

**This interview was commissioned by the Belgian literary magazine Yang <<http://www.yangtijdschrift.be/>> and will appear in Dutch in Yang 2006.2 (July). The interview was conducted by Sarah Posman.**

YANG: You set out to capture some of the vast quantities of language that is all around us and present it as art. Your framing device, as you explain in an interview with Marjorie Perloff, is mimesis. A couple of years ago Yang did a mimesis special (2001.1). In the issue, Geert Buelens notes how contemporary 'postmodern' poets tend to overemphasize the constructed nature of their poetry by employing a smart, rich and in a sense quite overtly didactic language. He finds this a limiting practice. Why not, he suggests, explore the 'as if' nature of poetry? This implies that writers actually work with (as opposed to e.g. wittily insert) everyday language - not in order to revert to the old game in which language was presented as a transparent medium but precisely to use it against itself.

Can you identify with this?

KENNETH GOLDSMITH: I agree with the notion that language is better less treated -- left raw -- and reframed in writing rather than "wittily inserted," which strikes me as a modernist strategy of collage that dips its big toe into the stream of "everyday" language without ever really employing it. In the end, there is still too much a trace of authorship, editing, and ego, riddled with choice so as if to say that one piece of language is better than another. I prefer not to make those sorts of distinctions and choices, but rather to simply reframe and quantify the vast amount of language around us. If we examine what is under our noses, we'll find that it's quite rich as is and that no amount of "witty insertion" or manipulation is going to make it any better. I call this a "non-interventionist" strategy of writing.

When you 'recycle' language how much does the act of transcribing matter as part of the art work?

It is the transcription that makes the writing. How does one, for example, transcribe a radio broadcast? Since spoken language contains no punctuation, what choices go into the transcription of the broadcast? Does one decide to flow the language as a never-ending stream without punctuation or pause, or does one decide to "parse" it according to standard rules of grammar? David Antin, for example, never uses punctuation whilst transcribing; instead he connotes pauses and inflection by using graphical space between words.

In my work, I try to use standard grammar and syntax wherever possible. I want my basic unit of writing to be deliberately uninteresting, pre-fabricated, or pre-determined so that it may more easily become an intrinsic part of the entire work. Using a common or ready-made form repeatedly narrows the field of my works and limits the amount of choices that I need to make. In this way, the work writes and constructs itself with less of my authorial intervention.

Almost all of your projects display a preference for the opposite. As a matter of fact you seem to indulge in turning traditional artistic parameters upside down. You try to push your 'valueless speech' further by trying to find language that has still less value, when you insert D.H. Lawrence's story "The Rocking Horse Winner" in your *No. 111 2.7.93 - 10.20.96* you do so on account of its number of syllables instead of its literary merits, you have been teaching uncreative writing as part of the creative writing program of the University of Pennsylvania and you seem on a perpetual quest for the "unboring boring". Why always go for the opposite? What is it you react against?

As the first generation of innovative writers after modernism -- assuming, as I do, that Language Poetry was the last gasp of modernism -- we are left with a large challenge: how to proceed after the deconstruction and pulverization of language that is the 20th century's legacy. Should we continue to pound language into ever smaller bits or should we take some other approach? I feel that we need to view language again as a whole -- syntactically and grammatically intact -- but to acknowledge the cracks in the surface of the reconstructed linguistic vessel.

Therefore, in order to proceed, we need to employ a strategy of opposites: defamiliarization and disorientation as opposed to deconstruction. "Unboring boring," "uncreative writing," and "valueless speech" are all methods of disorientation used in order to re-imagine our normative relationship to language.

The effect of your uncreativity is often very funny - that is, when one experiences it in small doses since the sheer length of much of your work makes it hard to digest when approached as a whole. Can you comment on the humour in your work? Do you mean to make it weightier by opting for vast quantities?

I don't assume that because a work is of extreme length, it is humorous. The length of my works are pre-determined by the content with which I'm working.

For example, the only reason *Day*-- the book where I retyped an edition of a day's *New York Times* -- is 900 pages is that's how long the manuscript turned out to be when retyped start to finish.

What is humorous, however, is that when examined, the contents of our daily newspaper is 900 pages long! Every day, a great book is written several times all over the world, only to be discarded and begun again the next day. Or as Marshall McLuhan put it half a century ago: "Any paper today is a collective work of art, a daily 'book' of industrial man, an Arabian Night's entertainment in which a thousand and one astonishing tales are being told by an anonymous narrator to an equally anonymous audience."

