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Textbook Uncreative Writing

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The idea could not be permitted to stand alone; it needed a body, even a proxy of the proxy.

Today, while “conceptual” is easily the most ubiquitous word in art, it does not signify any particular style or form of art. “What does seem to hold true for today’s normative Conceptualism,” writes Seth Price in *Dispersion* (2002),

is that the project remains, in the words of Art and Language, “radically incomplete”: it does not necessarily stand against objects or painting, or for language as art; it does not need to stand against retinal art; *it does not stand for anything certain*, instead privileging framing and context, and constantly renegotiating its relationship to its audience. (emphasis mine)

Art has inarguably been refreshed and strengthened by the rise of conceptualism and its challenge to the stronghold of retinal perception, but art no longer need follow the anti-gesturalism of a readymade, or be executed by written instructions (as in Sol LeWitt’s drawings, which are mere after-effects of the ideas that govern their making), or explicitly reference semiotics (as in Joseph Kosuth’s *One and Three Chairs* [1965], in which the dictionary definition of a chair is displayed with any chair and a photograph of that chair in that place). Instead, conceptualism is marked by incompleteness, continuous relocation, and the sort of “non-sight” that Smithson created, an awareness of blindness. The readymade, for instance, is not located in place and time but is instead an interiorization, as Price points out; it’s not a position but a reading process. “Perhaps one always reads in the dark,” Marguerite Duras wrote. “Reading depends on the obscurity of night. Even if one reads in broad daylight, outside, darkness gathers around the book.”

Darkness likewise gathers around the idea of conceptualism in writing, which is about as slippery as in art—but shares with art an overt awareness of the history of art. When Kenneth Goldsmith writes the introduction to his book *Uncreative Writing*, it is essentially a manifesto that adapts to literary practice many of the dominant beliefs in art of the last forty years. When he writes “Context is the new content,” an art historian hears echoes of Rosalind Krauss’s 1979 theory of the expanded field of art. He writes,

Age-old bouts of fraudulence, plagiarism, and hoaxes still scandalize the literary world in ways that would make, say, the art, music, computing, or science worlds chuckle with disbelief. It’s hard to imagine the James Frey or J. T. LeRoy scandals upsetting anybody familiar with the sophisticated, purposely fraudulent provocations of Jeff Koons or the rephotographing of advertisements by Richard Prince, who was awarded with a Guggenheim Museum retrospective for his plagiaristic tendencies.

Nearly a century ago, the art world put to rest conventional notions of originality and replication with the gestures of Marcel Duchamp.

Conceptual art has always been about language.

Hmm. Yes, appropriation is king in visual art. But its real implications still remain theoretical in important ways. Artists like Koons and Prince are happily ensconced in a capitalistic system that rewards the original in haunting ways, such as that regular reminder on the wall of a museum’s institutionalism: the “No Photography Allowed” sign next to a fully appropriated work of art. The much-touted death of the author often simply results in the reconstitution of the author/persona as an owner, or authorizer, in a consumer system. But the mass-distribution system of literature—in addition to its ability to be precisely reproduced rather than in a shadowy way (think JPEGs of artworks versus Vanessa Place’s ongoing project of Tweeting the entirety of *Gone With the Wind* [1936])—suggests that writing has more radical potential than art. That, and its history as an experience of embodying other voices, other bodies. As Michel de Certeau writes, “To read without uttering the words aloud or at least mumbling them is a ‘modern’ experience, unknown for millennia.... This withdrawal of the body, which is the condition of its autonomy, is a distancing of the text. It is the reader’s *habeas corpus*.”

Habeas corpus: who has the body? You? The artist? Is it the work itself? The body of the work of art, or piece of writing, is constituted instead in a dark place, a limited yet floating Smithsonesque zone that

evades the light wherever it finds it. Place’s book *Tragodia 1: Statement of Facts* (2010) is a *Ulysses*-weight piece of writing consisting entirely and only (there are no addenda or explanations) of appellate briefs from Place’s day job defending indigent sex offenders on appeal (she almost always loses). The shame and elusiveness of the crimes dramatizes this dark place where reading and comprehension are as charged as sex and justice.

