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Friends without Benefits

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NOW WE ARE FRIENDS

Robert Fitterman

Truck Books

<http://truckbooks.org>

126 pages; paper, \$5.00

Robert Fitterman describes *Now We Are Friends* as “an experimental poetry book where I randomly follow people online and appropriate the text along the way.” Only classicists and prudes will take exception to the word “poetry” in that account, but one might pick a bone with the word “follow”: unlike, say, the surveillance tactics of the conceptual artist Vito Acconci, from whose *Following Piece* (1969) this book takes its epigraph, Fitterman’s online scrutiny requires no legwork, and any real menace about it was abstracted away at least a decade ago. The risk in this project is neither criminal offense, as when Acconci stalked strangers in New York City, nor personal tedium, as when Kenneth Goldsmith copied out an issue of *The New York Times*. The risk here is equivalent to that of selecting the “random page” feature on Wikipedia a dozen times and reproducing the text of each resulting entry: that the endeavor will have been a waste of time.

If *Now We Are Friends* is indeed poetry, it is found poetry—assuming, as Fitterman long has, that the very act of appropriation suffices to make text poetical. The content of the book is a stream of Internet text-droppings, each belonging to a randomly chosen man named Benjamin Kessler or to a randomly chosen man or woman within one or two degrees of separation in his Facebook friend network. (There are in fact a small handful of different Benjamin Kesslers in play, but Fitterman makes no particular effort to keep track of which one is the original [section 1] and which ones are the “Other Ben Kesslers” [section 2]; an abortive attempt at a correspondence between Fitterman and the former was published online in the magazine *GlitterPony*, but is not included here.) Most of the material gathered in Fitterman’s impassive Web-combing is mundane and useless, albeit impressively diverse: genealogical data, voting records, local sports league tournament brackets, the sidebar of the *Arkansas Democrat-Gazette* website, the filmography of Canadian actress Rae Dawn Chong.

The uselessness of said material is, of course, meant to be evocative in itself: this is how easy it

is to sketch a picture of a Benjamin Kessler through the traces of his online comings and goings; this is how much information is available, on almost anyone who uses the Internet, for no cost and virtually no effort. (This is what we learn about Robert Fitterman from how little he learns about Benjamin Kessler.) The subtext here is important, if not novel: that the Internet’s greatest strength—connectivity—might be dangerous. The more we interact online, the more mingled our information becomes with that of a logarithmically increasing number of people. The more time we spend on the Web, the faster we become unwittingly, sometimes unwillingly, intertwined with the others in it.

If Now We Are Friends is indeed poetry, it is found poetry.

To the book’s superficial credit, the experiment happens upon some social data pregnant with commentary on just this situation: a blog post by Rich Sedmak (“Relevant expertise (in humans) is something that both Facebook and Google are missing”), a bio blurb about Daniel Burke, who plays in a band called Illusion of Safety. If these were indeed randomly dredged rather than shrewdly marshaled, they validate both Fitterman’s argument—here are his ideas about complacency expressed in our own unguarded words, flattened into the same canvas as the incidental Internet texts like *did you find this answer helpful* and *asked 16 days ago in automotive*—and his practice as an “uncreative writer.” His lack of effort is, after all, a Duchampian lack of effort, one where art lies in the gesture rather than the content, where creativity consists in selecting which uncreative text to appropriate. (His *Sprawl* [2010], a canny study on consumerism and the human condition through snippets of customer reviews of retail outlets, may be too subtly orchestrated to qualify as uncreative.) Here, his gesture succeeds in turning up the kind of usefully useless data needed to both show and tell what this book is about, what’s at stake in a discussion whose participants are not actually talking to one another.

Nonetheless, there is something problematic about the underlying bugbear of *Now We Are Friends*. The book wants very badly to be a statement about the consequences of our behavior on the Internet, a place where we are both endlessly linked and finally alone, where the more we engage, the more our socialization becomes, as the editor’s preface puts it, a series of “ambient relationships.” To make the statement resonate, though, it implies that such relationships are all we have, as individuals and as a society, that we are awash in information that for all intents and purposes has come to define us. This is not true, nor do Fitterman’s appropriations persuade us of the necessity of imagining that it is—not for the sake of fantasy, not for the sake of alarmism. To be shaken by the findings of this book requires that we give too much credence to the truism that our online selves are our real selves: that we are fully the sum of our public preferences and purchasing patterns, that what can be found out about us with negligible effort is the entire iceberg. Fitterman may not himself believe this, but the project’s insistence on presenting only the surface leaves little room to think about what might lie beneath.

The limits of the bare-minimum biography on display in *Now We Are Friends* are cast into sharper relief by Steven Zultanski’s coda, “Following Rob,” which turns the lens on Fitterman himself and uses his own personal effects and uninflected texts to

cobble together a portrait. The portrait is much richer than any afforded Benjamin Kessler or his “friends,” but that’s because the methodology behind it is the functional opposite of Fitterman’s approach here—it depends on the kind of intimate data most of us would balk at making public: lists of his colognes and exes and browser bookmarks (these last gathered for Zultanski by Fitterman’s daughter, Coco); the text of his flyleaf dedications to various friends; a screenshot of his computer desktop, complete with photo of his dog, Walter, curled up in an afghan. It is the beginning of an illuminating look at a real live person, and it would have been impossible from the distance maintained by *Now We Are Friends*, without access to the real live information our real friends already have. Acconci went to sociopathic lengths to obtain information that came across as flat too, but the act of pursuing it—not just following it, in the Twitter sense of the word—lent an important texture to its presentation. Fitterman finally gains only what he ventures, which is, by design, next to nothing.

Daniel Levin Becker is the reviews editor of The Believer magazine and the youngest member of the Paris-based Oulipo collective. He lives and works in San Francisco.

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