You're very much not into that kind of literature in which the ego of the author is holding the reigns but then again, it is striking how personal your work is. *Soliloquy* is an unedited document of every word you spoke during the week of April 15-21, 1996 from the moment you woke up Monday morning to the moment you went to sleep on Sunday night. You actually wore a hidden voice activated tape recorder to accomplish this and describe the result as a humiliating and humbling experience. Similarly, *Fidget* records every move your body made on June 16, 1997. Wonderful as the results are, both are rather ego-focused. And in one of your pending projects you flirt with the idea of being someone else which of course highlights the fact that you are not [Goldsmith is working on an edition of the fan mail intended for his namesake, the saxophone player Kenny G, but addressed to Goldsmith as Kenny G the WMFU dj]. Can you comment on this?

Actually, it's a common misconception that my works are ego-centric. On the contrary *Soliloquy* was an ego-effacing project. What was amazing is just how embarrassing, humiliating, and trite my week of speech was (and continues to be). Likewise, *Fidget* was an ego-eradicating project: it was a record of a body in an undermined space, not *my* body in *my* space. I never used the first-person "I" in *Fidget* nor did I employ any overt subjectivity; instead the book was an exercise in extreme objectivity.

After I gave a reading recently, the other reader came up to me and said accusingly, "You didn't write a word you read!" He was correct. Instead, I transcribed, reframed and resituated language, thereby making it my own. We need to do so little today in order to be able to "write." I believe that writing today constitutes the moving of information from one place to another, the way we do on the internet every day.

I'm fascinated with the idea of permeable and ever-shifting identity, the way we readily swap our avatars or gender on the web. Today, we are no longer limited to smaller notions of ourselves, rather the most effective writing, I think, occurs when we tap into the collective vast mind that we easily inhabit online. In fact, we never need "write" another new word; instead our job as writers is now information management: organizing and making our way through the huge amount of existing language. This is the new way to write.

This new way of writing you propose involves machines doing the writing instead of a traditional author. At the same time, however, you acknowledge machines are in need of an operator. You must agree that wonderful technology is no guarantee for the quality of art.

Yes, we need good machine operators! As writers, we are now employed in minding the machines and making sure they perform well. We are in charge of writing the programs which will, eventually, learn to write themselves. Once our machines are in good working order we can leave them to their own devices and find another way to occupy ourselves. But that's still a long way off and there's much minding to do between now and then.

Also, when you state you want you work to be "a mirror", doesn't this imply a rather traditional moralizing aspect to you work?

Well, one can't ever escape morality, can we? Every decision is a moral (or immoral) one.

Would you describe your work as political? At your performance in Ghent you read from your work *Weather* and opted for the Iraq forecasts from during the war.

While I have no determined political agenda with my works, somehow they often bump up against the political. Like morality, politics seems an unavoidable condition when engaging in the framing of public language and discourse. Sometimes the political engagement is overt -- like when in *The Weather* the forecasts include the weather conditions from the Iraq battlefield -- or more oblique as in *Day*, which is often read as a precursor to 9-11 (it, in fact, is). My more recent project, a retyping the day's edition of *The New York Times* issued on the morning of September 11th, is perhaps the most overtly political work I've ever done. But I didn't really do it to be political, but instead to twist the

"boring" or "mundane" nature of my work toward the "exciting", the "emotive", the "unboring." Needless to say, though, it's very political.

The programme of Language writing seems quite congenial to what you do. They as well felt the need to react against poetry as it was/is taught at universities. Many language writers, however, are currently working at a university (and so are you). Isn't there a contradiction in this?

It's a fact that in the United States, the primary reception of innovative literature happens in the university; there really is very little readership outside the academy. This is a condition that preceded my arrival onto the writing scene, fostered by numerous cultural conditions in the States, as well as the warm reception of Language Poetry by the academy. As such, I simply take it as a given that this is where the readership and study of my work occurs.

But it's not all bad news. At the University of Pennsylvania, where I teach, we are given free reign to teach in unconventional ways. For example, I teach classes in Uncreative Writing where we encourage the students to plagiarize, appropriate, plunder and sample. They are demerited when they show signs of originality or of conventional thinking. The university supports this agenda, so you see that perhaps the academy is not what it used to be!

A conspicuous difference between your project and that of Language writing is the latter's overt relating to theory. You rarely do so but still you call for 'conceptual writing' and state that you prefer a 'thinkership' instead of a readership. This seems to suggest you link art to philosophy. Can you comment?

