Improvisation, Community, and Social Practice
A NEW SERIES EDITED BY DANIEL FISCHLIN

Books in this new series advocate musical improvisation as a crucial model for political, cultural, and ethical dialogue and action—for imagining and creating alternative ways of knowing and being in the world. The books are collaborations among performers, scholars, and activists from a wide range of disciplines. They study the creative risk-taking imbued with the sense of movement and momentum that makes improvisation an exciting, unpredictable, ubiquitous, and necessary endeavor.

IMPROV-ISATION AND SOCIAL AESTHET-ICS

GEORGINA BORN, ERIC LEWIS,
AND WILL STRAW, EDS.

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KENNETH GOLDSMITH AND UNCREATIVE IMPROVISATION

Darren Wershler

To be unoriginal with the *minimum* of alteration is
sometimes more distinguished than to be original with
the *maximum* of alteration.
—T. S. Eliot (minimally altered)

Is there such a thing as *un*creative improvisation? If so, how would it operate in the second decade of the twenty-first century, when creativity and improvisation are as likely—or more likely—to be invoked in the business world than in the context of contemporary art? The "uncreative" and "conceptual" practice of Kenneth Goldsmith, with all of its attendant impurities, provides one possible model.[1]

Much of Goldsmith's oeuvre, which involves labor-intensive acts of textual appropriation on a large scale, bears a counterintuitive relationship to the sorts of extemporaneous production that characterize improvisation. However, Goldsmith's fifteen-year stint as a DJ for the free-form New Jersey radio station WFMU (from mid-1995 to mid-2010) offers some possibilities for a reconsideration of how improvisation works in a contemporary context. Goldsmith's show, which went under a variety of monikers, including "Unpopular Music with Kenny G," "Anal Magic with Kenny G," "The Kenny G show with Kenny G," "Kenny G's Hour of Pain," and "Intelligent Design with Kenny G," managed to bridge the gap between improvisation and constraint without resolving the difference in one direction or the other.

In *The Philosophy of Improvisation*, Gary Peters (2009, 52) argues that "free-improvisation is more about power than it is about freedom." As he pushes and pulls against self-imposed limitations, what Goldsmith's uncreative improvisations embody is the struggle between control and autonomy—in other words, what Michel Foucault (1982, 780) dubbed "power relations." Further, Goldsmith's uncreative improvisation provides an important contrast to the ways in which the discourse of contemporary business uses terms such as "improvisation," "innovation," and "creativity." For corporate gurus such as Richard Florida, these terms are always productive—that is, they are a means to make something efficient and commodifiable. Goldsmith, however, is a much more complex beast. Like Andy Warhol and Jeff Koons, Goldsmith knows the techniques of the business world well and cheerfully incorporates them into his repertoire. At the same time, his work gestures back toward decades of difficult, uncomfortable, constrained art and, ultimately, to the freedom that allows for it. However, Goldsmith's astonishing popularity indicates that he clearly and obviously profits from his work and does not occupy anything like the oppositional positions of the historical left. In sum, Goldsmith's uncreative improvisation is characterized by its *impurity*.

As Craig Dworkin (2007, 34) has noted elsewhere, Goldsmith's ongoing personal project, which he has successively dubbed "nutritionless writing," "uncreative writing," and "conceptual writing," falls squarely into a century-old tradition of technologized, high-volume appropriation. Goldsmith's methodology proceeds by identifying a neglected (because mundane, or, in Goldsmith's terms, "boring") repository of cultural discourse, such as an average edition of the *New York Times*, or the artist and album names from his extensive LP collection (*6799*),[2] or all of the traffic reports on a New York radio station that appear at ten-minute intervals over a twenty-four-hour period (*Traffic*). He then transcribes the contents of that repository meticulously, sorts and reconfigures the resulting digital manuscript as a book, and attaches his name to it. In this context, even Goldsmith's curation of the decade-old Ubuweb, the world's largest digital archive of avant-garde sound recordings, concrete poetry, video, outsider art, and related critical materials, is perhaps his most significant work and arguably part of the practice of uncreative improvisation. (Damon Krukowski [2008] explicitly compares Ubuweb's ongoing operation to Goldsmith's DJ practice at WFMU.) Although such projects have been common in the art world for decades, they are relatively rare in what Charles Bernstein (1986, 246) famously refers to as "official verse culture."

The concept of improvisation does not appear very often in Goldsmith's critical writing or in the discourse of contemporary conceptual writing in general. In Goldsmith and Craig Dworkin's 593-page *Against Expression*

(2011), the term appears only twice and never in the editorial sections of the book.[3] In *Uncreative Writing* (2011b), Goldsmith's major statement of poetics to date, it appears three times (and I address two of them). The first is a comparison of Ezra Pound's and Walter Benjamin's methods of literary appropriation: "Pound's is a more intuitive and improvisatory method of weaving textual fragments into a unified whole. Often-times it takes a great deal of Pound's intervening—finessing, massaging, and editing those found words—to make them all fit together just so. Benjamin's approach is more preordained: the machine that makes the work is set up in advance, and it's just a matter of filling up those categories with the right words, in the order in which they're found, for the work to be successful" (Goldsmith 2011b, loc. 2014).

