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# The Waste-Management Poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith

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For those who follow closely the contemporary American poetry scene, perhaps no recent figure has made a greater intervention in received ideas of poetic excellence than Kenneth Goldsmith. This self-described “conceptual poet” has managed to become “the most critically well-inspected writer now under the age of 50 in the United States” by ceding all claims to authorial originality and practicing instead a procedural, quasi-robotic poetics.<sup>1</sup> Warhol famously declared, “I want to be a machine,” and Goldsmith has colonized this desire, importing it into the literary realm.<sup>2</sup> Goldsmith explains: “I used to be an artist, then I became a poet; then a writer. Now when asked, I simply refer to myself as a word processor” (Perloff). Like Warhol, Goldsmith chooses ephemeral, well-circulated, often banal texts as source material; periodicals, radio reports, and his own mundane chatter are some chosen objects of *détournement*. But Goldsmith’s practice—which he calls “uncreative writing”—is even less transformative than Warhol’s.<sup>3</sup> In *Day*, the aesthetic acme of Goldsmith’s machinic asceticism, the poet slavishly retyped an entire volume of *The New York Times* into an 840-page book, a clear homage to John Cage’s “writing through” of texts like *Finnegan’s Wake*—with the difference that Goldsmith elides not a single word in his reproduction, and chooses, instead of the “high” texts of canonical literature, the detritus of mass culture.<sup>4</sup> Like Warhol’s visual recyclings of Photoplay and newspaper photographs, Goldsmith’s transposition into poetry of what is often disparaged as “fish-wrapping” or “bird-cage liner” stanches the news’ bleed into ephemerality, literalizing Ezra Pound’s dictum that “Poetry is news that stays news.” But in a defining difference, Goldsmith reproduces *The Times*’ text from left to right, top to bottom, front to back, irrespective of story jump or column boundary. This defamiliarizing of the text—what Russian formalist Viktor Shklovsky calls *ostranenie*, or poetic strange-making—ensures that only those accustomed to “difficult” literature will approach, much less read, *Day*. A representative passage:

Elsewhere today, a bomb exploded near a public market, wounding at least 13 people, officials said. The police said they suspected that another Muslim rebel group, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, was responsible.

the original razor scooter

hot@bloomingtondale's

adjustable.

collapsible. six pounds. (40)

Here sober disaster journalism falls into the vapid sensationalism of advertising copy. In supplementing, in the Derridean sense, *The New York Times* with an almost unreadable version of itself, Goldsmith reminds us that few consumers read *every* word of the newspaper, even in its original format. (The *Times* still printed stock quotes in the paper in 2000, when Goldsmith undertook his writing.) Instead we skim and read only the bits of interest, ignoring vast amounts of primary and secondary information (page numbers, story jumps, bylines) to avoid wasting time. As if addressing this issue of waste, Goldsmith chose to reproduce a volume of the *Times* on September 1—not September 11, a frequent misreading—the sleepy Friday before the American holiday Labor Day. Goldsmith's expense of unremunerated labor on Labor Day weekend, when he began the project, reminds us of the vast work expended in the newspaper's production, and how comparatively little we expend in our consumption of it. To produce *Day*, Goldsmith *read* the newspaper like a book (doggedly left-to-right, rather than scattershot, as one might read a newspaper), and in the process, *produced* a book.

Such aesthetic efficiency—consumption *as* production—is the prototypical gesture of our current cultural moment, argues art historian Nicolas Bourriaud, in his thin tome *Postproduction: Culture as Screenplay: How Art Reprograms the World*. Bourriaud argues that much contemporary art practice is founded on the by now self-consciously “postmodern” notion of reappropriation:

It is no longer a matter of elaborating a form on the basis of a raw material but working with objects that are already in circulation on the cultural market, which is to say, objects already informed by other objects. Notions of originality (being at the origin of) and even of creation (making something from nothing) are slowly blurred in this new cultural landscape. (7)

