

THE CORRESPONDING SOCIETY



FRIDAY, OCTOBER 10, 2008

Lonely Christopher in Conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith

Kenneth Goldsmith studied sculpture at RISD but has become the foremost practitioner of Conceptual Writing. He curates the invaluable archive of avant-garde material called Ubuweb, hosts a radio show on WFMU, and acts as a spokesperson for his contemporary poetics online, in print, and at academic conferences. His books are expressions of what he calls "uncreative writing": renegotiations of the value systems upon which literature rests. The work ranges from entertaining (*Soliloquy* transcribes every word he said over the course of one week), to hypnotic (*The Weather*, a short volume, is a year's worth of radio forecasts), to presumably readable only by madmen (the thick *Day* contains every character printed in one copy of *The New York Times*). Although he frequently suggests the idea of the texts should substitute for the experience of reading them, when somebody is inclined to make the effort she confronts a vacuum in which, paradoxically, everything is breathing with meaning. Kenneth is the subject of the 2007 documentary *Sucking on Words*, which is available to view online. Though I've heard his peers accuse him of being a confidence man, the implications of his work have been addressed extensively by poets and academicians. (Ron Silliman recalls, "I knew people were taking him seriously when, over five years ago, the MacArthur Foundation called to ask me if I thought he was a genius.") Goldsmith teaches at the University of Pennsylvania; he edited *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, which was the basis for an opera that premiered in March 2007. When I first met him four years ago he wasn't wearing any shoes. The following is a transcript of a recording from last January when I sat down with him at his Manhattan home and asked him some questions (originally published in an undated issue of *The Prattler* circa February 2008).

Lonely Christopher: Why do you think writing is such a conservative form?

Kenneth Goldsmith: Because language is the means through which we communicate with each other. If we disrupt that communication flow then chances are, according to the conservative idea, we can never understand each other. And if we can never understand each other, in the type of way we're speaking right now, we can't get anywhere. Most likely we can't do anything. We can't make business together, for example, if we don't have a common language. It's very sacred to a lot of people so they get very threatened by rupture in language.

LC: You have said you no longer think of yourself as a poet or writer but as a word processor. You have also said that creativity is bankrupt. I can't really decide whether those are pessimistic or optimistic statements, or both, but they sort of scare and excite me. Yet maybe there's also something restrictive or tyrannical in declaring the death of creativity. What do you think about these reactions?

KG: It's not really meant to be a provocation; it's simply an explanation of where we happen to be at this particular time. We spend our time processing language these days. We spend our time processing everything these days. Writing needs to respond to the new environment of the web, which is all about information management. If it's not responding to that particular situation it cannot be called contemporary.

LC: So do you think that responding to situations presented by the Internet is one of the main concerns of your work?

KG: Very much so, yeah. It's changed the whole game, hasn't it? Most writers, of course, don't want to deal with it. They pretend the Internet never happened.

LC: What does sculpture mean to you and why did you quit it?

KG: I'm not sure how to answer the first part of that question.

LC: That's the part of the question I'm more interested in.

KG: Oh, is it? Okay. In a city like this, sculpture is impractical. I came to New York as a sculptor. In a city where space and transport is at a premium I couldn't function the way I could when I was in school when I had unlimited studio space and I could make these enormous things and show them in these big spaces and store them in another place. You come to New York and everything has to change. I think writing is the perfect solution. A sculptural approach to writing is really great. You can actually carve words, be very physical with words, and you can do it all on a laptop in a studio apartment. I think the best way to be a sculptor is to work on the computer.

LC: How do you address the materiality of the word?

KG: Words are really great. They can take any form you pour them into. If you want to make it material you can output it in a thousand different ways. You could make those words into cast iron, you could paint them, you could make dresses out of them... it never ends. On the web you can realize it materially in all other ways, the ways we were talking about with Flash or with programming. That's the beauty of language. You can't do that with paint. It's much more malleable than paint. It's a great medium.

LC: What is it about Andy Warhol that you admire?