The Benjamin text that Goldsmith has in mind is *Passagen-Werk* (translated as *The Arcades Project* [Benjamin 1999]), an enormous, cross-referenced shuffle text that had no fixed form until its posthumous publication as a volume with a fixed spine. Goldsmith (2011b, loc. 2008) asserts that "it's impossible to determine Benjamin's exact methodology" for authorship of this work, as he left no set of instructions to follow. Goldsmith also cites Susan Buck-Morss's observation that although *Passagen-Werk* has no necessary narrative structure, it does in fact have a conceptual structure, presenting confusion without collapsing into a confused presentation (loc. 2008). Goldsmith's decision to base the structure of *Capital*, his major work-in-progress, on *Passagen-Werk* suggests that while it may be impossible to follow the letter of Benjamin's methodology, improvising in his spirit may be an option. Marjorie Perloff's paper (and subsequent book) "Unoriginal Genius: Walter Benjamin's Arcades as Paradigm for the New Poetics" provides critical support for this position, arguing that *Passagen-Werk* is "paradigmatic for our own poetics," with Goldsmith as its exemplar (Perloff 2008, 251). Just as the flaneur improvises a path through the rigid confusion of urban space, Benjamin and Goldsmith demonstrate that it is possible to repeat something to make a difference.

What form would this sort of practice take? In *Uncreative Writing*, Goldsmith (2011b, loc. 2284) invokes Sol LeWitt's notion of art based on the recipe: "Like shopping for ingredients and cooking a meal, he says that all the decisions for making an artwork should be made beforehand and that the actual execution of the work is merely a matter of duty, an action that shouldn't require too much thought, improvisation, or even genuine feeling." One name for this approach (which Goldsmith implies cannot expunge improvisation entirely) is "scored improvisation," a term that appears in some of Goldsmith's early music criticism and provides his longest statement on improvisation to date (Goldsmith 1999, 180). In "Near the Edge and Off the Page" (1999), what interests Goldsmith is the practice of commingling/composed scores and improvised works. The exemplars of this approach, Goldsmith argues, are Pierre Boulez and John Cage, but he also provides a laundry list of other musicians who blur these boundaries, including John Zorn, Mauricio Kagel, Butch Morris, Iancu Dumitrescu, and Takehisa Kosugi. The transgressions are bidirectional; Goldsmith happily reports, for example, that some of the guitarist Jim O'Rourke's work with Kosugi on John Cage scores "would certainly have upset Cage." For Goldsmith, the result of these experiments is "win-win," producing "flexible and spontaneous" structures that hold composition and improvisation in tension without resolving that tension in one direction or another (180).

But is this improvisation, really? Theorist practitioners have argued that the distinction between scored composition and improvisation is blurrier than we commonly imagine. In the essay "Towards an Ethics of Improvisation," the composer Cornelius Cardew (whom Goldsmith has long hosted in pirated form on Ubuweb), implies that it is. He writes that "scores like those of LaMonte Young (for example 'Draw a straight line and follow it') could in their inflexibility take you outside yourself, stretch you to an extent that could not occur spontaneously" (Cardew 1971, xviii). Conversely, as Marcus Boon (2010, 228), a DJ, university professor, and Goldsmith colleague and collaborator, points out, many improvisers are not all that free in their approach: "Faced with a field of total, open possibility, many improvisers repeat a certain set of gestures that are 'free' but as predictable as the idiomatic forms they seek to move away from. In other words, they copy themselves, or they copy a way of relating to other musicians. This is not necessarily bad, since it can result in new idioms, protocols, forms of beauty and pleasure (what Simon Reynolds identifies as the pleasure of 'cheesiness'). Or not: there are no guarantees." Just as structure can lead to unprecedented occurrences, "total openness" in practice often means a reliance on "common sense," "gut feelings," or some other set of unexamined and clichéd forms.

There is also a philosophical justification for considering Goldsmith's work within the realm of improvisation. Peters argues for a consideration of improvisation that is quite distinct from discourses that invoke the creativity and innovation of the performer:

> Instead of situating freedom in a future yet to be attained, the discussion follows Immanuel Kant in tracing the origin of freedom to the prior play of the cognitive faculties, a sense common to all (*sensus communis*) and one that the artwork helps us remember. This strategy is crucial because it allows for a rethinking of freedom in terms of memory rather than hope while also introducing into the past a freedom that, once remembered, must be preserved in the artwork. In other words, the prioritization of the past is able to be conceived in conservationist rather than conservative terms: the conservation of freedom understood as the infinite opening of the artwork. (Peters 2009, 2)

Here freedom is a state that exists not because of but prior to the creation of the structured work, which calls forth memories of that freedom in the minds of the audience. To support his position, Peters also cites Keith Johnstone's *Impro*, which uses the same allusion: "The improvisor has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but he pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still 'balance' it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them" (Johnstone 1979, 116). Once again, the spirit of Walter Benjamin has been invoked; for Peters, the improviser is like Benjamin's Angel of History, blown ceaselessly backward into the future while watching history accumulate in his wake.

Likewise, Goldsmith continually researches the archive of avant-garde practice for performative recipes to pair with texts he has plucked from some forgotten corner of the wreckage of history. As Boon (2010, 140–41) points out, Goldsmith's interventions are minor, because limiting himself to making small changes allows him to maintain his claim to be conceptual, uncreative, and scripted. For Goldsmith, the act of carefully selecting and preparing something for a procedure (however idiosyncratic) is a means to remember that the "givens" of history could have been, and can still be, otherwise.