Bourriaud's thesis is valuable for its happy lucidity, not its groundbreaking novelty, his formulations having been previously elaborated by such critics as Jameson (negatively), de Certeau (marvelously), and of course Marx, who writes, in *The German Ideology*, that “consumption is simultaneously also production” (195-196). We

can see how this practice is an efficiency, even a kind of waste management, with the interval between consumption and production diminishing to the point of erasure. (Through the course of this essay, I will reveal the illusory nature of this ethics.) Goldsmith produces his writing through intensive consumption—yet it is a consumption that Goldsmith himself calls “nutritionless,” disavowing even a modicum of the alchemical compressions expected of the artist.<sup>5</sup> By banishing any notion of aesthetic originality, Goldsmith avoids the wasted effort of aesthetic transformation. Yet the ephemeral objects Goldsmith chooses to reproduce in his books are themselves destined for the rubbish bin. Does not Goldsmith's reproduction of the texts—at signally excessive length—simply produce more waste? It is this productive tension between efficiency and waste that Goldsmith mines and, most interestingly, eroticizes in his work. In the remainder of this essay, I will trace the linguistic and queer dimensions of this eroticization in two of Goldsmith's most heralded works: the book-length poems *Soliloquy* and *Fidget*.

\* \* \*

Goldsmith's stated intentions for his book-length poem *Soliloquy* are to better the experiments of American avant-gardist David Antin, whose edited “talk poems,” Goldsmith feels, betray the mission of faithful speech transcription in their failure to isolate the non-referential, non-meaningful utterances—the waste—embedded within our very conversations. On first glance, we might consider talk too “raw” a source material to fit the *Postproduction* schema in which I placed Goldsmith above. Yet I would argue that Goldsmith's project is predicated on reminding us that speech is indeed a cultural production, a recycling of the Symbolic order, the language we consume endlessly through childhood development and adult life. “Every thought I've ever had I've probably read or heard elsewhere, while wading through this thick band of language which surrounds us daily,” notes Goldsmith, in an online interview with Eric Belgum. Speech is, in a sense, a product of our language consumption.

In *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith tape records his every speech act for an impressively social week—a parade of art gallery openings, lunch at New York City's Museum of Modern Art, a visit to parents on Long Island—then transcribes the result without elision of disfluencies (“um,” “like,” and other such nonmeaningful speech-fillers). Goldsmith's

*Soliloquy*, premised on a faithful, scrupulous redaction of just such Cageian “music,” swells to 488 pages of dense, margin-to-margin prose. *Soliloquy*'s postscript addresses this notion of excess outright: “IF EVERY WORD SPOKEN IN NEW YORK CITY DAILY WERE SOMEHOW TO MATERIALIZE AS A SNOWFLAKE, EACH DAY THERE WOULD BE A BLIZZARD” (488). The whiteness of the snowstorm figure is in some sense a feint, obscuring that more common image of words darkening and polluting the snow-white page.<sup>6</sup> In conversation, Goldsmith revealed to me that it was more precisely the image of tow trucks pushing *dirtied*, excess snow into the Hudson River after a blizzard—i.e., the spectacle of waste management—that prompted his unusually “poetic” metaphor. Indeed, Goldsmith had earlier accounted for the project (within the project) as detritus:

[T]ranslating all this raw material that I'm speaking right now into, you know, into equivalents. I actually thought it was a really interesting idea. Kind of neat, huh? Or if I printed them all on a page, I'd probably have a stack. I mean, it would make everybody realize how much garbage they speak. (*Soliloquy*, 64)

Goldsmith's projects confront us with the information waste that we consume daily but rarely absorb. But will reproducing speech in its rawest state prompt us to attend to our own productions, to listen to our words, rather than map meaning onto speech that is often disjointed, nonsensical, self-serving? In pursuit of this aim, Goldsmith quotes Wittgenstein as epigraph to the online version of *Soliloquy*: “Scheue Dich ja nicht davor, Unsinn zu reden! Nur muß Duf auf Deinen Unsinn lauschen.” (“Don't for heaven's sake, be afraid of talking nonsense! But you must pay attention to your nonsense.”)

Throughout *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith displays a keen interest in the most excremental registers of speech—gossip and bullshit—and in doing so, underlines the relationship between oral and anal productions. The signal event of *Soliloquy* is Goldsmith's three-hour, alcohol-fueled lunch with literary critic Marjorie Perloff—a ground zero of trash-talk. Gossip renders friendships and alliances changeable, ephemeral. “He's soft,” Goldsmith remarks, repeatedly, of his lunchtime competitor to Perloff's attentions, in phallic disparagement (*Soliloquy*, 55). Gossip elevates, momentarily, the gossipier at the expense of the trashed softie, but in the end also lowers the speaker: “I don't think I could have handled Marjorie on my own for like 3 hours in the Museum of Modern Art. I just drank as it was. *I got trashed*. Well, I couldn't keep up with the gossip, I mean I had a lot of gossip but I couldn't sling it” (*ibid.*, my emphasis)—a sentiment, incidentally, that contradicts Goldsmith's claim elsewhere that he played