KG: There's nothing about Andy Warhol that I don't admire. I think in terms of a writer the thing that struck me the most was Warhol's sense of the contemporary; he really embraced the contemporary. And it wasn't always pretty, but he knew he had to be of his moment. As a result, because of being such a part of his moment, he became a part of the culture and now he's as relevant or maybe even more relevant than he was when he was alive. So I must admire his contemporariness.

LC: How does that work? When I first started thinking about Warhol I was thinking about him actually in relation to the Situationists because I was studying the Situationists and I saw that they wanted to affect change but they designed their movement in a way where all their ideas were easily colonized and they really quickly failed. That failure made me think of Warhol because he seemed to have designed his work and life in a way where whatever the position it was put in it still retained its integrity.

KG: You're very astute; that's a great point. But the real thing is that the secret of Warhol was he never intended resistance and therefore something that could never offer resistance could never be co-opted. That's fucking brilliant. He was completely complicit and by being complicit he was subversive. It was a very brilliant strategy of his. He took a lot of shit for it, too. People didn't understand.

LC: Can you tell me about the Warhol opera? I know very little about it.

KG: I did an opera based on the book of Andy Warhol interviews I edited that was performed in Geneva by a troupe of six dancers, a dozen musicians, and a bunch of opera singers. It was all chopped up text from the words of Andy Warhol.

LC: What's the purpose of turning Warhol's interviews into a libretto? That seems like a "creative" act in contradistinction to both your own ideas about writing and maybe even certain perceptions about the intentions of Warhol's work.

KG: But this book was a very different type of a book: it was an art historical book, it was a different type of a project. Had this been my project I would have gathered the Andy Warhol interviews and put my name on them (simply retype them and not attribute them to Andy Warhol).

LC: What do you think about the interview as a form?

KG: That's why that interview book with Warhol was so interesting. Because, like everything Warhol touched, it became a new way of making art for him. Warhol would do a completely untraditional interview and he would end up asking the interviewer more questions than the interviewer could ask him so by the end of the interview you found out nothing about Warhol but you found everything out about the guy who was interviewing him. He was a mirror: you just see yourself in it. He would never show you what he was.

LC: What does plagiarism mean to you?

KG: It's a fabulous way to write. It's a writing technique to me.

LC: What do you teach your students?

KG: I teach them plagiarism. I teach them uncreative writing. I teach them how to steal, how to appropriate, how to falsify papers, how to buy papers and call them their own. Anything that's not allowed. We explore in the classroom and my students are penalized for showing creativity or originality.

LC: What do you think of creative writing workshops and of formalism?

KG: I think they are shit. I mean they're bullshit. It's fine for another time but it's not contemporary. It has absolutely nothing to do with the world we live in right now. It's high school stuff.

LC: Why do you think creative writing programs have become so popular?

KG: I have no idea. I have no idea why anybody would be interested in that approach. Maybe they want to go to Hollywood and write screenplays, but if you write screenplays all you're doing is plagiarizing other screenplays and other stories anyway. They're doing what I'm saying writing should be doing, but they're not admitting it. Nothing's original in Hollywood. If you made something original in Hollywood it would never get made. You have to remake the same story over and over again. But of course they can't admit it.

LC: Can you talk about your ideas of process in relation to art and writing?

KG: Unlike painting (where the artist has to stretch a canvas, prime it, make the thing stand up) writing is a different process but I think it's an equally intense and important process. Like you were talking about with your work: sort of building a structure, hanging the language onto it, and then letting the structure fall away. I'm a bit of a Structuralist. I'm interested in Oulipian constraints, but then in the end kind of kicking the thing away and letting it stand, like you. Very interesting.

LC: You say that people don't have to read your books as long as they understand the ideas -- but to me, thinking about a concept of one of your books and engaging with one of them in practice (by actually reading it) are different experiences. To me the effort of reading your books, which are boring texts in a way, provides a fuller experience and a sharper understanding of what it is you are accomplishing. Why do you often suggest that reading your books is unnecessary?

