Uncreative is the New Creative: Kenneth Goldsmith Not Typing

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The epigraph from Kenneth Goldsmith's *Day* is, by now, very familiar: "That's not writing. That's typing."[1] But is it?

a. The Trouble with Bon Mots

Truman Capote's famous dismissal of Kerouac's work - "it isn't writing at all, it's typing"[2] – turns out to be entirely accurate, even if it isn't interpreted as a pejorative. Capote first made this remark on David Susskind's television show during an appearance with Dorothy Parker and Norman Mailer, but, knowing a *bon mot* when he uttered one, repeated it as often as possible (with the inevitable distortions) in interviews in later years.[3]

What's odd is that Capote never saw his own brand of New Journalism as an equal but different product of typewriting, rooted, as it is, in many of the same values as William S. Burroughs's and Charles Olson's notions of writing as a poetic proprioceptive reportage capable of conveying perceptual truths. After repeating his Kerouac joke in one later interview, Capote was asked by his interlocutor exactly how many writers are just typing, to which he responded "Ninety-nine-point-nine percent. (*Laughs.*) And that's being generous."[4] Capote was missing the obvious, even though he has already stated it: for most of the last two centuries, writing *was* typewriting, and, rather than being an anomaly, he was as caught up in that logic as everyone else.

Capote's moment of blindness is even stranger considering that it occurred during an event when he was fully aware of the difficulties that Parker and Mailer were having in attempting to cope with another new medium, television, which he had already mastered: "Dorothy Parker was scared out of her wits, 'cause this was live television, and she was just afraid to open her mouth, and Norman – I kept tripping him up all the time."[5] Even after his comeuppance at Capote's hands, Mailer, in an article for *Esquire*, defended Capote on the grounds that

he was invoking "the difficulties of the literary craft in contrast to Mr. Kerouac's undisciplined methods of work."[6] He, too, missed the point. Disciplinary practices saturate Kerouac's writing, but as they were not the kind of disciplines familiar to himself, Capote, or Parker, they were effectively invisible. What Kerouac did when he typed was of an entirely different order than the writers working with pens in his own or the previous century. As with custom cars, Marcus Boon notes that *On The Road*, which celebrates speed as a value in and of itself, is a product of "the machinic accelerations of World War II"[7] … accelerations which were produced, before, during and after the war, with the aid of typewriting.

What Kenneth Goldsmith does when he writes is not typing. It operates according to another logic altogether, a logic delineated by the disciplinary constraints of networks, software and the flow of digital text.

b. The Value of Typing

Day is a massive tome, 836 pages in length – as thick as the phonebook of many cities. Its contents consists of the entire issue of the *New York Times* from Friday, September 1, 2000, reproduced "word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page" and bound into book form.

In "Uncreativity As Creative Practice," Goldsmith's manifesto on *Day*, he writes that the object of the project is to be an *un*creative writer:

> I'm interested in a valueless practice. Nothing has less value than yesterday's news (in this case yesterday's newspaper – what could be of less value, say, than stock quotes from September 1, 2000?). I'm interested in quantifying and concretizing the vast amount of "nutritionless" language; I'm also interested in the process itself being equally nutritionless.

Following this trajectory, and with Capote's quote still ringing in our collective ears, it would seem that the logical tool for producing nutritionless language would be typewriting.

However, Goldsmith discovers almost immediately what Capote could not see – that somewhere in the middle of the twentieth century, in the eyes of many writers, typewriting became the preeminent creative method. For Goldsmith like so many others, merely hitting the keys of the typewriter is enough to invoke some sort of inspiration: "with every

keystroke comes the temptation to 'fudge,' 'cut-and-paste,' and 'skew' the mundane language."[8] Moreover, because of the current nostalgic cultural association between typing and unalienated writing (both journalistic and creative), the act of typing itself became problematic as a means of composing something "valueless."

