

## **Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?**

Kenneth Goldsmith

There is a room in the Musée d'Orsay that I call the room of possibilities. The museum is roughly set up chronologically, and you happily wend your way through the nineteenth century until you hit this one room that is a group of about a half a dozen painterly responses to the invention of the camera. One that sticks in my mind is a trompe l'oeil solution in which a painted figure reaches out of the frame into the viewer's space. Another incorporates three-dimensional objects into the canvas. Great attempts, but as we all know, impressionism won out.

With the rise of the Web, writing has met its photography. By that, I mean that writing has encountered a situation similar to that of painting upon the invention of photography, a technology so much better at doing what the art form had been trying to do that, to survive, the field had to alter its course radically. If photography was striving for sharp focus, painting was forced to go soft, hence impressionism. Faced with an unprecedented amount of available digital text, writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance.

When we look at our text-based world today, we see the perfect environment for writing to thrive. Similarly, if we look at what happened when painting met photography, we find the perfect analog-to-analog correspondence, for nowhere lurking beneath the surface of painting, photography, or film was a speck of language, thus setting the stage for an imagistic revolution. Today, digital media has set the stage for a literary revolution.

In 1974, Peter Bürger was still able to make the claim that, “because the advent of photography makes possible the precise mechanical reproduction of reality, the mimetic function of the fine arts withers. But the limits of this explanatory model become clear when one calls to mind that it cannot be transferred to literature. For in literature, there is no technical innovation that could have produced an effect comparable to that of photography in the fine arts.”<sup>1</sup> Now there is.

With the rise of the Internet, writing is arguably facing its greatest challenge since Gutenberg. What has happened in the past fifteen years has forced writers to conceive of language in ways unthinkable just a short time ago. With an unprecedented onslaught of the sheer quantity of language (often derided as information glut in general culture), the writer faces the challenge of exactly how best to respond. Yet the strategies to respond are embedded in the writing process, which gives us the answers whether or not we’re aware of it.

Why are so many writers now exploring strategies of copying and appropriation? It’s simple: the computer encourages us to mimic its workings. If cutting and pasting were integral to the writing process, we would be mad to imagine that writers wouldn’t explore and exploit those functions in ways that their creators didn’t intend. Think back to the mid-1960s, when Nam June Paik placed a huge magnet atop a black-and-white television set, which resulted in the *détournement* of a space previously reserved for Jack Benny and Ed Sullivan into loopy, organic abstractions. If I can chop out a huge section of the novel I’m working on and paste it into a new document, what’s going to stop me from copying and pasting a Web page in its entirety and dropping it into my text? When I dump a clipboard’s worth of language from somewhere else into my work and massage its formatting and font to look exactly like it’s always been there, then, suddenly, it feels like it’s mine.<sup>2</sup>

You might counter by saying that, after all, home computers have been around for twenty-five years. What’s so new about this? The penetration and saturation of broadband connections makes the harvesting of masses of language easy and tempting. With dial-up Web access, although it was possible to copy and paste words, in the beginning (or Gopherspace), texts were doled out one screen at a time. And even though it was text, the load time was still considerable. With broadband, the spigot runs 24/7. By comparison, there was nothing native to the system of typewriting that encouraged the replication of texts. It was incredibly slow and laborious to do so. Later, after you finished writing, you could make all the copies you

wanted on a Xerox machine. As a result, there was a tremendous amount of manipulation that happened after the writing was finished. William Burroughs's cut-ups or Bob Cobbing's mimeographed visual poems are prime examples. The previous forms of borrowing in literature—collage or pastiche, taking a sentence from here, a sentence from there—were predicated on the sheer amount of manual labor involved: to retype an entire book is one thing, and to cut and paste a entire book is another. The ease of appropriation has raised the bar to a new level.

The cut-and-paste scenario plays out again and again as we encounter and adopt other digital, network-enabled strategies that further alter our relationship with words. Social networking, file sharing, blogging: in these environments, language has value not as much for what it says but for what it does. We deal in active language, passing information swiftly for the sake of moving it. To be the originator of something that becomes a broader meme trumps being the originator of the actual trigger event that is being reproduced.<sup>3</sup> The “re-” gestures—such as reblogging and retweeting—have become cultural rites of cachet in and of themselves. If you can filter through the mass of information and pass it on as an arbiter to others, you gain an enormous amount of cultural capital. Filtering is taste. And good taste rules the day: Marcel Duchamp's exquisite filtering and sorting sensibility combined with his finely tuned taste rewrote the rules.

Since the dawn of media, we've had more on our plates than we could ever consume, but something has radically changed: never before has language had so much materiality—fluidity, plasticity, malleability—begging to be actively managed by the writer. Before digital language, words were almost always found imprisoned on a page. How different it is today, when digitized language can be poured into any conceivable container: text typed into a Microsoft Word document can be parsed into a database, visually morphed in Photoshop, animated in Flash, pumped into online text-mangling engines, spammed to thousands of e-mail addresses, and imported into a sound-editing program and spit out as music—the possibilities are endless. You could say that this isn't writing, and in the traditional sense, you'd be right. But this is where things get interesting: we aren't hammering away on typewriters. Instead, focused all day on powerful machines with infinite possibilities, connected to networks with a number of equally infinite possibilities, writers and their role are being significantly challenged, expanded, and updated.

Clearly we are in the midst of a literary revolution.

