spit, and could vanish at any moment. Ubu is merely a provocation, an invitation for someone to actually come along and do it right. In fact, our own obsolescence would happily render the project successful.

BLVR: How does unlimited availability of texts for reuse square with the idea of copyright? If all texts can be seen as more or less interchangeable information, does a novelist own his or her words any more than a weather reporter does?

KG: It's a good question, and the answer has to do with various economic ecosystems. Let me take an example of my own work. A few years ago, I published a super-boring book that was a radio transcription of a Yankees–Red Sox game. I included everything that was on the radio, from the pre-game show to the ads to the broadcast-booth patter. The book opens with the disclaimer that begins all sports broadcasts: "This copyrighted broadcast is presented by authority of the New York Yankees and may not be reproduced or retransmitted in any form. And the accounts and descriptions in the game may not be disseminated without the express written consent of the New York Yankees." When the book was published, I sent a copy to the Yankees organization. Naturally, I never heard from them. So here I was blatantly flouting the copyright of what is arguably the most lucrative franchise in all of sports, and there was no reaction. I suppose if I was a commercial publisher making the identical gesture, I would've been taken to court. But a small press publishing a book of "poetry"? I imagine that the Steinbrenners scratched their heads and swiftly tossed it into the recycling bin.

BLVR: This seems like a good argument against trying to make a profit: The determining factor in whether someone like Steinbrenner would care or not may be whether there's any money involved. But it may also be because, as you imply, that project was incomprehensible to the Yankees' management. There are cases like Negativland's parody CD *U2*, where they clearly were never

going to make any money from the project, but U2's record label went after them anyway, possibly because it was embarrassing to the band.

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