In Place’s collection of appellate briefs, voices intersect and collide with only systematic attribution. This is a form of public sculpture, built around an interior that can only be obsessively circumnavigated. Police reports, public record in any town or city, are like this: the mess of the events themselves (even on a fundamental level: what is the experience of a sexual act for a prepubescent child?) becomes processed through a further mess that includes precise addresses that make mock of the imprecise testimonies, extraneous facts added, intrinsic facts overlooked, and, to top off this sundae of semiotic gluttony, stenographic tics that participate in unknown systems of failures, biases, and triggers in the reader/receiver. The mess is in direct proportion to the neatness desired, and total neatness is desired, since this is the moment when authorities have become involved in order to clean up.

Place happens to be working on a film project with visual artist Stephanie Taylor called *Murder Squaredance on the Spiral Jetty*. It will not include a trip to *Spiral Jetty*. By phone from her home in Los Angeles, I asked Place about why she writes alongside visual art—essentially, why she applies art systems to writing. I loved her answer: “For visual artists, the whole idea of dematerialization is okay because you have language left. The problem is, when you lose that stability, which is what happens when you go into the tradition of the literary arts, then what do you have? And that’s what’s really interesting to me.” You have only a newfound awareness that you are, finally, in the dark.

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Textbook Uncreative Writing

Brian M. Reed

AGAINST EXPRESSION:
AN ANTHOLOGY OF
CONCEPTUAL WRITING

Edited by Craig Dworkin and
Kenneth Goldsmith

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593 pages; paper, \$45.00

What does it mean to be “against expression”? Usually, books that announce that they are “against” a topic stake out a clear rhetorical position. Jonathan Baron’s *Against Bioethics* (2006), Eavan Boland’s *Against Love Poetry* (2001), John Ellis’s *Against Deconstruction* (1989): a person immediately has a sense of what these authors oppose. In the case of Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith’s anthology *Against Expression*, however, the goal is less

obvious. How can a book take on something as ill defined and capacious as “expression”? The subtitle does not help much either: *An Anthology of Conceptual Writing*. What kind of writing do the editors have in mind? Short stories? Autobiography? Lyric poetry? Instruction manuals? And doesn’t all writing, except perhaps the purest nonsense verse, convey or rely on concepts?

One could explain the book’s title by situating it in relation to recent literary history. After 9/11, many assumptions and practices that defined the late twentieth-century American, British, and Canadian poetic avant-gardes—above all, the rampant use of aberrant or disjunctive syntax—began to appear outmoded, even defanged. With grammar-mangling, fragment-spouting George W. Bush on television every night arguing for war, how could a leftist poet in good conscious continue to advocate anacoluthon, solecism, and other varieties of non-normative English usage as tools to achieve utopian ends? One literary movement to emerge in this new

aesthetic climate was conceptualism. Among its key players are *Against Expression*’s coeditors, Dworkin and Goldsmith, as well as Christian Bök, Robert Fitterman, and Vanessa Place, all of whom appear in the anthology. Their work involves the appropriation and recycling of large amounts of text; prolonged mindless labor, especially transcription, copying, and retyping; a fascination with what happens when data is transposed from one medium to another; and a de-emphasis on close reading in favor of analytical attention to larger formal patterns and higher orders of information organization. The conceptualists challenge readers to rethink what constitutes a literary text, how literature operates as an institution, and what role if any it plays in public life. In this context, the title *Against Expression* could serve as shorthand for one of the movement’s favorite harangues. Down with the cult of personality! Away with weepy self-revelations, tawdry public confrontations, and

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Jonathan Franzen-sized egos! The hour has come to rethink from the ground up the nature and function of authorship.