Or are we? From the looks of it, most writing proceeds as if the Internet

never happened. 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. Since then, a parade of blue-chip artists from Andy Warhol to Jeff Koons have taken Duchamp's ideas to new levels, which have become part and parcel of the mainstream art world discourse. Similarly, in music, sampling—entire tracks constructed from other tracks—has become commonplace. From Napster to gaming, from karaoke to BitTorrent files, the culture appears to be embracing the digital and all the complexity it entails—with the exception of writing.

Although the digital revolution has fostered a fertile environment in which conceptual writing can thrive, the roots of this type of writing can be traced as far back as the mechanical processes of medieval scribes or the procedural compositional methods of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. James Boswell's *Life of Johnson*, a meticulous and obsessive accumulation of information (replete with glosses similar to the way comments function on blogs today) was prescient of today's writing.

Modernism provided a number of precedents including Stéphane Mallarmé's falsified fashion writings, Erik Satie's experiments with repetition and boredom, Duchamp's readymades, and Francis Picabia's embrace of mechanical drawing techniques. Similarly, Gertrude Stein's epically unreadable tomes and Ezra Pound's radical, multilingual collaged works could be considered proto-conceptual. Perhaps the most concrete example of "moving information" is Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project*, a work that collates more than nine hundred pages' worth of notes.

By midcentury, with the advent of widespread technology, we see such diverse movements as musique concrète, concrete poetry, and Oulipo and Fluxus picking up the thread. Texts such as Walter Benjamin's writings on media, Michel de Certeau's *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Roland Barthes's *Mythologies*, and Jean Baudrillard's theories of simulacra provide a theoretical framework. From the 1940s to the early 1990s, the towering influence of John Cage—as composer, poet, and philosopher—cannot be underestimated.

The 1960s brought the advent of conceptual art and saw the emergence of Andy Warhol, perhaps the single most important figure in uncreative or conceptual writing. Warhol's entire oeuvre was based on the idea of uncreativity: the effortless production of mechanical paintings and unwatchable films in which literally nothing happens. In terms of literary output, too, Warhol pushed the envelope by having other people write his books for him. He invented new genres of literature: *a: a novel* was a mere transcription of dozens of cassette tapes, spelling errors, stumbles, and stutters left exactly as they were typed. His *Diaries*, an enormous tome, were spoken over the phone to an assistant and transcribed; they can be read as an update to Boswell's *Life of Johnson*. In Perloffian terms, Andy Warhol was an "unoriginal genius."

By the 1980s, appropriation art was the rage. Sherrie Levine was busy rephotographing Walker Evans's photos, Richard Prince was reframing photographs of cowboys taken from Marlboro ads, Cindy Sherman was being everyone but Cindy Sherman, and Jeff Koons was encasing vacuum cleaners in Plexiglas. Music of the period reflected this as well: from hip-hop to plunderphonics to pop, the sample became the basis for much music. Artifice ruled: inspired by the voguing craze, lip-synching became the preferred mode of performance in concert.

In the 1990s, with the emergence of the Internet, as chronicled earlier, uncreative writing developed as an appropriate response for its time, combining historical permissions with powerful technology to imagine new ways of writing.

What we're dealing with here is a basic change in the operating system of how we write at the root level. The results might not look different, and they might not feel different, but the underlying ethos and modes of writing have been permanently changed. If painting reacted to photography by moving toward abstraction, it seems unlikely that writing is doing the same in relation to the Internet. It appears that writing's response will be mimetic and replicative, involving notions of distribution while proposing new platforms of receivership. Words very well might be written not to be read but rather to be shared, moved, and manipulated. Books, electronic and otherwise, will continue to flourish. Although the new writing will have an electronic gleam in its eyes, its consequences will be distinctly analog.

Other approaches of writing will continue on their own path, finding solutions to their own lines of inquiry. What we're proposing here is very specific to those so inclined to that approach. In closing, the sentiments

of Sol LeWitt—who looms very large in conceptual writing—reminds us that there is nothing prescriptive in this endeavor: “I do not advocate a conceptual form of art for all artists. I have found that it has worked well for me while other ways have not. It is one way of making art; other ways suit other artists. Nor do I think all conceptual art merits the viewer’s attention. Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good.”<sup>4</sup>

## NOTES

1. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 32. First printed in 1974.

2. The language environment we’re working in could easily have been rendered unique and noncopyable: witness how unobtainable language and images are in Flash-based environments.

3. The word *meme* comes from the Greek word *mimema*, “something imitated.”

4. Sol LeWitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art,” *Artforum* (June 1967): 79–83, [http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol\\_Lewitt.htm](http://www.ddooss.org/articulos/idiomas/Sol_Lewitt.htm).

Against Expression, the premier anthology of conceptual writing, presents work that is by turns thoughtful, funny, provocative, and disturbing. Dworkin and Goldsmith, two of the leading spokespersons and practitioners of conceptual writing, chart the trajectory of the conceptual aesthetic from early precursors including Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp to the most prominent of today's writers. Nearly all of the major avant-garde groups of the past century are represented here, including Dada, OuLiPo, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and Flarf to name just a few, but all the writers are united in their imagin Citation: Kenneth Goldsmith (2011/01/17) Why conceptual writing? Why now?. Introduction from "Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing" (RSS). Download: <http://ubu.com/concept/AgainstExpressionTOC-Essays.pdf>. Tagged: Arts and Literature (RSS) literature (RSS), Technology (RSS), Internet (RSS), creativity (RSS), new media (RSS). Summary: "Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now?" is an essay that addresses the impact of the Web on the written word. Citing the impact that photographic technology