Perloff expertly, that he “read her like a book.”<sup>7</sup> In this we see the poet's engagement not only with trash-talk but that other most obvious rhetorical deployment of excremental speech: bullshit (a connection reinforced by Goldsmith's locution, “sling it,” as in “slinging shit”). These dizzying dislocations of intoxication, language production, and waste disposal write on the body the Marxian dynamics of consumption-as-production. One gets trashed (consumes alcohol excessively) to trash-talk (to produce excessively venal speech), through the same fouled orifice.

A primary grace of *Soliloquy* is that, from a distance, it stages a number of searching linguistic and generic interventions, yet, in the reading, careers forward with the momentum, detail, and character study of a nineteenth-century novel. Career is indeed Goldsmith's Balzacian preoccupation in *Soliloquy*: the book opens with Goldsmith at breakfast with his art dealer to discuss sales, and follows the artist-cum-poet as he greases his way through the week's art openings and lunches—each an opportunity to “network.”

Goldsmith's careerism helps locate us in a consideration of economy in poetry. In her scholarly study *Economy of the Unlost*, Anne Carson compares Simonides and Paul Celan, two poets who, for very different reasons, created poems of chiseled compression, wasting not a word. Simonides's poetry arose not so much from aesthetic conviction as out of real-world strictures. In ancient Greece, a primary vocation of the poet was the production of epitaphs—grave poems to fit the narrow breadth of a tombstone. Material limitations mandated concision. Rhetorical economy was also the result of an actual monetary economy: poets were rewarded (well paid, it seems) for each line composed. The slimness of Simonides's verse reflects each word's precious value—and the correlative stinginess of his patrons.

Goldsmith's work does not disregard Simonides's ethos as much as it attempts to translate it into our own current moment. In our era of mechanical reproduction, the book, unlike an epitaph or a painting, contains zilch aura. And poetry offers especially scant exchange value. Since words are cheap, Goldsmith reasons, why not overproduce? He explains:

Ours is an economy based on plentitude and abundance; the more copies of our work there are out there and the more readily available they are, the greater the impact our works will have.<sup>8</sup>

Considering Goldsmith's investment in Warhol's aesthetic (the poet recently edited a popular collection of Warhol's interviews, *I'll Be Your Mirror*), I asked him why he didn't “outsource” the typing of his poems, as

Warhol did his artwork, on the factory model. Goldsmith responded, in an email, that “the factory is predicated upon a viable economic system—Warhol’s was enormously effective. Since there is no economy in poetry, it seems that a factory system would be at best whimsical, and more romantic than anything, cloying really.”<sup>9</sup> Yet in this denial of poetry’s exchange value, Goldsmith deflects attention from the economy of academic appointment, where poetry is converted into “academic cultural capital.” This conversion of the valueless into the prized might summon for us the antinomic relation of shit and money, the latter a dominant preoccupation of Goldsmith’s *Soliloquy*, as I have already indicated. However, considering the poet’s name, it is significant that Goldsmith does not attempt the sublimating transformation of transforming the dross of reality into poetic gold. Instead, in *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith apprises us of our words’ value through negative example: by showing us how we waste them, by insisting on words as waste.

\* \* \*

*Soliloquy* blurs the line between public speech and private speech—the ways we kiss ass in the socius, then trash-talk in private. Throughout *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith worries about the effect of its publication; he considers changing or redacting names to protect the identities of trashed parties. But to do so, Goldsmith realized, would betray his project’s premise, and so he claims to have made public the raw text, with deleterious social effects: “I lost a lot of friends,” Goldsmith revealed to me in conversation, “It was catastrophic for my marriage” (for reasons that will become evident below).<sup>10</sup> Such a socially subversive publication—making public a gossip that is normally kept private—resonates with Freud’s notion that anal eroticism is socially unviable, because “everything related to [the anal] functions is improper and must be kept secret. This is where [the infant] is first obliged to exchange pleasure for social respectability” (Freud, 390). Goldsmith, desublimating, refuses respectability in his decision to publish the deleterious trash-talk of *Soliloquy*.<sup>11</sup>