One outcome that we might reasonably expect from such a model of improvisation is the death and subsequent disappearance of the modernist author as genius, whose acts of bricolage and appropriation succeed precisely because of a refined sensibility. However, this is one place where Goldsmith differs from the more radical improvisers that inspired him. John Cage, for example, eschews the notion of taste along with his attempts to break free of the sovereign subject position:

> What I have never appreciated in improvisation is the return to memory or to taste: the return of things that have been learned or to which one has become accustomed—sometimes consciously, deliberately, sometimes insidiously. Phrases thought to be original are only articulations heard a long time ago. In improvisation, when you think you are following your own direction, most of the time you are following someone else's line. At the most, that is not what bothers me so much as the desire for uniqueness that appears in the act of improvising. Once you realize the number of obstacles and of more or less deliberate references that the improviser is struggling with, you can only smile at the claim to originality. (Kostelanetz 1988, 229)

By way of contrast, here is Goldsmith (2011b, loc. 2508): "Sorting and filtering—moving information—has become a site of cultural capital. Filtering is taste. And good taste rules the day." In the same volume, Goldsmith's references to the taste of his heroes Benjamin and Warhol both merit the adjective "exquisite" (locs. 2009, 2508). Where Cage wants to purge taste, Goldsmith hangs on to it, tightly. Regardless of whatever else he is doing, Goldsmith is almost always building his reputation as an artist in the process.

In this as in many other respects, Goldsmith is a residual modernist. As Deleuze and Guattari (1987, 6) described, although most modern methods for creating openness and multiplicity succeed in one aspect, a unity of totalization often reaffirms itself at a different level—in this case, the reification of the author as iconoclastic but tasteful genius. (Krukowski [2008] refers to this as Goldsmith's "Stein-like self-admiration.") In "My Career in Poetry," Goldsmith explains the logic behind the "famous suit[s]" (Goldsmith 2011a, 8) he wore for his readings at the White House for President Barack Obama and the First Lady. Although "John Stewart speculated that it was improvised at the last minute, quipping that the afternoon before I went onstage I glanced at the wall and asked, 'Hey, does that wallpaper come off?'" both the paisley suit that Goldsmith wore for the evening performance and the pastel suit that he wore during the day were "designed by the avant-garde designer Thom Browne under his Brooks Brothers' owned Black Fleece label" (2011a, 6). Call it sartorial scored improvisation, if you like. In any event, it epitomizes Goldsmith's signature ability to make careful planning evoke spontaneity—and increase the value of his personal brand at the same time.

This seems like an appropriate spot to suggest that the "creative" business theory of Richard Florida and the "uncreative" work of Kenneth Goldsmith are reflections of each other. They are strikingly similar but ultimately op-

posed attempts to address the same basic situation: the cultural economy of late capital. As BAVO (Gideon Boie and Matthias Pauwels) argue, the sort of instrumentalized creativity that has been part of U.S. business since the 1950s is a major component of contemporary business: "When creativity is affirmed as an autonomous value that needs to be nurtured and maintained, it stands in a direct instrumental relation to the current regime. The acquisition of poetic freedom by creative agents is achieved through the agent's voluntary acceptance of the inscription of creativity in the economic process, where it gets put into service as something that cannot be established by capital alone" (BAVO 2007, 163). In a networked milieu, as business claims creativity for itself, turning its factories into playgrounds, art makes a corresponding detour into the boring and the uncreative, turning its playgrounds into factories. Creativity is the imaginary surplus that contemporary business uses to remain "business as usual," wallpapering over the traumas of barely contained global fiscal meltdowns and looming climate change.

As texts such as Florida's bestselling *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2012) and Hal Niedzviecki's *Hello, I'm Special* (2004) demonstrate, the invocation of creativity is deeply imbricated into contemporary neoliberal ideology and ontology: "the creative ethos pervades everything from our workplace culture to our values and communities, reshaping the way we see ourselves as economic and social actors and molds the core of our very identities" (Florida 2012, loc. 525). For Florida, creativity is the new normal, a paradoxical regime of individuality, self-expression, and openness to difference (2012, loc. 486) that somehow includes "heretofore excluded groups of eccentrics and nonconformists" (loc. 438). This cheerfully contradictory contention corresponds closely with Slavoj Žižek's description of today's predominant mental state as a sense of not being fully in the clutches of the dominant power structure. Everywhere we see opportunities for play and creativity (Žižek 1997, 77), although such moments are precisely when we are most fully in ideology's grasp (Žižek 1989, 49). As Alan Liu (2004, 375) points out, the link that the Romantics once forged between creativity and critique is now badly broken, "no matter how functional creativity may be at the lower levels of ideology."

The signature characteristic of the neoliberal formulation of improvisation and creativity is that it is always *useful* (Florida 2012, loc. 424 passim). In Florida's writing, creativity is important because it is the machine that synthesizes nebulously defined "knowledge" and "information" into a thoroughly instrumentalized "innovation," which can be anything (and the

range here is breathtaking in its narrowness) from "a new technological artifact or a new business model or method" (loc. 736). In "Struggling with the Creative Class," Jamie Peck provides the following incisive critique:

> Rather than "civilizing" urban economic development by "bringing in culture," creativity strategies do the opposite: they commodify the arts and cultural resources, even social tolerance itself, suturing them as putative economic assets to evolving regimes of urban competition. They enlist to this redoubled competitive effort some of the few remaining pools of untapped resources; they enroll previously-marginalized actors for this effort, enabling the formation of new governance structures and local political channels; they constitute new objects of governance and new stakes in interurban competition; and they enable the script of urban competivity [*sic*] to be performed—quite literally—in novel and often eye-catching ways. (Peck 2005, 763)

Florida (2012, loc. 859), for example, is ready and willing to put even poets, musicians, and artists to work in his caring sweatshops, willfully forgetting that creativity ever bore a strong relation to waste, excess, profligacy, and expenditure.