The over 130 works represented in *Against Expression* do not, however, add up in any straightforward way to a polemical argument for or against any single mode of composition. On the contrary, the book’s contents are extraordinarily diverse. Some are by canonical literary figures (Samuel Beckett, Denis Diderot, Stéphane Mallarmé). Others are by art world luminaries (Vito Acconci, Joseph Kosuth, Andy Warhol). One will also encounter postmodern novelists (Walter Abish, Kathy Acker, J. G. Ballard); Dadaists and surrealists (Louis Aragon, Marcel Duchamp, Tristan Tzara); and Oulipians (Georges Perec, Raymond Queneau). In addition, although the majority of figures are American, Canadian, or British, Goldsmith and Dworkin also include writers from Finland (Leevi Lehto), Japan (Shigeru Matsui), and Norway (Monica Aasprong, Paal Bjelke Andersen). Other authors have more complex affinities, such as Caroline Bergvall (France and Great Britain); Mónica de la Torre (Mexico and the US); and M. NourbeSe Philip (Trinidad and Canada). In short, the table of contents is aggressively transnational, cross-period, and multigeneric. Unlike earlier, more pronouncedly clique-centered endeavors such as Dworkin’s UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing, *Against Expression* strives to be eccentrically unpredictably omnivorous, including big surprises (Hart Crane’s retro-romantic “Emblems of Conduct”) and omitting figures one would assume to be *de rigueur* in a collection of this kind (Gertrude Stein).

And the texts themselves! *Against Expression* is a marvelous compendium of “what ifs.” What if I wrote a novel using only the letter T? What if I selectively deleted large chunks of Shakespeare’s *Sonnets*? What if wrote down bibliographic information for absolutely everything I ever read, from product labels to scholarly articles? What if I rewrote *The Communist Manifesto* (1848) in a Yorkshire dialect? What if recorded every word I spoke for a week? What if I tried to describe in exhaustive detail the opening scene of the film *Apocalypse Now* (1979)? What if I compared the first lines of every English translation of Dante’s *Inferno* (1321) in the British Library? What if I collected and alphabetized every response to a Rorschach inkblot test in a stack of old psychology textbooks? What if I paid a bunch of people five bucks each to write down fifty words of their choice?

These thought experiments often lead to curiously compelling results. Claude Closky’s *The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order* (1989) delivers exactly what its title promises:

eight hundred and four, eight hundred and fourteen, eight hundred and nineteen, eight hundred and ninety, eight hundred and ninety-eight, eight hundred and ninety-five, eight hundred ninety-four, eight hundred ninety-nine, eight hundred ninety-one, eight-hundred ninety-seven, eight hundred and ninety-six.

At first Closky’s text is viscerally frustrating. It feels just plain wrong, for instance, for ninety-five to precede ninety-four or ninety-seven ninety-six. Then one begins to get the hang of it and starts guessing what the next few terms in the series are going to be. After a while, this jump-around, counterintuitive sequence of integers begins to provoke more

wide-ranging speculations. What is going to come after “eight hundred” in this skewed math? Where would “one thousand” occur in the work as a whole? Halfway through? Three quarters? What is going to be the final number? Which is more fundamental to the way an adult thinks, counting or spelling? How and why?

If entries such as Closky’s estrange the very fundamentals of the reading process, other pieces in the anthology, such as Alexandra Nemerov’s “First My Motorola,” are efforts at updating conventional genres, in this case the lyric poem. She purports to list “every brand she touched over the course of a day in chronological order”:

First, my Motorola
Then my Frette
Then my Sonia Rykiel
Then my Bulgari
Then my Asprey
Then my Cartier
Then my Kohler.

Although the method of composition here might appear wholly impersonal, Nemerov ends up revealing quite a bit about herself. One can easily reconstruct her movements and actions based on the spray of proper nouns. “First, my Motorola”: Motorola, of course, is synonymous with cell phones, and since it is the first thing she touches once awake, she must be using it as an alarm. She throws aside her covers (Frette makes fine linens) and puts on a designer outfit, probably knitwear, since that is Sonia Rykiel’s trademark. Next, it is time to put on her jewelry and perhaps a watch (Bulgari, Asprey, Cartier), and, fully dressed, she now heads to the bathroom (Kohler). Anyone else who tried to replicate this exercise would likely

reveal an entirely different set of morning rituals. I, for one, would be wholly at a loss concerning the brand of sheets I own—I removed the labels long ago—and any clothing I mentioned would likely be from Kohl’s, not Sax. But I would never have dreamed up this “what if” scenario in the first place. The most illuminating thing about “First My Motorola”: Nemerov herself has chosen this manner of cataloguing a day. The unfurling anaphoric list and the proliferation of brand names conveys the sense that careful creative consumption and artful display provide her life with

much-desired stability and structure. Significantly, the narrow column, from the opening “my Motorola” to the final line’s “finally, my Motorola” (time to set the alarm so it can all begin again tomorrow!), looks eerily like a backbone.