I have written that "I look to theory only when I realize that somebody has dedicated their entire life to a question I have only fleetingly considered." Theory follows my work, not leads it.

Conceptual writing is a type of writing that doesn't require a readership. You can know my books without ever having read them. For example, there's the book that contains every word I spoke for a week; or the book where I retyped a day's *New York Times*; or the book where I transcribed a year's worth of weather reports; and so forth. These books are very difficult to read, but anybody can understand them without ever having seen them. Hence, I often have a "thinkership" rather than a "readership." Or, you can read them and have a very different sort of textual experience with them -- glacial, really. Fast or slow -- you can choose how to use the books.

I'm not so interested in being read, in fact, I believe that I rarely am read. Illegibility, after all, has long been a trope of innovative writing. Craig Dworkin has written a book on illegibility and in his book cites example after example of disrupted texts, disjointed texts, and deconstructed texts. But never does he invoke another type of illegibility -- that of length and duration. Faced with an unprecedented amount of text today (due largely to digital media), not to invoke textual quantity seems to be a grievous oversight. My works reflect the glut of textuality in which we are submerged today.

[Apart from Language writing, which artists have had major influence on your work?](#)

My inspiration comes from all sorts of disciplines, literature being only one source of influence. It's a long list but some of the bigger names would be John Cage, Andy Warhol, Henry James, Samuel Johnson, Sri Ramakrishna, Giuseppe Verdi, Frank Zappa, Meredith Monk, John Oswald, Fluxus, Georges Perec, Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, Neil Young, Morton Feldman, Igor Stravinsky, Merce Cunningham, Jean-Luc Godard, Marcel Duchamp, Augusto de Campos, Vicki Bennett and Gertrude Stein.

[Gertrude Stein stands out as a major source of inspiration since you, in a way, dedicate one of your works to her \[Goldsmith's chapbook \*Gertrude Stein on Punctuation\*\]. Can you comment on the huge importance of Stein for so many American writers?](#)

We love her primarily because she's so *American*. She writes in the most American of Englishes; it would be impossible to imagine the simplicity and reduced vocabulary she uses if she was, say, British. She's also a great figure, anticipating our condition of "intermedia" by positioning herself at the nexus of so many fields. We love her because she was a woman; we love her because she was an open lesbian; we love her because she was a pop icon before the idea of popular culture was invented; we love her for the many permissions and freedoms she grants us by the example of her life. For us Americans she really is "the mother of us all."

[You have said that after Language writing there is nothing that can be called writing, no matter how much it might not "look like writing". How important is this "look like writing" for you? The phrase struck me as seeming to go straight](#)

back to one of your first projects which consisted of wooden sculptures of books. How would you say does your training as a sculptor has affected your writing?

When referring to a type of writing that it can be called writing "even though it doesn't look like writing", I was thinking of a radical approach to textuality. For example, could a column of map coordinates or stock quotes be identified as "literature"? After Language writing, I think so; as a movement, it really did an enormous amount of work and opened up a lot of new territory.

The Gertrude Stein scholar, Ulla Dydo, tells us that visuality was a key way of reading Stein's texts. Often, she says, Stein's pages were never meant to be "read" rather they were meant to be looked at, to be scanned visually. This was a great revelation to me in forming my ideas about Conceptual Writing. It also dovetailed with concerns earlier in my work about the theorized utopian linguistic state of concrete poetry -- a language that could be read by looking -- and like Esperanto, understood visually and intellectually without understanding the language it was written in.

One of the great advantages I've had as a writer is the fact that I was schooled as a visual artist. When I became a writer, I didn't know the rules of writing, which made it easy for me to pursue my own vision as a writer. I see many of my peers, schooled for many years in the history and techniques of writing, struggling to unfetter themselves from this knowledge in order to be able to pursue a more innovative path. In this way, I consider my lack of education to be very fortunate.

In a Yang interview with Michael Palmer (1997.3) he testifies that he prefers writing by hand over typing because the former is an, if you like, more intimate physical experience. How do you feel about doing everything by computer?

I honestly think Palmer's statement is the most idiotic thing I've ever heard. He must be living in a cave.

As a public space the Internet is of huge importance to you and UBUWEB of which you are the editor is a worldwide success, with a "browsership" no magazine format could ever reach. You say you have stopped organizing live happenings because of the fact that these are always (disappointingly so) smaller in scope. Yet still, isn't avant-garde art necessarily an elitist practice?