As Thomas Frank's *The Conquest of Cool* (1997) carefully and convincingly documents, the entry of creativity into the discourse of business is not a recent phenomenon; it spread into the larger business community through the advertising agencies of Madison Avenue between 1946 and 1966 (the *Mad Men* moment), preceding the appearance of the 1960s counterculture. By 1969, when the highly influential exhibition "Live in Your Head: When Attitudes Become Form: Works–Concepts–Processes–Situations–Information" was staged by Harald Szeemann at the Bern Kunsthalle (March 22–April 27, 1969) and the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London (September 28–October 27, 1969), John Murphy could confidently write the following on behalf of the show's patron, the Philip Morris tobacco company:

> We at Philip Morris feel it is appropriate that we participate in bringing these works to the attention of the public, for there is a key element in this "new art" which has its counterpart in the business world. That element is innovation—without which it would be impossible for progress to be made in any segment of society. Just as the artist endeavors to improve his interpretation and conceptions through innovation, the commercial entity strives to improve its end product or service through experimentation with new methods and materials. Our constant search for a new and

> better way in which to perform and produce is akin to the questionings of the artists whose works are represented here. (Murphy 1999, 126)

The ease with which the discourse of business absorbed the art world's notions of creativity explains in part why "When Attitudes Become Form" became so central to contemporary practice, Catherine Spencer writes in her review of the 2013 re-creation of the show: "As well as introducing the ideas of process art and the concept exhibition, 'When Attitudes Become Form' ushered in a new era of overt corporate art sponsorship. You don't need to look much further for an object lesson of money and power uniting to write histories, and select archives for preservation."[4]

During the same period that business began to appropriate the discourses of conceptual art and improvisation to describe its own modes of creativity, European and North American neo-avant-garde art movements (especially Fluxus, pop, and figures such as Jackson Mac Low and John Cage) were making a reciprocal shift into a variety of investigations of the boring and the mundane, including the discourse and methods of business itself. Goldsmith's forays in this tradition are worth considering for several reasons. Just as Warhol incorporated practices from his early days of advertising display and window dressing into his later career and Jeff Koons worked on Wall Street as a commodities broker, Goldsmith, since the late 1990s, has drawn on the discourses and techniques of business—particularly information technology and advertising (although this is seldom, if ever, commented on by his critics).

During the dotcom boom at the turn of the millennium, Goldsmith was working as a creative director for an early New York Internet design firm called Methodfive Inc. Methodfive was an archetypal dotcom success story: founded in 1996 by a twenty-three-year-old University of Pennsylvania dropout named Adeo Ressi, who had already sold a previous Internet startup, the Greenwich Village firm boasted customers such as the New York Times Company and Fox Networks. In January 2000, one month before it was sold to Xceed Inc. for $75 million in cash and stock, Methodfive employed seventy-five to eighty people.[5] One of the few surviving online artifacts relating to Goldsmith from this period is an entry from the online newsletter *Courtney Pulitzer's Cyber Scene*, dated Monday, April 21, 1997. In it, Pulitzer recaps Goldsmith's talk "Ramping Up without Dumbing Down: Lessons Learned from Methodfive's Own Site Redesign," delivered on the same date at the After-5 Web Forum at the offices of NickandPaul in the Chelsea Market. As the following excerpt demonstrates, Goldsmith (who in a business context usually identified himself as "Ken" to immediately distinguish by mode of address on the phone his business contacts from art-world people, who knew him as "Kenneth," and friends who called him "Kenny," and thus shift into the proper persona)[6] was adept at the business argot of the moment:

> As the client, ensure that you understand the components and ramifications of what's outlined in the spec before submitting it to the designers or to others involved in your Web initiative, such as the content producers or programmers. All involved parties, especially the designers, should then follow this document to the letter. Using an extranet to post thoughts, comments and feedback regarding the site's development and for designers to post their work helps with communication and meeting expectations. Allow your designers to be experimental and innovative during the first stages of design to get creative juices flowing. Then assign a "cranky monkey" who helps the designers integrate their imaginative and inventive designs into a site that's practical, functional and buildable. While keeping in mind the new technologies that will be able to repackage and distribute information in a new and innovative way, be aware of who your audience is and their level of technology. Analysis on who your user is and what the level of technology they'll be using to access your site is also important. Designing for a lower-end browser and keeping plug-ins to a bare minimum to ensure that the site can be accessed by the greatest amount of people possible is one way to ensure your users are accessing your site with ease.[7]

At the same that he was working for Methodfive, Goldsmith was coding the first pages for Ubuweb, which had launched six months earlier in 1997. In a recent e-mail, he remarked that the Methodfive talk "is the UbuWeb charter statement."[8] Hewing to Methodfive's principles so closely is, in part, what has kept this ancient site in good operating condition for more than a decade with minimal alterations to the underlying code.

Second, Goldsmith (2011b, 258) works explicitly with the categories that the business world's championing of improvisatory creativity exclude (e.g., the uncreative and the boring) to reveal the current bankruptcy of the popular usage of terms such as "creative" and "spontaneous." He alludes indirectly to Florida's arguments, writing, "Having worked in advertising for many years as a 'creative director,' I can tell you that, despite what cultural pundits might say, creativity—as it's been defined by our culture with its endless parade of formulaic novels, memoirs and films—is the thing to flee

from, not only as a member of the 'creative class,' but also as a member of the 'artistic class.'" Intriguingly, both Florida and Goldsmith cite Warhol as a major inspiration for their conceptual moves (see Florida 2012; Goldsmith 2011b).[9] However, there are not two perspectives here but a perspective and what eludes it: Goldsmith's work shows, as if in relief, the gaps in the edifice of Florida's approach.

