

UNCREATIVITY AS A CREATIVE PRACTICE

Kenneth Goldsmith

I am spending my 39th year practicing uncreativity.

On Friday, September 1, 2000, I began retyping the day's New York Times, word for word, letter for letter, from the upper left hand corner to the lower right hand corner, page by page. Today, November 10, 2000, I am approximately half way through the project. I intend to finish by New Year's Day.

The object of the project is to be as uncreative in the process as possible. It's one of the hardest constraints an artist can muster, particularly on a project of this scale; with every keystroke comes the temptation to "fudge," "cut-and-paste," and "skew" the mundane language. But to do so would be to foil the exercise.

I've long been an advocate of extreme process writing—recording every move my body has made in a day, recording every word I spoke over the course of a week, recording every sound I heard ending in the sound of "r" for almost four years—but never have I faced a writing process this dry, this extreme, this boring.

John Cage said "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all."

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.

Retyping the New York Times is the most nutritionless act of literary appropriation I could conceive of. Had I instead, for example, retyped *Ulysses*, there would have been too much value, for *Ulysses*, as we all know, is a very valuable book.

I took inspiration from Warhol's "Empire," his "unwatchable" 24-hour film of the Empire State Building. Similarly, imagine a book that is written with the intention not to be read. The book as object: conceptual writing; we're happy that the idea exists without ever having to open the book.

Innovative poetry seems to be a perfect place to place a valueless practice; as a gift economy, it is one of the last places in late hyper-capitalism that allows non-function as an attribute. Both theoretically and politically, the field remains wide open.

But in capitalism, labor equals value. So certainly my project must have value, for if my time is worth an hourly wage, then I might be paid handsomely for this work. But the truth is that I've subverted this equation by OCR'ing as much of the newspaper as I can.

Almost 100 years ago, the visual arts came to terms with this issue in Duchamp's "Urinal." Later, Warhol, then Koons extended this practice. In music we have vast examples from John Oswald's Plunderphonics to the ubiquitous practice of sampling. Where has literature been in this dialogue? One hundred years after Duchamp, why hasn't straight appropriation become a valid, sustained or even tested literary practice?

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; certainly, nutritionlessness was not what we would consider a Cagean attribute.

However, if John Cage theoretically claimed that any sound can be music, then we logically must conclude that, properly framed, any language can be poetry.

When I reach 40, I hope to have cleansed myself of all creativity.

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