We average over 10,000 unique visitors on UBUWEB daily. When confronted with these numbers, suddenly the practice of avant-garde art doesn't seem so elitist.

You see poetry on the web as "essentially a gift economy, [as] the perfect place to practice utopian politics. Freed from profit-making constraints or cumbersome fabrication consideration, information can literally be free." Isn't it a bit rosy to see the web as the great democratizer?

Absolutely not. The web *is* the great democratizer. Of course there is the digital divide between those with access to technology and those without, but this is quickly crumbling. If that sounds too rosy still, think of the penetration rate of the last great paradigm shift: television. Some ten years after the birth of the television (we are now ten years into the internet), still only the elite and very wealthy had a television. It wasn't until many decades later that television was available even in the poorest nations and homes. Contrast that with the internet where in ten years, far greater numbers have online access than did have television during the same time span. Each year, vast quantities of the global population have web access, first dial-up, then broadband. I feel that as a content-provider of UBUWEB, I must keep five years ahead of the current state of bandwidth. Hence, we serve very large files of audio and video which have led some people to comment that we are catering to the digital elite. To which I respond, yes, we are for the moment, but within a year or two what now appears to be elite will be commonplace. We need to anticipate the future because it's coming at us very very fast.

And what about government support for the arts?

In the United States, the government long ago pulled "out of the business of funding the arts" on any sort of large scale, particularly when those arts fall outside their idea of what is proper. So, we've had to find ways to keep making art and distributing it without their help. And this has been one of the reasons I've been so "rosy" about the prospect of the internet: It allows us to deliver the sort of art that interests us globally at a minute cost to an international audience without any governmental dependence or interference. Let's hope it stays that way.

At the conference "On the Sound(s) and Images of Contemporary Poetry, an American Connection" [Brussels 11/25/2005] you read your manifesto. One of the things you touched upon was form of which you said it is of little importance since "complex forms disrupt the unity of the whole". Can you elaborate on this?

I'm interested in ideas for writing that are so simple that they verge on stupidity and absurdity. What could be more silly than transcribing every word one spoke for a week and not editing it? But it occurred to me that nobody -- to my knowledge -- had ever done this. And that's an amazing thing to think of since one of the things we are most adept at is talking. There have been many attempts over the past century to try to "incorporate" daily speech into poems that have seemed to me unnecessarily complex, when what they were looking for was being produced literally right under their noses. So, complexity can get in the way. We need to move our ego, our ideas, and our will out of the way in order to be able to experience language in all its untrammelled glory.

You also happily work with languages you don't understand. The only foreign languages you seem truly sorry you don't understand are computer languages. Can you comment?

I think of both foreign human languages and computer languages in the same way: both tools which provide me the opportunity to create new texts, albeit in different ways. For example, I am currently making recordings of me reading the works of Wittgenstein in German, a language I neither read nor understand. I so horribly mispronounce the words that most German speakers who hear my work don't recognize it as German. So what is it, then? It's these sorts of questions that fascinate me.

Computer languages are another story. The Canadian poet Christian Bök has predicted that in the future, the poet will have to learn PERL in order to write poetry. It's a good point and brings to mind one of the reasons for the sorry state of electronic poetry. It's hard enough for a poet to write a good poem. Now she must also be a programmer and a designer. These are great demands and I only know of one poet who can write poems, program and design equally well. The financial hurdles of getting design or programming help are insurmountable for most poets, hence the pitiful state of the art today.

Finally, can you tell us something about the anthology you're editing?

I am co-editing with Craig Dworkin an anthology called *Against Expression: An Anthology of Uncreative Writing*. It's an extension of the UBUWEB Anthology of Conceptual Writing ([ubu.com/concept](http://ubu.com/concept)). The anthology begins with Marcel Duchamp's text for the readymades and moves through the 20th century touching on figures such as Gertrude Stein and George Bataille; thorough the

sixties with artists like Andy Warhol, Adrian Piper and Hanne Darboven; and into the present with younger writers such as Laura Elrick, Dan Farrell, Christian Bök, Judith Goldman, Claude Closky and Fiona Banner.

One large thesis of the book is that much writing that has been, to this point, considered part of the art world needs to be re-examined. Appropriation, data-mining, intermedia, mechanical reproduction, and information management -- concerns of the current generation -- all have their precedent in artists' writings. These concerns were completely ignored by Language Writing in favor of a straight literary model ranging from Stein to Pound to The Objectivists. Our sense of history is somewhat different and this anthology will make these generational distinctions very clear.