Like Goldsmith, Peter Stallybrass (2007, 1584) has suggested that digital media, and database technology in particular, offer a way out of the regime of originality, creativity, and proprietary authorship. He argues that originality "produces as its inevitable double the specter of plagiarism, a specter rooted in the fear that we might have more to learn from others than from ourselves." As an alternative to the Romantic legacy of waiting around for inspiration to strike, Stallybrass offers instead a program of organizing, annotating, and imitating that is strikingly similar to the self-written job description that Goldsmith provides in "Being Boring," a major statement of his poetics: "I've transformed from a writer into an information manager, adept at the skills of replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, hoarding, storing, reprinting, bootlegging, plundering, and transferring."[10] Such an approach is what Charles Bernstein (1986, 164) has dubbed a "strategy of tactics." In opposition to strategy proper, which manifests all of the assurances of the powerful, a strategy of tactics would be a way to combine the hodgepodge of poetic techniques so that they form "a complementarity of critiques," which is then projected onto the social in the manner of negative dialectics, as a transgression against tradition. Goldsmith's notion of scored improvisation is part of a strategy of tactics—neither one thing nor the other but a compromise formation that holds the two approaches in an unresolved tension. This approach is driven by the ethic of impurity that Goldsmith professes to adore. And, as Boon asks rhetorically in the unedited transcript of his interview with Goldsmith for *Bomb*, "Your radio practice also kind of flaunts that impurity, right?"[11]

Uncreative improvisation is most evident in the least discussed aspect of Goldsmith's practice: his three-hour DJ shifts for the free-form radio station WFMU (90.1 FM in the Hudson Valley, Lower Catskills, western New Jersey, and eastern Pennsylvania and 91.1 FM in Jersey City; see also http://wfmu.org). Originally the radio station of Upsala College in East Orange, New Jersey, WFMU is often credited with coining the term "free-form" (Post 1993, 108) and is the longest-operating station of its type in the United States. The content on virtually every radio station in existence—music, commercials, and public service announcements—is dictated by a playlist created

and maintained by the station's program director. Steve Post (1993, 107) asserts that "playlists have nearly always been standard operating procedure at almost all radio stations." Free-form stations such as WFMU, which grant total autonomy to their disc jockeys provided that they adhere to Federal Communications Commission (FCC) regulations, such as the need for station identification and restrictions on foul language,[12] are the exception to this rule (WFMU is almost entirely listener-supported, which frees its programming from the need to make a profit or the demands of advertisers). As a result, as Jaime Wolf described in an article for the *New York Times Magazine* from 1999, which briefly mentions a younger Goldsmith under his *nom de radio* "Kenny G," the DJs of WFMU have long been arbiters of taste in American music.

What a DJ actually does is synthesize tradition and innovation in a manner that is similar to the notion of scripted improvisation. Siva Vaidhyanathan (2001, 125, 219) surveys the work of a range of cultural theorists (including Gena Dagel Caponi, Brenda Dixon Gottschild, Paul Gilroy, Gerhard Kubik, and Stephen Tracy), all of whom contribute to a tracing of the DJ's logic back through the practices of delta blues musicians to West African aesthetics. Vaidhyanathan distils his survey down to a neat little bouillon cube of theorization: a DJ's practice, he writes, demonstrates simultaneous "individual 'stylization' and mastery of a canon."

It has become a commonplace to invoke the DJ as the paradigmatic creative figure in contemporary culture. Paul Miller (2004, 57; a.k.a. DJ Spooky That Subliminal Kid) claims that "DJ-ing is writing, writing is DJ-ing." Nicolas Bourriaud and Lev Manovich go a step further. For Bourriaud (2005, 47), "The remixer has become more important than the instrumentalist"; likewise, for Manovich (2001, 134–35), the practice of the selection and combination of preexisting elements from the archive is the wellspring of new cultural forms. What remains uninterrogated in this formulation is a deeply modernist investment in the worth of the new. Manovich, for example, sees novelty, creativity, and even "true art" as the inherently valuable results of the DJ's inspired manipulations. It would be more accurate, and more theoretically useful, to conceive of DJs not as the "new" creators, but as the embodiment of an impure aesthetic of uncreative improvisation.

Goldsmith's work as a DJ occasionally has been commented on but has not been explored in any detail, although Christian Bök (2002, 69) argues that it is Goldsmith's print practice that emulates his radio work and not the reverse. The fact that Goldsmith was broadcasting recordings of reportage on the explosion of the space shuttle *Challenger*, the assassination of

John F. Kennedy, and the attacks of September 11, 2001, before they were transcribed for his book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* supports such a claim.[13] The reciprocal is also true: Goldsmith notes in an e-mail interview with Ben Baumes (2005), "I'm always plundering and poaching my own writings for my own show." Such activities, whether the provenance of information managers and laptop DJs rather than creative directors and freestyle jazz musicians, are about *working* rather than *thinking*. Running a free-form radio show in the manner that Goldsmith did is arguably more rather than less work for the DJ than usual. Goldsmith added additional, unnecessary constraints to the various chores involved in programming a radio show, revealing the impression of a spontaneous creative DJ as a romantic fantasy. On occasion, such constraints have been literal as well as figurative, as in Goldsmith's three-hour-long on-air performance on September 24, 2003, with the WFMU DJ and multimedia collage artist Vicki Bennett (a.k.a. People Like Us). During the performance, the two DJs were literally bound to each other and gagged in the control room. Every fifteen minutes a rope was loosened, and the two occasionally broke free to change the programming, only to be captured and rebound by guards in the booth.[14] Mic breaks consisted largely of the sounds of the ongoing struggle.

