CRITICAL CITIES

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Kenneth Goldsmith: the New York Trilogy

Kenneth Goldsmith's "conceptual writing" has been the subject of some ridicule in recent years, much of it fuelled by deliberately provocative and quotable quotes. In interviews and theoretical essays, Goldsmith has described his work as "boring", "dumb", "stupid" and "unoriginal" and has proclaimed that "Google is the greatest poem ever built". (Brian Lindenbaum's Conceptual Writing Journal, from which these quotations are taken, is a useful guide to the "conceptual conceptual" but to Bhanu Kapil's excellent critique of Goldsmith's Soliloquies it seems that much of the critical material on his writing is actually quite thoughtful and nuanced). Perhaps the most provocative of his claims is that it doesn't matter whether anyone reads his work or even possesses the time and the literacy skills to appreciate the complexity of his work. Goldsmith's ideal audience, he has stated on Facebook, "is the stuff that's never read but that's the most important". Perhaps the most ridiculed of his statements on his work has been his claim that his 'Soliloquies' project, which involves the transcribing into a word processor of everything he says in a single day, "is the greatest poem ever written". Goldsmith's ideal audience, he has stated, would be overwhelmed by the sheer volume of his output and would, therefore, be unable to read it. Such statements have, unsurprisingly, been used by his critics to dismiss his work as pretentious posturing by a writer that lacks the intellectual depth and the capacity for critical self-reflection to appreciate and tolerate long-term projects involving tedious and extreme rotation (or incarceration, if you will) practice, and Goldsmith himself has been accused of being a "Fake Avant-Garde".

Perhaps Goldsmith has referenced his work in the phrase the "American Trilogy" the subject matter is actually more specific than that. Despite the fact that he has been a resident of New York for most of his life, Goldsmith has not made his residentiality in the city the subject of his four volume work on Jackson Mac Low's Bard York's American. The New York Trilogy, as I shall refer to it, is a collection of four long-form autobiographical appropriations – Sony Walkman, Day, Traffic and Sports – that, taken together, provide a kind of Marx-Engels-Lexicon of New York's Yankee-Inflected sports culture. Sony Walkman, for example, is a transcription of Goldsmith's listening habits on his Sony Walkman over a period of a year, Traffic is a transcription of the radio traffic reports he listened to while driving in his car, and Sports is a transcription of his viewing habits on the television. Day, the longest of the four volumes, is a transcription of the contents of Goldsmith's personal computer for a single day. Taken together, the four volumes provide a kind of encyclopedia of Goldsmith's New York's Yankee-inflected sports culture. Sony Walkman, for example, is a transcription of Goldsmith's listening habits on his Sony Walkman over a period of a year, Traffic is a transcription of the radio traffic reports he listened to while driving in his car, and Sports is a transcription of his viewing habits on the television. Day, the longest of the four volumes, is a transcription of the contents of Goldsmith's personal computer for a single day. Taken together, the four volumes provide a kind of encyclopedia of Goldsmith's New York's Yankee-inflected sports culture.

Sony Walkman

The first book of the New York Trilogy, Sony Walkman, comprises approximately 600 radio transcripts, mostly from the year 2010, that Goldsmith listened to on his Sony Walkman while he was in his car. The transcripts are, for the most part, sports related and, as such, they provide a kind of Goldsmith's Sports Lexicon. Sony Walkman, for example, contains approximately 50 pages