In his long poem *Fidget*, Goldsmith draws into the public an even more private speech, and makes salient the anal subtext of this linguistic transaction. *Fidget* is a transcription of Goldsmith’s bodily gestures—every movement, every fidget, every fart—for the duration of June 16, 1997, Bloomsday (the anniversary of the day on which the events of Joyce’s *Ulysses* are supposed to have occurred). One effect of this translation is to reveal how nuanced and subtle is our body language—by which I mean the body’s inter-organ communication as well as its

semaphoric messages to other subjects. In *Fidget*, the crudeness of speech offers dry compensations for the attendant deprivation of affect, gesture, expression that a mere lowering of the eyelids or angling of the head can offer the observer. The following scene from Goldsmith's *Fidget* is representative:

Index finger extends into crack of buttocks and probes anus. Scratches once, twice, three times. Strong pressure applied by fingertip. Finger glides over coccyx and out of buttocks. Arm extends. Yawn. Elbow bends. Hand drops. Forefinger moves to nostril. Enters. Tip of finger probes ridges inside nostril. Shape of left nostril conforms to shape of finger. Shape of finger conforms to shape of left nostril. Finger removes caked mucus from nostril. Wipes. (9-10)

This is poetry as gross-out, as provocation. Yet if the animating idea of *Fidget* is to allow the body to speak, to let every organ, not just the mouth, have its say, it is appropriate that Goldsmith should out the anus, the body's most euphemized, occulted orifice, an organ that often ghosts literary production as a displacement of the mouth. Like the mouth, the anus conveys matter inside the body—air, shit, speech—outside the body; like the mouth, it can *produce* (in alimentary mode) as well as *consume*, or at least *admit* (in sexual mode). Note how the term *diarrhea*, for example, ghosts *logorrhea*, an association realized in this following passage about (and through) the anus:

Sits. Legs spread. Hands in front, elbows on thighs. Teeth grasp thumbnail. Push. Push from center of stomach. Push. Urine dribbles from tip of penis. Breathe steadily. Urine flows from tip of penis. Bowels open. Push from abdomen. Sphincter opens. Bowels fall. Push. Push. (Ibid., 48-49)

The scene described is of course defecation. Elsewhere in *Fidget*, the poet's actions flicker in and out of legibility; movements involving hands, eyes, and the mouth are relatively inscrutable, because these organs' functions are myriad and common. Goldsmith's every mention of the anus, however, is hyperlegible, because this remote organ occasions only very specific uses, most of which are repressed. When the word "anus" is uttered, we can pinpoint its significance with relative confidence. The same might also be said of the genitals, but in *Fidget*, Goldsmith draws unusually direct attention to the anus as a site of sexual excitation. Evidence this 1 p.m. masturbation session, which comprises a hat-trick of anal-digital contact.

Body slouches then moves backward. Strokes repeatedly. Right hand moves to groin area and grasps testicles. Left hand continues to stroke penis. Middle finger of right hand probes anus. Stroke. Stroke. Stroke. Tip of middle finger inserts into anus. . . . Genital area sweats. Legs spread. Right middle finger presses anus. (Ibid., 28-29).



What to make of this anal erotic motif? The eroticism performed here gains interest by virtue of its curious position within a heterosexual teleology, and I at first welcomed this unexpected deviation from heteronormative sexuality. A male anal eroticism that doesn't signify automatically as "gay" appeals to me more than "outing" or "queering" the married Goldsmith—at this juncture, a maneuver more banal than anal. Goldsmith himself admits, in *Soliloquy*, to a bisexual potential, reporting that his wife "keeps me away from the guys it keeps me away from guys! No no no it does it does. It's enough it's enough it's cute enough it's it's it's sort of bisexual enough to keep me at home" (*Soliloquy*, 81).