What is noteworthy is that, given almost total freedom, Goldsmith's attention to the formal qualities of radio itself is the source of the disruptive quality of his on-air work. In the Baumes interview, Goldsmith says, "I'm interested in pulling back the curtain on radio, making visible what is always hidden. When I first started on WFMU, [the station manager] Ken Freedman requested that I speak more like a person and less like a DJ, 'Put a few ums and uhs into your mic breaks.' It was an eye-opener for me" (Baumes 2005). The hours and hours of digitized online playlists and audio streams from Goldsmith's radio show indicate that the lesson went deep. There are entire hours in which Goldsmith's broadcasts consisted of nothing but farts (September 16, 2010), screams (July 29, 2010), laughter (July 15, 2010), and silence (July 1, 2010, July 22, 2010).[15] All imply the too bodily existence of the disc jockey, suddenly present to the extent that he overrides any ostensible "content" for his show. At one point, Goldsmith had dubbed his on-air practice as "annoyism"; Jason Kaufman (2007, 81) argues that a central aim of annoyism is not simply to air "bad" art but "to call into question the very standards by which we make such judgements."

The name of Goldsmith's website, Ubu.com, points directly to the theoretical and aesthetic context for Goldsmith's approach: the writing of Alfred Jarry (1996), particularly the parts concerning his crass, loud, barbaric anti-

hero Père Ubu (of the play *Ubu Roi* and its sequels), and the imaginary science of 'pataphysics (*The Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, and various short essays). Conceived as a fin de siècle schoolboy's response to the bewildering explosion of scientific discourses into the popular, Jarry's 'pataphysics is a principle of functional equivalence, in which any given theory is treated as being as valid as any other. In Jarry's (1996, 21) deliberately obtuse definition, 'pataphysics "symbolically attributes the properties of objects, described by their virtuality, to the lineaments." As Bök (2002, 32) summarizes it, 'pataphysics deliberately prioritizes the superficialities of the imaginary over the substance of the thing. Whereas science produces facts to arrive at generalities, 'pataphysics concerns "the laws governing exceptions" (Jarry 1996, 30–31). Not so much a form of parody as a kind of parallax, 'pataphysics frequently involves minimal or no alterations to its object, relying instead on its ability to create a subtle shift in the perspective in its audience. According to Bök, 'pataphysics operates in three modalities: *anomalos* ("the repressed part of the rule which ensures that the rule does not work," usually manifesting itself as a sort of excessive surprise [Bök 2002, 38]); *clinamen* (a minimal swerve akin to the *détournment* [43]); and *syzygy* ("the neglected part of a pair which ensures that such a pair is neither united nor parted for more than an instant" [41]). All of these modalities are relevant to Goldsmith's work as a DJ, so I am going to talk briefly about each of them in turn.

To the extent that there is anything unusual about how Goldsmith presented particular tracks on his show, it could be described in terms of the *anomalos*: a difference in the degree to which free-form DJs are willing to examine the limits of their alleged freedom. Even among the iconoclastic, taste-making DJs on WFMU, Goldsmith was an anomaly. Ken Freedman told Ben Baumes (2005) that "before [Goldsmith] came along, I felt that FMU had explored all there was to explore in terms of experimental approaches to radio." On a station where DJs are ostensibly permitted to do anything during their shows, though, Goldsmith had the distinction of being suspended on several occasions for violating rules that were not so much nonexistent as unspoken. One infraction involved rebroadcasting material from other stations, but the majority of Goldsmith's suspensions involved obscene content. In his comments on the back of a bootleg CD titled *64 Minutes of Anal Magic*, Goldsmith wrote, "I've been suspended many times on WFMU for playing the kind of music included on this disc. In fact, just a few months ago, I was thrown off the air for 3 weeks for playing track #9, 'Sexual Pleasures Film Documentary Series Reel #2,' which is the soundtrack to a stag film from

the 1950s. . . . In selecting the cuts, I've stayed away from standard erotica or straight porn. Instead, I've opted for cuts that are more psychological, more musical, more racist, more twisted."[16] The best known of Goldsmith's suspensions occurred after his show on Wednesday, December 15, 2004,[17] for, in Freedman's words, breaking station policy (not FCC policy) against "descriptions or depictions of sexual or excretory matter, anatomy or behavior from 5 A.M. to 11 P.M." Freedman had asked Goldsmith to change the show's name from "Anal Magic" due to this policy; during the show on December 15, "Goldsmith solicited new names from listeners. . . . Though Goldsmith refused to read many of the suggested titles on the air due to their content, the show still contained numerous references to sexual and excretory anatomy and behavior, prompting the suspension. The thread on the WFMU message board regarding this incident has also been removed."[18] Freedman was also quite clear, though, that this act of censorship was in the interest of protecting the station's license during a period of overweening FCC scrutiny, saying, "I disagree with the FCC's approach, with its guidelines, and with its enforcement. . . . I really respect Kenny G and his show, but this is something I have to do to protect the station in the face of the FCC's ongoing crackdown."[19]

Clinamen was the Roman philosopher Lucretius's term for the Greek philosopher Epicurus's postulate that a borderline-imperceptible, minimal swerve in the motion of atoms makes it possible for an event to occur in the universe. An artist executes a clinamen by making a minimal swerve in relation to the works of their precursors or some other cultural object (Bloom 1973, 14). Works based on the principle of clinamen often begin as identical copies of such objects and depart from resemblance by such subtle degrees that their audiences are stunned to realize that at some point they have entered what Jarry (1996, 30–31) described as a universe "that perhaps one *should* envision—in place of the traditional one." The spiral that always appears on the belly of Père Ubu was the symbol that Jarry used to represent the clinamen. In the universe next door to this one, it might be the groove on a long-playing record.