If my description of Nemerov’s poem has begun to make it sound, well, expressive, that is par for the course. Many of the works included in *Against Expression*—among them an extract from Jen Bervin’s *Nets* (2004), Harryette Mullen’s “Elliptical,” and a few pages from Ariana Reines’s *The Cow* (2006)—contain idiosyncratic original passages that are hard to describe as anything other than out-and-out lyrical. Presumably, the editors could have used the front matter of the anthology to explain their criteria for inclusion, however unconventional or expansive. Unfortunately, though, the two essays at the beginning of *Against Expression* do not do an ideal job of introducing the anthology or explaining its key terms.

The first of them, Goldsmith’s preface, argues that the widespread use of digital technologies

has fundamentally altered both what authors write and what readers demand. He offers, however, no solid proof. One could call the piece a manifesto, but the tone is wrong. The writing is too deadpan to stir the blood or fire the imagination. Moreover, while it does provide insights into Goldsmith’s own appropriation-based writing from *Soliloquy* (2001) to *Sports* (2008), it also directs readers to think about a topic, the advent of the Internet, that later proves only intermittently helpful as readers confront the wild array of writing practices on exhibit in the anthology, many of which predate the first IBM mainframes.

Against Expression gives permission to forget all the rules that you ever internalized and start over.

As if acknowledging that he, too, finds Goldsmith’s arguments incomplete or troublesome, Dworkin provides a second, supplementary preface that pursues an entirely different tack. His intent is reasonable and laudable. He seeks to provide a literary- and art-historical genealogy for the texts collected in *Against Expression*. More specifically, he explores links between contemporary “conceptual writing” and the varieties of word-based art, also called conceptual, associated with the sixties and seventies. Ultimately, he stresses rupture over continuity. Today’s conceptualists, he maintains, generally amass and showcase the raw undigested stuff of writing, whereas artists a generation ago tended to assert the aesthetic superiority of generative ideas over any possible physical realization.

If encountered in a scholarly journal, Dworkin’s essay would represent a first-rate piece of criticism. Here, however, it doesn’t quite fit. It provides a high level of detail, and the academic to-and-fro about the originality of conceptual writing will probably perplex the uninitiated. Yes, there are haters who habitually announce that the avant-garde is absolutely positively most sincerely dead and haughtily dismiss any attempted revival as derivative pale neo-avant-gardism. (When obliged to endure these tirades, one cannot help but wonder whether the same critics would also kvetch about, say, Italian restaurants in North Beach claiming to serve pizza when all they could ever hope to produce would be *neo-pizza*, an ersatz imitation of the tomatoey goodness and savory crunch of the original nineteenth century *pizza napoletana*.) Dworkin chooses to stand at the blackboard and rebut the opposition when the best policy might have been to usher readers swiftly to their tables and let the feast begin.

Is *Against Expression* worth reading? Absolutely. Few literary collections have left me so breathlessly excited. But one should get to know it by flipping around in it randomly, paying limited attention at first to the title, the headnotes, and other scholarly apparatus. What probably began as a coterie venture somewhere along the way turned into an abundance of riches containable under no single label. It has the potential to serve as an unofficial textbook for a generation of young writers looking to strike out into new territory. What if I tried this? Or did this? What if I threw caution to the wind? It gives permission to forget all the rules that you ever internalized and start over. While it might not contain any work by Stein, *Against Expression*, in the tradition of her *How to Write* (1931), issues a call for readers and writers to begin again and again and see where their ingenuity can take them.

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