And yet even as such a frame admits a kind of universalized homosexuality (we're all a little bit gay), it does so only as something abjected. "Give us the dirt. At least he's not gay," Goldsmith later remarks (*ibid.*, 262), of an unknown subject, pointing up the linkage of gossip and the closet, the circulation of speech acts around the enigma of queer sexuality. This associative linkage of "gay" and "dirt" (the abject) is hardly novel; such homophobic paranoia is characteristic of our culture, and my aim here is not to pillory Goldsmith for displaying traces of this prevalent attitude. Rather, that such a homophobic posture coincides with Goldsmith's own anal-erotic peccadillo adds interest to his subject position. When, in *Soliloquy*, a figure I take to be poet American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet Bruce Andrews remarks that he had been in a fraternity in college, Goldsmith leaps to provide the homosexual subtext, a subtext that links his own sexual practice with the homosexuality he publicly disparages: "You were in a frat? Was it a gay thing? Were there fingers in anuses and things like that?" (*Ibid.*, 459-460). Do "fingers in anuses," in Goldsmith's *imaginaire*, equal gay? If so, then Goldsmith's "public" homophobia would seem to operate as a classic reaction-formation to defend against an imputation of homosexuality in his "private" anal eroticism. (I put the words in quotations marks because in *Soliloquy*, as in all literature, "privacy" is something of an artifice—performed and published—for the reading audience.) The "raw" truths that *Fidget* and *Soliloquy* perform, their revelations of the otherwise unspoken private life of a heterosexual male, and the kernel of homosexuality lodged there, allow us to entertain—briefly and perhaps irresponsibly—the fantasy of male heterosexuality as a *failed* or *unrealized* homosexuality (rather than vice versa, as so often supposed).

But having suggested the commonsensical reading that Goldsmith's heterosexuality and attendant homophobia results from a repressed homosexuality, I now want to venture the opposite and more productive hypothesis that Goldsmith's anal eroticism and homosexual tropisms

are not so much helplessly admitted as *staged*, in imitation of identificatory icons of the avant-garde, Cage and especially Warhol, whose art production was fundamentally oriented around the eroticized male body. (Evidence to Goldsmith's identification with these figures: in an interview by poet Caroline Bergvall, in the Canadian journal *Open Letter*, Goldsmith twice responded to the question, "Who would you be if you weren't [sic] yourself?" His first answer was "John Cage"; his second, "Andy Warhol.")<sup>12</sup> Though I lack the space to expound on the subject here, in a longer [unpublished] version of this essay I argue that such identifications are crucial to Goldsmith's emergence as an iconoclastic poet. Goldsmith is not an "avant-gardist," which implies a school or group mentality, but rather, like Cage and Warhol, a polymathic maverick whose aesthetic advances are keyed as much to sexual disruptions as formal innovations.

Warhol himself noted the fine, perhaps nonexistent, line between symptom and performance when he declared that, with the "acquisition of my tape recorder . . . [n]othing was ever a problem again, because a problem just meant a good tape" (26). And indeed, the notion of *staging* sex for theatrical value is of vast import to Goldsmith's project (as is the use of the tape recorder, a topic to which I'll return below). In perhaps the most interesting revelation of *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith asks his wife, in sexual overture, whether he can "stick his finger up" her "ass," a request made to "spice the tape." This request prompts a crisis of marriage and art project:

Can I put my finger in your ass? All the way up? That's on tape. Just to spice the tape a little bit, right? I said that just to spice up the tape . . . Really? Really stop or, yeah? . . . OK, alright, I'll turn it off. I'll turn it off. I'll turn it off. I can't turn it off. We already had had one! Of me! Getting blown! That was all on tape . . . . No, and I'll tell you another thing, there's no part of you that's on this tape. Your voice or your actions or nothing will appear. It's all me. . . Oh, well be on the tape. I can't turn the tape off. But you're gonna get anything cause there's no language. The tape will shut off if there's no language. I have it programmed . . . It won't catch you. I mean, why? Come on, this is art! I mean, look at what I do for your art! Look what you do for your art! . . . you do for your you get naked in front of audience of thousands and you're crawling around and you can see your pussy and here she says I don't want to be on the tape. It's so contradictory! And it's O.K. for your art but it's not O.K. for my art! . . . These tapes, nobody will ever hear these tapes, Cheryl. How can you say you're self conscious when you're like the nude artist of the century? It's pretty close. And Head? So, this is simulated to. It's it's mediated by the tape medium. (*Soliloquy*, 336-37)

This passage opens up an obvious place to make a feminist critique of *Soliloquy*, with Goldsmith using his wife's body as a kind of host or platform for the improvement of his project. (Also of relevance to this

reading are the seduction and repeated invocations of Perloff, whose criticism and academic support offer Goldsmith and his fellow avant-garde poets a site through which their opinions, reputations, and poems can traffic. Though I should also point out the obvious in noting that Goldsmith far more frequently uses his own body as a platform, as in the case of *Fidget*.)