To return to the opening sentence I stole from Eliot and repurposed, unoriginal improvisation is all about the clinamen. Boon (2010, 140–41), a longtime friend and collaborator of Goldsmith's, writes the following: "Goldsmith's most successful works as a writer/artist/poet are those in which any embellishments of the original material are minor. . . . Goldsmith reveals the deception while carefully concealing his own originality, which consists in small but essential decisions as to format, scale, name, and medium.

When the composer Morton Feldman told Karlheinz Stockhausen that his secret lay in never manipulating the sounds, Stockhausen shrewdly replied, 'Not even a little bit?'" So for a radio DJ, what sort of minimal intervention constitutes a clinamen? Subtle variations, such as temporal shifts, are a good place to start. On his first show after the inauguration of President Obama (November 15, 2008), for example, Goldsmith played Parliament's "Chocolate City"—a five-minute-and-thirty-seven-second track from 1975 that imagines the possibility of a black president—for a solid three hours.[20] On other occasions, he has used software to extend the length of spoken recordings while leaving individual words audible, as in the case of a show where he extended the hour-long finale of *Friends* to the full three hours of his time slot (June 12, 2004).[21] Goldsmith's most extreme versions of the practice of temporal shifting involved digitally condensing his playlists to radical degrees, playing 180 songs in three hours on October 20, 2004, and 360 songs in three hours on October 27, 2004.[22]

Another of Goldsmith's ongoing practices as a DJ, "kenny g sings theory," offers another point for thinking through the structure of the clinamen.[23] In each of these pieces, Goldsmith pairs a digital karaoke audio file with the work of a particular cultural theorist and sings the theoretical text as the lyrics. In karaoke, as in conventional DJing, competence is a mixture of fidelity to traditional form and improvisation, which always departs slightly from tradition. Unlike DJing, however, in karaoke the emphasis falls on the affective force of the performance, which has more to do with a ritual affirmation of belonging to the community of singer-listeners in the karaoke space, a process that inevitably involves attempts to expand that community, than it does with musical competence—hence, the form of the spiral. Goldsmith's on-air karaoke raises a number of questions, not only because of the ambiguity of his affect and the attenuated feedback from the remote radio audience, but also because the potential object of fidelity for his performance is double: is it about the music or the theory? As incongruous as they may seem, there is often an associative logic to Goldsmith's theory-karaoke pieces. For example, "Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Jean Baudrillard" pairs the Disneyland section of Baudrillard's *America*, which concerns the structure of the simulacra, with the theme from Claude Lelouch's *Vivre pour Vivre* (1967), a film that is deeply concerned with themes of self-deception and the substitution of a series of phantasmatic objects of desire.

Johan Fornäs (1994) observes that karaoke exemplifies one of the commonplaces of post-structural theory and cultural studies: "Theoreticians like Wolfgang Iser, Stanley Fish, Julia Kristeva, Roland Barthes, Paul Ricoeur

or Stuart Hall have long maintained that all cultural texts leave openings for the individual and collective creation of meaning." By taking theorists literally and plugging their descriptions of the creation of cultural meaning into the epitome of cultural objects that permit such a process, Goldsmith finds a way to be faithful *and* depart from orthodoxy simultaneously. The seriousness of the theory is undercut precisely because Goldsmith follows its spirit rather than its letter, betraying it while repeating it verbatim.

A syzygy is a temporary conjunction or yoking together of entities that otherwise occupy different spaces and trajectories. The 'pataphysical version might include Goldsmith pretending to be another DJ on his own station. Two such pieces are exemplary: "Poem for Ken Freedman" (station manager of WFMU) and "Poem for Irwin Chusid" (the DJ whose show preceded Goldsmith's time slot and the author of *Songs in the Key of Z: The Curious Universe of Outsider Music*). On at least three separate occasions, Goldsmith transcribed every detail of Freedman's and Chusid's mic breaks—their on-air patter from between recordings, down to the ums and ahs—and recited them verbatim as his own mic breaks. The effect was heightened because Goldsmith's voice and Chusid's are very similar. In a rare interview about his work as a DJ, Goldsmith notes that in another case he and Chusid switched time slots and simply pretended that each was the other (Baumes 2005).

When Goldsmith is involved, "pretending to be the other DJ" is already complex, because his on-air persona has always been not "Kenneth Goldsmith" but "kenny g" (all lower case). The potential for confusion with Kenneth Gorelick, the saxophonist also known as Kenny G (capital K and capital G), is immediately obvious. In a Google search for "Kenny G" (at least, *my* Google search for Kenny G; search engines are no longer agnostic about who uses them)—the top eleven results all refer to Gorelick. But the twelfth still points to "kenny g's homepage" at WFMU.org; the eighth, to "kenny g's homepage"; and the thirteenth, to his playlists and archives.[24] What has happened since 1995 as a result of this confusion has a certain wince-producing predictability: fans who believe they have found the secret Gorelick home page inundate Goldsmith's WFMU e-mail address with fan mail, and lowercase kenny g reads the messages on the air.[25]

In the summer of 2007, at a church in Amherst, Massachusetts, Goldsmith began a reading as he often does—with a selection of the Kenny G letters. After the reading, he was approached by a young man in the audience who extended his hand and said, "Kenny G. May I introduce myself? I'm Jon Zorn" (without the h). To be precise, this was Jonathan Zorn the composer, sound artist, and performer from Middletown, Connecticut, not John Zorn, the composer, sound artist, and performer from New York.[26] The result of this meeting (not unlike the Comte de Lautréamont's chance encounter of an umbrella and a sewing machine on an operating table [Lautréamont 1994, 193]) was an album called *Kenny G Meets John Zorn*, on which the h-less Jon Zorn developed an interactive digital music system to accompany the lowercase kenny g's reading of letters addressed to the uppercase Kenny G. What manifests itself in this project is the possibility of subverting the grip that the fantasies of celebrity culture hold for us by overidentifying with them, revealing the absurdities and inconsistencies of those fantasies in the process.

