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Looking at Blindness: The Double Ascendancy of Conceptual Art and Writing

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Introduction to Focus:

Uncreative Writing: What Are You Calling Art?

Doug Nufer, Focus Editor

Conceptual writing has been thought of as an afterthought to conceptual art. And yet, writers deployed strategies of appropriation and re-contextualization long before Marcel Duchamp exhibited a urinal as sculpture. Centos made up of fragments of other works, poems built on the pure meaninglessness of sight or sound, and procedure-riddled texts where language play trumps sense anticipated and developed this tradition. In their anthology *Against Expression*, Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith take a broadly inclusive view to present this genre. For this *ABR* Focus, I would also like to concentrate on a subset of the genre that is sometimes used interchangeably with the term for the whole: uncreative writing. Uncreative writing is the appropriation of previously produced material, taking something out of its original context and putting it forth as art by reproducing it in another context.

More than anyone, Goldsmith has made a career of making work that defines what conceptual writing can be, and of defining it with incisive essays and catchy remarks. A former visual artist who has advertised himself as “being boring,” he is the author of several books that have been branded as Poetry, even though there may be not a line in any of these typically recognized as poetry. After the very creative *No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96* (1997) and *Fidget* (2000), he plunged full-bore into uncreativity with *Soliloquy* (2001), a transcription of everything he said in a week. Then came *Day* (2003), a reproduction of one issue of *The New York Times*. His trilogy, *The Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2007), and *Sports*, (2008), re-published radio broadcasts. Aside from the anthology with Dworkin and his essay collection *Uncreative Writing*, he’s the founder and editor of UbuWeb. Critical writing about his work abounds, despite a rather astonishing phenomenon: his books are, in most cases, impossible to read all the way through. They may be more fun to write about than to read, but what distinguishes them for me is a sequence of responses: first, the idea is intriguing (e.g., a re-publication of the accounts of a product

of Major League Baseball without the express written consent of the commissioner of baseball), but then the idea seems unlikely to stick beyond a few minutes, until, hours later, I’m still reading. Finishing is beside the point. It’s possible to appreciate what he’s doing and to think and, well, fight about these works without reading every last word.

This quality of being ultimately unreadable or readable in the conventional way doesn’t apply to all conceptual or uncreative writing. The books considered here by Robert Fitterman and Simon Morris may defy conventions, but I would have felt cheated if I hadn’t finished them. As for Mathew Timmons’s credit history (if not his search engine-engineered work), well, that’s another story, as is Vanessa Place’s compendium of criminal case histories.

The arrival of these critical volumes comes at a critical time for conceptual and uncreative writing.

I’m pleased to welcome recent publications by Fitterman and Place, whose *Notes on Conceptualisms* (2009) must have set some kind of record for garnering reviews: so many more words were written about it, compared to how many words were in it. *Notes* is a provocative introduction to *Against Expression*, Marjorie Perloff’s *Unoriginal Genius*, and *Uncreative Writing*. Even though followers of the genre read much of this material when it appeared on blogs, websites, and elsewhere, the arrival of these critical volumes comes at a critical time for conceptual and uncreative writing. For one thing, despite the reality of art being subject to influence and the technology that facilitates the sharing of works, practicing artists have rarely been so threatened as they are now by non-artists who, by hook or crook or inheritance, hold a copyright. For another, despite the availability of information on this (or any) subject, there’s a tendency for cultural movements to be unrecognized or simply ignored until they are

documented by a university press, commercial house, or even some so-called “paper of record.”

Consider the reception of the citation-built *Reality Hunger* (2010) by David Shields. Review after review made no mention of David Markson, whose novels set the contemporary standard for works that are composed as mosaics from lines of other books. Shields himself acknowledged Markson in an interview, but in the parallel universe of daily newspapers and glossy magazines, appropriation was something new. *The New York Times* might notice Kenneth Goldsmith for a day, but for *Day*?