KG: We let them off the hook. Text works on so many levels. There's the level of language that we're speaking right now, which is transparent: the language doesn't exist; only the ideas are jumping from my mouth to your mind and from your mouth to my mind. Or else we could have a you know we could start eh h blep ek app whhwhat am I try um ep uh ahh you juh ah start to uh hhhheh wait, you know, then suddenly we begin to think of language not as transparent but actually as physical matter. That's the beauty of language: there's no one way to understand it, there's no one way to engage with it. I say you don't have to engage with it, but I don't say you're not permitted to either. I think there's another experience to be had; it's not one many people are going to want to do, and that's okay, that doesn't really bother me. But I like the multi-tonality of these books. They provide a different experience to think about it and a difference experience to read it. Most books, if you don't read it you don't get it.

LC: I've heard you sometimes use languages you are not familiar with. Can you talk about that?

KG: When I first started writing I was extremely formal and I realized that by inventing a formal system you could subvert the normative uses of your native language. I was at Whole Foods yesterday and I was talking to the bagger and I had all these groceries and I said, "I'd like you to bag everything by shape or color this time, so put everything that's red in one bag and everything that's round in another bag." So you have an extremely different interaction with what's most familiar if you begin to apply a different type of structural system to it. So in that way I was able to de-familiarize my own language. I was able to actually work with English in a way where I didn't understand English even though I understood every word. It was really interesting, organizing things by shape and color instead of by what goes in a bag together naturally. And so I figured if I could do that with my own language then I could do it with any language. And so I began using languages that weren't mine and language would fall into place). And I was able to write in any language I wanted.

LC: How do you see groups of artists being configured now compared to earlier when New York had seemingly more vital communities predicated on geography? I feel like, to some extent, student communities that form around schools are incidental and the artistic environment of the city thirty or forty years ago that I tend to idealize has basically been erased or mostly paved over. What does the Internet have to do with this paradigmatic change?

KG: The Internet has rendered geography basically obsolete. Everybody's scattered everywhere. Thank god there's the Internet; without it then we'd really have a problem finding each other. I think communities are really, really thriving all over the web and all over the world, but it's a very different configuration from being in SoHo and going out at night and everybody having a beer together. It's completely different, but very strong. My best peers are scattered around Europe and all over Canada. And I go there, I'm invited to read and to teach there, and we see each other, and it's great to meet these people and be in touch, and then they come through New York, and we do see each other, there's a lot of physical contact, but oftentimes some of the closest people I'm involved with I've never even met. I think that the whole thing has been completely realigned. I think it's better, though. I think we have tighter communities now than we did before when it was geographically based.

Related Resources

- [Ubuweb](#)
- [Kenneth's page at The Electronic Poetry Center](#)
- [Audio and video from the Conceptual Poetry Conference on the Poetry Foundation website](#)
- [The documentary *Sucking on Words*](#)
- [The *Anthology of Conceptual Writing*](#) edited by Craig Dworkin
- [Traffic on the The Eclipse Archive](#)
- [Interview with Andy Warhol](#)

POSTED BY THE CORRESPONDING SOCIETY AT 4:17 PM
LABELS: INTERVIEW, POETICS

2 COMMENTS:

Steven Fama said...
Geography basically obsolete?

I don't think so.

I disagree with Goldsmith completely on Warhol too. I think Warhol was a no talent. But then everybody's entitled to an opinion.

Did you happen to ask Goldsmith how he feels about the low quality tiny video images he puts on his UBU website? Pity those who watch those things and believe they have seen the actual films, or anything close.

OCTOBER 13, 2008 9:44 PM

Joseph said...
Steven--

Surely you're not suggesting that it's better not to experience the work at all than to get a taste of it via the small screens available at UBU. I don't think many folks who watch films on UBU think they're a substitution for a "real" screening... or even a viewing on a little cathode-ray tube. But even in Los Angeles, one doesn't get many chances to see the works on UBU web, even in Manhattan (I live in LA). But what it does do is get those films--or the idea of those films--out to a larger, and perhaps broader, audience. Which, in turn, might eventually make it more likely that screenings will be held, that quality and available DVD transfers will be made, as more and more people realize what they're not getting at their local theaters (even small art-houses) or local video shops. In short, it's better than nothing. A lot better.

OCTOBER 15, 2008 10:56 AM

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