But I want to refocus my consideration from the politics of gender and sexuality back to the literary sphere in suggesting that Goldsmith's anal eroticism also resonates metatextually, impacting both the concept and the form of his poems. "The anus is a cut," D.A. Miller argued in his essay on Hitchcock's film *Rope*, "Anal Rope" (34). And I would add that it also *cuts*, as Slavoj Žižek recognized in his extension of the anal stage to the realm of film montage in *Looking Awry*—an extrapolation, perhaps, from the excremental process by which one "clips a log" (Žižek, 95). This vulgar metaphor helps us identify the commonalities between waste and contemporary art practice. One of the hallmarks of postmodernism is taking up of the *list* or *log* as an exemplary form for expressing the arbitrary nature of identity; we are defined by what and how we digest (information, possessions). Aside from *Fidget*—which might be read as a kind of list of body movements—Goldsmith has engaged this form by logging his record collection and, suggestively, his closet, in "Inventory of my clothing as of June 19, 2000, 22:00."

But I would also argue that both the compositional approach of *Soliloquy* and the machinic syntax of *Fidget* are also impacted by this notion of an anal cut. Consider the form of *Soliloquy*. The poem is marketed, and the reader thus experiences the poem, as an unedited, logorrheic torrent of words—writing as a *flow*, as Deleuze might term it. Yet the seamlessness of *Soliloquy*'s prose format elides the project's dialogic origins. For although Goldsmith's tape recorder no doubt picked up the speech, protestations, and ambient sounds of others, the text reproduces only Goldsmith's words. In excising the speech of his interlocutors, Goldsmith *cuts out* half the content. The anal incision is reflected in the work's paratactic sentences (a feature even more pronounced in the dry rhythms of *Fidget*). In *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith is a conversation colonizer, who cuts off others' claims to speech at the *cut* (in Latin, the *punctum*, or point): that is, the period of each sentence.

The composition of both *Soliloquy* and *Fidget* was aided by the tape recorder, a historical fact that helps us locate and extend the significance of the anal-erotic trope yet further in Goldsmith's work. As the analog technology of electro-magnetic tape recording was intrinsic to the texts'

production, so was the digital realm of the Internet crucial in their distribution, with the texts appearing online synchronous to their publication in codex form. One can also see this analog/digital binary replayed in the polymathic Goldsmith's career, as he tacks between work as a DJ at WFMU (where he plays records, i.e., analog media), and web designer (the digital realm). So I want to suggest that Goldsmith's navigation between the *analog* and the *digital* realms, and the crisis this travel occasions, for the body and the book, is inscribed in a condensation of *analog-digital* technology and *anal-digital* contact.<sup>13</sup> Anal : analog :: digit : digital. For Goldsmith, "the digital divide" takes on an entirely new meaning—as a dangerously eroticized cleft.

Beyond signaling different recording formats, *Analog* and *Digital* more precisely denote different languages of information encoding. *Digital* is an on/off, in/out encoding: the pushing of a button, the insertion of a finger into an orifice, the predictable fall of the next number on a digital alarm clock. *Analog* is a graduated or multiply differentiated encoding: a color wheel, a thermometer, the slow inexorable movement of the second hand as it glides over the watch face. Most communications entail some layering of the two systems. To return again to *Fidget*, we might clarify the problems that Goldsmith sets himself in that poem—how to express body language in plain human speech—by examining it through this structuralist model of analogical–digital communication. In *Fidget*, Goldsmith attempts to express largely analogical body movement in brutally curt digital language. Anthony Wilden clarifies how these terms operate in the field of rhetoric:

Denotations and literal significations in language are predominantly digital, as are naming and definition: these are all well-bounded terms reminiscent of Descartes' ideal of "clear and distinct ideas." Connotations and meanings, however, including metaphors and other figures of speech, and of course rhetoric and poetic diction, are predominantly analog and iconic. (224)

The irony of *Fidget* is that a "poetic" language that Goldsmith abjures might better capture the analogical dimensions of body movement than his machinic antidote: "Swallow. Jaws clench. Grind. Stretch. Swallow." Etc. Missing here are affect, connotation, phatic speech—all analogical. By limiting himself to a largely digital realm of information—consonant with Goldsmith's decision to first publish *Fidget* online—the poet admits the impoverishment of language in the digital dimension (though in such impoverishment he also locates a minimalist beauty). The frustration attending Goldsmith's translation of analogical body language into

digital, denotative rhetoric is inscribed in the poet's decision, in the book's last chapter, to run his text backward:

.etarapes regniferof dna bmuht thgiR .flac thgir sehctarcs dnaH thgiR.  
 .ydob dhiheb tsiF .regnif elddim thgir fo pit yb del ,swercskroc dnaH  
 thgiR. .sllup woble .rsir skcottuB .nethgiarts seenK .thgir petsediS  
 .tnorf ni sevom mrA .snepo dnaH tfeL .tnorf sehenniP .petS .drawkcab  
 teeF .tfel snruT .ydob morf sevom dnaH .esole sregniF .ydob ot  
 sevom dnaH tfeL .petS .petS .petS .petS. (*Fidget*, 84)

On a narrative level, this reversal may reflect the poet's intoxication (in an afterword Perloff wrote to the poem, the critic reveals that Goldsmith's difficulties in translating his every movement led to his drunkenness by day's end).<sup>14</sup> But phenomenologically, the reversed text amplifies the failure bedeviling the entire project. In *Fidget*, the analogical-digital expression of the body *exceeds* the abilities of denotative (digital) language to represent it. Language delimits, fails the body. In its unreadability, *Fidget's* last chapter is the project's frustrated remainder, a fulfillment of Lacan's notion that language indexes its own inadequacy to realize the body's desires. Language is itself a residue.

Specifically, Lacan posits the infant's emergence into language (the Symbolic) as a residue of its unsatisfied desire for the mother, repressed by the incest taboo.<sup>15</sup> But moving beyond this oedipal schema, I wonder what semantic leftovers *fecal prohibition* might occasion. The mother's injunction—"Don't touch!"—to the infant curious about its own excrement would seem to echo in the masturbation prohibition, a connection that Goldsmith explores in the anal-erotic onanism of *Fidget*. Such a fecal prohibition might also affect a subject's attitudes towards textual production, in a desire to leave words or source materials *untouched* or *seemingly untouched*—a posture that Goldsmith assumes in his composition of both *Day* and *Soliloquy*. In these projects, language is worked over but left untouched: words as turds.

I want finally to suggest that Goldsmith's anal-digital fetish encodes a number of anxieties about the validity of the poet's machinically-oriented project. Despite Goldsmith's own technological expertise, as web designer, and pronouncements on the importance of the digital realm—"If it doesn't exist on the Internet, it doesn't exist"<sup>16</sup>—the poet nevertheless expressed, in his conversation with me, a distaste for "e-poetry" that seems even to extend to his own digital versions of his books.<sup>17</sup> Indeed, when I asked Goldsmith whether publishing his texts in digital-only formats wouldn't show more fidelity to his project's premises, he admitted as much, but replied that he possessed a recalcitrant desire to see his work in codex form. Such an urge would seem to betray the

ecological import of his own imperiously voiced artist's statement:

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." I've come to embrace Huebler's ideas, though it might be retooled as, "The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."<sup>18</sup>

A committed ethical interest in sparing the world more productions would require Goldsmith's work to remain conceptual, potential, unrealized. Instead, Goldsmith's voluminous books are all too material—wasteful—in their flurry of pages, their blizzard of words.

I want to end by exploring the following notion: that Goldsmith's finger doesn't just stimulate the anus for pleasure, but also points, deictically, to the energizing locus of Goldsmith's poetics of waste recovery, which the anus, as outlet of bodily waste, metaphorizes. This is not to suggest that Goldsmith redeploys the ingrained binary of a feminized, messy, material body and a masculine, abstract, dematerialized digital realm. Heidegger calls technology, in its ordering of nature, a "mode of revealing" (295). But Goldsmith, in conjoining the digital and the anal, reveals technology itself to be the locus of waste. Online, we get caught in "shit from the net," as Goldsmith terms it—an overabundance of pointless information, useless verbiage, wasteful textuality that, as pundits suggest of social-networking sites MySpace and FaceBook, can be dangerously revealing (*Soliloquy*, 61). This recognition is inscribed in Goldsmith's name for his personal website, Ubuweb, which has blossomed into an important storehouse of avant-garde Twentieth- and Twenty-First Century concrete, sound, and video poetics. Goldsmith himself explicates Ubuweb's etymology to an interlocutor in *Soliloquy*:

Kenny. Ubu. Kenny. Same thing. Ubu is shit in French, right? Shit web. Yeah no no no, it is. I mean, you know Alfred Jarry, right? The great great Surrealist Dadaist wrote Pere Ubu Alfred Jarry wrote Pere Ubu uh Ubu Roi and you know the band Pere Ubu they took their name from that as well. Twentieth Century French Surrealist stuff. So, uh, it's father shit Pere Ubu or King Shit. (*Ibid.*, 247)

Goldsmith's digital identity, his "shit web"—also the face of innovative writing, over which the visage of Beckett, himself a King Shit, literally presides—by definition embraces the waste of media capitalism. Likewise does Goldsmith's poetry, rather than escaping or occluding waste, engage and figure it, a desublimation characteristic of postmodernism that seems just now to be gaining currency in poetry, long the genre of the chiseled phrase and the well-wrought urn. Such desublimation, as Donald Kuspit points out, places a premium on anal

sexuality and excrement; Goldsmith's poetic signature is to make such a desublimation, following Warhol, machinic. In *Soliloquy*, Goldsmith nicknames his dog Babette—whom he frequently takes on walks through the course of the book—“shit machine,” and I find in the sobriquet an apt description of Goldsmith himself: Kenny G, shit machine, repurposing the waste of media capitalism on his poetic assembly line.

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## Notes

1. Ron Silliman, "Kenneth Goldsmith," *Electronic Poetry Center*, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/silliman\\_goldsmith.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/silliman_goldsmith.html).
2. Gene Swenson, "'What Is Pop Art?,' Answers from 8 Painters, Part I," *Art News* [November 1963] p. 26.
3. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice."
4. Goldsmith's most recent project is a trilogy, *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and the forthcoming *Sports*, in which he records daily radio reports over the course of an entire year.
5. Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as Creative Practice."
6. Cf. James Merrill's poem, "From a Notebook": "A first word stops/ The blizzard . . ." See James Merrill, *Collected Poems*, J.D. McClatchy and Stephen Yenser (eds), New York, 2001, p 130. The title of Anne Carson's book of Sappho translations, *If Not, Then Winter*, seems also to deploy this trope, as if imploring us to value even these few fragments of Sappho's verse, because, if not for these strewn extant words, we would be left with all-white pages—the bleak cover of winter snowfall.
7. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Soliloquy." *Electronic Poetry Center*, [http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/01/01\\_06.html](http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/01/01_06.html).
8. Goldsmith, "Goldsmith on Poetry & Copyright."
9. Goldsmith, email correspondence.
10. Personal interview, 15 May 2007.
11. My research, however, revealed that Goldsmith cut the following passage, marked by brackets, from the codex version of *Soliloquy*. This passage, in which Goldsmith describes his lunch with Perloff, can be found in the online version: "I just sat there I started slinging shit the minute I saw her [I could read her like a book. I had her, you know I am sorry to say, I had her on the tip of my finger. Really. I just, you know, I really. I was twirling her on the end. I knew how to play her.]" The exclusion of this passage from the print version betrays Goldsmith's claims to absolute fidelity in his transcription. See Goldsmith, 'Soliloquy', *Electronic Poetry Center*, [http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/01/01\\_06.html](http://www.epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/soliloquy/01/01_06.html).
12. Caroline Bergvall, "Stepping Out with Kenneth Goldsmith: A New York Interview,"



*Ubuweb*, [http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg\\_ol\\_bergvall.html](http://www.ubu.com/papers/kg_ol_bergvall.html).

13. However suggestive the slippage between the *anal* and the *analog*, it seems worth clarifying that “anal” comes from the Latin, whereas “analog” derives from the Greek.
14. *Ibid.*, 97. Though I am uncomfortable with the homophobic ramifications of the “anal-erotic character” that Freud and his followers elaborate with such (might we say “anal”?) precision and fervor, it would be remiss of me not to mention Ernest Jones’ observation that those with an anal-erotic character are drawn to the backsides and reverse sides of objects, including reversed type.
15. As glossed by Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble*, p. 43.
16. Goldsmith, “If It Doesn’t Exist on the Internet, It Doesn’t Exist,” *Electronic Poetry Center*, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/if\\_it\\_doesnt\\_exist.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/if_it_doesnt_exist.html).
17. Goldsmith, personal conversation.
18. Goldsmith, “Being Boring,” *Electronic Poetry Center*, [http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith\\_boring.html](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html).