Meanwhile in my parallel universe, the people who write about conceptual and uncreative writing tend to be those who have some stake in it. Although this may be common for any field of endeavor, I looked for people from a variety of backgrounds to respond to the peculiar challenges that this writing poses, including reviewers who are new to the game with those who are well aware of it. Above arguments of fair use vs. copyright infringement and the problems of sorting out a genre that puts work done by an intense level of constraint-driven creative thought (e.g., *Eunoia* [2001] by Christian Bök) in the bin with work done by an arduous process of scanning and cutting and pasting (e.g., *Day*), looms an essential question for anyone who would explain this stuff: isn’t it just bullshit?

What is art? Is that urinal a sculpture just because Duchamp says it is? These are questions that have been around forever, and now, thanks to a new burst of activity that strikes many as blatantly fraudulent if not merely preposterous, issues that visual artists have long dealt with have come to the world of creative and uncreative writing.

Doug Nufer knows and likes many of these people in the conceptual writing world, and although he’s flattered to have had his novel Never Again identified as conceptual in the appendix of Notes on Conceptualisms, he’s not so sure about that.

Looking at Blindness: The Double Ascendancy of Conceptual Art and Writing

Jen Graves

Last year, I decided *not* to visit Robert Smithson’s classic work of land art, *Spiral Jetty* (1970), before writing about it. Instead, I substituted a visit with a story, told to me by a curator friend over dinner on a sidewalk café in Seattle. She went to *Spiral Jetty* several years ago in an exhausted state; her father had recently died, and at the end of the trip to his funeral, she tagged on a drive out to the *Jetty*, which is notoriously difficult to find. Right on cue, she found herself lost. She had a hard time distinguishing jetties; there are real, non-art ones in that same area on the Great Salt Lake, and the ground is rough and unmarked. She got out of the rented SUV and still wasn’t sure she was in the right place—until she found a camera lens cap in the dirt at the mouth of the path, the unmistakable mark of an art tourist.

I embedded this appropriated story in my own essay rather than my own memoir of pilgrimage because it characterizes *Spiral Jetty* as aptly, and in its elliptical way, is maybe more faithful to the spirit of

Smithson’s piece. Smithson knew *Spiral Jetty* would be rarely visited but widely photographed—he made it that way—and he knew too that the *Jetty* could disappear under the water of the lake’s naturally changing level only to reemerge years later (which it did after his death). In his work, he was always concerned with the tension between seeing and not seeing; as the scholar Thomas Crow has pointed out, his famous “non-sites”—piles of earth taken from remote sites and arranged in gallery settings—might also be seen as “non-sights,” conjuring the notion of everything you missed in this lopped-off environment.

I felt free to non-sight *Spiral Jetty*. While Smithson is not a conceptual artist per se—as in, an artist who is strictly grouped with Sol LeWitt, Joseph Kosuth, and others of the purist ilk—he was certainly conceptually driven, and given the dematerialization of the art object under conceptualism, deferring the physical object with a linguistic one seems to be just

carrying out what the art trained me to do. Conceptual art has always been about language, or about what Roland Barthes termed the transformation of “the work” into “the text,” or a field of inquiry rather than an object of delectation. Conceptualism in art was one among many attempts in twentieth-century art to move the proxy body of the art object to the side so that the primary bodies—author and viewer—could rise and come together for a dance with nothing but a slim negative space between them.

While conceptual art didn’t get going until the 1960s, its first object is obviously Duchamp’s *Fountain* (1917), the readymade urinal, which doesn’t need to be seen to be appreciated and understood, and which, as Duchamp put it, did nothing more than take an existing object and add a new idea to it. And yet, conceptualism is unfixed, almost from the beginning. The readymades that Duchamp lost at the start of his career (including *Fountain*) were reproduced later.

————— *Graves continued on next page*

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

Northwestern University Press
http://www.nupress.northwestern.edu
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 author 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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