Even the physical labour involved in the retyping of an entire newspaper could be interpreted as a feat of athleticism or performance art, Herculean or abject or both by turns depending on one's critical perspective. Indeed, one of the obvious precedents for Goldsmith's "Uncreativity As Creative Practice" in terms of both the document's syntax and intention are the statements of artist Tehching Hsieh,[9] whose year-long performances (such as living on the streets of Manhattan for a year; living in a barred, austere cell inside his studio for a year; tied to artist Linda Montano for a year by a length of rope cinched around their waists; punching a time clock every hour on the hour for a year) occupy this same uncertain but extreme realm. Making *Day*, Goldsmith would be equal parts Kerouac and Don Marquis's abject typing cockroach assistant, archy ... as long as he was actually typing.

But he wasn't. When Goldsmith conceived of *Day*, he didn't actually own a typewriter. As an occasional professional web developer, Goldsmith has a sophisticated and intimate knowledge of the artistic potential of network technologies, and has stated on many occasions that "If it's not on the Web, it doesn't exist." For a writer familiar with the tools and procedures that produce text in a networked computing environment, a typewriter is a novelty at best, and at worst an inconvenience. Consequently, Goldsmith boxed up and returned the typewriter that he had purchased explicitly to work on *Day* within days of bringing it home, and turned to the network-based document handling system of choice: optical character recognition (OCR) scanning. In a globalized milieu where multinational corporations routinely outsource the digitization of their print archives to firms in India, China and the Philippines, and digital sweatshops exploit third-world labourers to "play online games 24/7 in order to create virtual goods that can be sold for cash,"[10] Goldsmith commoditizes his own labour by converting himself into a one-man data conversion sweatshop, explicitly to avoid being "paid handsomely" for an extended act of performative typing that could easily be staged in a gallery.[11] While Goldsmith is not a political writer, the production of

Day raises many interesting questions about the production, storage and maintenance of writing in a contemporary context.

c. Unböring

... which brings me to the question of *Day's* relationship to boredom. For a writer and artist like Goldsmith, growing up and formulating his practice in New York under the shadow of John Cage, Andy Warhol, Nam June Paik and Jackson Mac Low, whose work all deals extensively with boredom, the question of the artist's relation to boredom is inescapable. As Fredric Jameson details in his discussion of video art, boredom has been a significant part of aesthetic practice since the inception of high modernism. It "can always be used productively as a precious symptom of our own existential, ideological, and cultural limits, an index of what has to be refused in the way of other people's cultural practices and their threat to our own rationalizations about the nature and value of art."[12] Boredom, then, is a sign that we are approaching something we will not yet permit ourselves to think.

One of the most interesting aspects of Goldsmith's approach is he accuses the boring aesthetes of *not being boring enough*: "John Cage, whose mission it was to accept all sound as music, failed; his filter was on too high. He permitted only the sounds that fell into his worldview. Commercial sounds, pop music, lowbrow culture, sounds of violence and aggression, etc. held no place in the Cagean pantheon."[13] In Jameson's terms, Cage et al. did not place the markers indicating the limits of the amusing far enough out into the boring realm that lies beyond. Over the last thirty years, the low-cultural cognates of Jameson's subject matter – music videos, reality television and the availability of cheap home video technology which has ensured that many families now have extensive footage of births, birthday parties, baby's first steps, graduations, weddings and so on, to say nothing of the roles that boredom plays in other aspects of contemporary culture, like electronic music – have greatly expanded the overall toleration of, and arguably even created a craving for, aestheticized boredom, far surpassing the avant-garde's sorties.

Jameson chooses video as the privileged medium for his discussion of this boredom, which signals an end to both the author as great artist and to the corresponding notion of his productions as Great Works because, he claims, video always exists as part of a "flow" rather than as a series

of discrete objects (76). Goldsmith's own metaphors confirm that he conceives of his own work in terms of flow as well: Cage's "filter was on too high." The notion of the "filter," first part of the lexicon of cybernetics and information theory formulated to express the subjective processes that separate out the signals that one individual finds useful from the otherwise contextually useless noise of overall information flow, has passed into the popular vocabulary, thanks to over a decade of consumer-grade email clients and image handling software. And, large as it may be in bound form, *Day* is still easiest to conceive of as part of Goldsmith's overall output – a considerable flow in and of itself, extensive enough that many of his works bear numerical designations rather than titles. In an interview with Marjorie Perloff, Goldsmith states, "I've come to believe that language by its nature is fluid and will assume any form it's poured into."[14]

d. Word Processors

The fluidity of language that Goldsmith's writing demonstrates is a function of the behaviour of language under the conditions of networked computing, as Goldsmith tells Perloff:

> None of my works after *73 Poems* could have been done without the computer [...] My method of language hunting changed in 1994 when I started using the internet. Back then only gopher space or the text-based Lynx browser was available, but suddenly there was reams and reams of raw language available. I didn't even have to type, I just had to cut-and-paste.[15]

Typewriting produces discrete works – one letter per cell in an invisible grid on a discrete page, which in turn is part of a discrete manuscript – written by discrete subjects: authors. Computing produces flows, or more often, *reproduces* flows (as Brian Stefans has remarked, *Day* is "a full frontal act of acidic plagiarism"[16]), which aren't so much written as they are filtered by people like Goldsmith, who is not constituted according to the same logic as an author writing with a typewriter: "I no longer think of myself as a poet or a writer, but instead as a word-processor."[17]

This is not to say that a kind of "mechanical depersonalization" (Jameson 74) was not part of typewriting as well; in both cases, the machine first renders the body of its operator amenable to its operation, then subsumes the operator's identity into itself. Jameson argues, though, that while depersonalization may have been present in

modernist technologies (such as the still photography that preceded video, which required clamping the subjects' heads into position to immobilize them during long exposures, resulting in "the machine as subject and object, alike and indifferently" [74]), it "goes even further in the new medium." (73).

e. Extracting Value

Consider the following passage, from science fiction writer Jack Womack's novel *Ambient*, describing the fate of the "word processor" in Jameson's "new medium":

> Each processor sat in a small cubicle, their eyes focusing the CRTs hanging on the walls before them; each wore headphones so as to hear their terminals – number eights – as they punched away. A red light flashed over one of the cubicles. One of the office maintenants rolled over and unlocked the stocks that held the woman's feet. It guided her across the room, toward the lav; her white cane helped her in tapping out the way. The system had flaws; some employees went insane – they were fired – and some grew blind – the ones whose fingers slipped were given Braille keyboards, at cost.[18]

In *Ambient*, the cognate of proportional spacing is the ability to write every last drop of productivity out of a human asset – the weakest component in the new human-computer writing network – by adapting itself to steadily degenerating bodies. The cost for the necessary adaptations, which are already minimal, thanks to the adaptability of computing technologies, can always be passed on to the workers themselves.

The situation for generative typists is not much better. The familiar dictating voices are still present, but in a networked milieu, become even more despotic as this fragment of a sentence from William T. Vollmann's *You Bright and Risen Angels: a cartoon* demonstrates:

> The keys of my typewriter depress themselves and clack madly, like those of a player piano, like (more appropriately still, since we are in the age of electricity) a teletype machine in some computer center at three in the morning, with the lights glaring steadily down, failed programs in the wastebasket and punchcards on the floor; and far off somewhere at the other end of the dedicated synchronous modem line, a sunken computer swims in its cold lubricants and runs things, and there is nothing to do but wait until it has had its say; the keys do not feel my touch; they do not recognize me; and all across the room the other programmers rest their heads in their arms as Big George dictates to

> them as well, garbage in and garbage out, screwing up everything with his little spots of fun, refusing to drown in the spurious closure of a third-person narrative (think how lonely he must be if he has to play such stupid games with me); when what I really wanted to do was write about our hero [...][19]

As recently as 1967, the focal character of John Barth's *Lost In The Funhouse* was still capable of formulating elaborate fantasies of authorial sovereignty, describing writing as "a truly astonishing funhouse, incredibly complex yet utterly controlled from a great central switchboard like the console of a pipe organ," and himself as its secret operator.[20] *You Bright and Risen Angels* abandons any hope of mastery along with the phonocentrism of Barth's pipe organ metaphor; it reveals the fantasy of authorial control as a shimmering chimerical product of his own funhouse mirrors. The author is out of control from the beginning, merely a local node soldered into the complex network that constitutes the scene of computerized writing. There is no certain point of origin for the text, and, it suggests, no privileged final version. A vast, impersonal, remote mainframe and the villainous Big George dictate simultaneously to the author, who situates himself as one of a masochistic group of "programmers" who only experience subjectivity intermittently: "all I can hope to do is to type in a little ameliorating detail here and there so that my angels will at least have the dignity of consistency as they are made to kill each other, and fall and die, and maybe Big George will draw a long breath at the end of this section and I can make adjustments, but I doubt it, I really doubt it; and all I can say is that I'm very sorry and that I'm dying, too" (17).

Womack's and Vollmann's abject cyborgs provide some evidence for Jameson's contention about the depersonalization of the author under computing, but so does Goldsmith's own work. In *Fidget*,[21] a limit-case for autobiography, Goldsmith objectifies his body for a day in order to first describe its movements into a tape recorder and then transcribe them into digital text, which can flow into many containers: print, a kinetic software application, a gallery installation, a sound recording (In her supplementary essay on *Fidget*, Perloff calls this a "differential poetics"). Goldsmith's writing is many things, often simultaneously, but it is never typing.

None of this means that Goldsmith was successful in his attempt to cleanse his work of creativity, which Goldsmith himself freely admits: "The object of the work was to create a valueless practice, which I found to be an impossibility since the act of reproducing the texts in and of itself has some sort of intrinsic value."[22] In fact, Goldsmith's practice has proved to be so valuable that it may well have spawned its own movement in American poetry; there are "uncreative writing" classes inspired directly by his work at at least three U.S. universities already. As much as anything else, this is evidence of a discontinuity between discursive formations: while terms like "typing" and "uncreativity" are still in circulation, the networks which inform them in a context like Goldsmith's writing have shifted the meanings of these terms in substantial ways. Uncreative is the new creative, and typing will never be typewriting again.

What remains is the uneasy question of the economics of writing subjects in a networked world: who writes, who controls, who pays, and who benefits? Goldsmith's writing practice, already complex and extensive, will be an important site for the investigation of these questions.

Notes

1 Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Day*. Great Barrington: The Figures, 2003: 7.

2 Nicoisia, Gerald. *Memory Babe: A Critical Biography of Jack Kerouac*.: 588.

3 See Capote, Truman. *Truman Capote: Conversations*. Ed. M. Thomas Inge. Jackson/London: UP of Mississippi, 1987. 299; also Capote, Truman. *Conversations with Capote*. Ed. Lawrence Grobel. New York: NAL Books, 1985: 135.

4 Capote, Truman. *Conversations with Capote*. Ed. Lawrence Grobel. New York: NAL Books, 1985. 135.

5 Capote, Truman. *Truman Capote: Conversations*. Ed. M. Thomas Inge: 298.

6 Mailer, Norman. "Of A Small And Modest Malignancy". *Esquire*. Qtd. in Capote, Truman. *Conversations with Capote*. Ed. Lawrence Grobel. New York: NAL Books, 1985: 32

7 *Conversations with Capote:* 198.

8 <epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>

9 <www.one-year-performance.com/menu.html>

10 <www.msnbc.msn.com/id/6870901/>

11 <epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>

12 Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke UP, 1991: 72.

13 <epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html>

14 Perloff, Marjorie. "A Conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith." *Jacket* 21 (February 2003). <www.jacketmagazine.com/21/perl-gold-iv.html>

15 Perloff, Marjorie. :A Conversation with Kenneth Goldsmith

16 <wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/bks_day.html>

17 <wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/bks_day.html>

18 Womack, Jack. *Ambient*. New York: Weidenfield & Nicolson, 1987: 50.

19 Vollmann, William T. *You Bright and Risen Angels*. London: Andre Deutsch, 1987: 15.

20 *Print, Tape, Live Voice*. [1968]. New York: Barth, John. *Lost In The Funhouse: Fiction for* Doubleday, 1988: 97.

21 Goldsmith, Kenneth. *Fidget*. Toronto: Coach House Books, 1999.

22 <wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/goldsmith/bks_day.html>

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