As Bernstein's notion of a strategy of tactics suggests through the invocation of negative dialectics, the question that uncreative improvisation raises is this: can we fix the problems created by the discourse of corporate creativity by adding uncreativity to the mix? This is also the precise moment that Goldsmith's larger ethos of impurity and uncreativity encounters its own limit. The irony is dialectical. If Goldsmith at one point escaped from Florida's creative class of highly paid new media ad executives into the realms of poetry, art, and the academy, his success in being uncreative has propelled him straight back into what Florida (2012, 858) calls the "Super-Creative Core" of contemporary culture, limiting his ongoing efficacy in staging the very problem that his work foregrounds. Goldsmith recognizes that there are few spaces in "hypercapitalism" that allow for the appearance of the valueless and that others who experimented with boredom and uncreativity found either mixed or too much success.[27] But there is a very real risk that the fate of uncreativity may be, in Alan Liu's (2004, 375) terms, to "simply be lumped together with 'cool' by the dominant corporate, media, and other institutions of society as part of the undifferentiated bread and circuses of contemporary 'entertainment.'" Žižek (2008, 155–56) has commented repeatedly on the ability of capitalism to undermine "all particular lifeworlds, cultures, and traditions" and enlist them to its cause, so why not uncreativity, as well? It is all too possible to imagine the advent of the first "uncreative director" of corporate advertising, if such a person has not already appeared.

A decade ago, Goldsmith wrote, "When I reach 40, I hope to have cleansed myself of all creativity."[28] The ambiguity around whether Goldsmith's acclaim as an uncreative DJ or uncreative writer is due to succeeding or failing

in this aspiration is beside the point, as Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak pointed out more than thirty years ago:

> We are the disc jockeys of an advanced technocracy. The discs are not "records" of the old-fashioned kind, but productions of the most recent technology. The trends in taste and the economic factors that govern them are also products of the most complex interrelations among myriad factors such as foreign relations, the world market, the conduct of advertisement supported by and supporting the first two items, and so on. To speak of the mode of production and constitution of the radio station complicates matters further. Within this intricately determined and multiform situation, the disc jockey and his audience think, indeed are made to think, that they are free to play. This illusion of freedom allows us to protect the brutal ironies of technocracy by suggesting either that the system nourishes the humanist's freedom of spirit, or that "technology," that vague evil, is something the humanist must transform by inculcating humanistic "values," or by drawing generalized philosophical analogies from the latest spatio-temporal discoveries of the magical realms of "pure science." (Spivak 1979, 209)

What matters is how a system that presents us with such a false choice marginalizes us all. Goldsmith's (2011a) recent turn toward institutional critique suggests that he is attempting to take the political form that his work implies and actually fill it with politics. Having the history of institutional critique already at hand as an example of what does and does not work, he asks: "So what happens when the institutional critique is so easily absorbed by the institution, that it moves from a 'critique of institutions to an institution of critique?' We've seen this already in the art world where performative acts of institutional critique are regularly commissioned by the institutions themselves" (2011a). Goldsmith speculates that it might be possible to proceed by "at once fondly caressing these institutions, while at the same time driving a stake into their backs. To imagine it in any other way would be insulting" (2011a). With no way around the "conceptual, political, and institutional complexities of parapoetic practice," the only way to proceed is to point out the deadlock between creativity and work rather than try to resolve it (2011a). The next question is whether the throngs of newly professionalized "uncreative writers" and DJs can use such practices to shift culture away from this impasse.

Notes

Epigraph: T. S. Eliot, "Poetry in the Eighteenth Century," in *The Pelican Guide to English Literature 4: From Dryden to Johnson*, ed. Boris Ford (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1957), 272.

1. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing," Electronic Poetry Center (State University of New York [SUNY], Buffalo), http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/conceptual_paragraphs.html. Accessed March 13, 2010; Kenneth Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice," Electronic Poetry Center (SUNY Buffalo), http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/uncreativity.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

2. This number is the title of a publication (Kenneth Goldsmith, *6799*. New York: zingmagazine, 2000. Also available at http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/works/6799.pdf. Accessed August 26, 2016). At the time it was also the number of albums in the author's collection.

3. See Shigeru Matsui, "Pure Poems," in Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011, 397; Wiener Gruppe [Vienna Group], "Ideas for a 'Record Album/Functional' Acoustic Cabaret," in Dworkin and Goldsmith 2011, 571.

4. Catherine Spencer, "When Attitudes Become Form: Bern 1969/Venice 2013," blog post, Ca' Corner Della Regina, Venice, September 2, 2013, http://www.thisistomorrow.info/viewArticle.aspx?artId=1999. Accessed March 13, 2010.

5. See David Leonhardt, "When Button-Down Meets Buttonless," *New York Times*, January 26, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/01/26/jobs/when-button-down-meets-buttonless.html. Accessed March 13, 2010; "Metro Business: Web Design Firm Sold," *New York Times*, February 15, 2000, http://www.nytimes.com/2000/02/15/nyregion/metro-business-web-design-firm-sold.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

6. See the dedication in Pashenkov 2002. In the acknowledgments, Pashenkov (2002, 5) refers to his former boss, "Ken Goldsmith at Methodfive."

7. Courtney Pulitzer, "Methodfive after 5 Forum," *Cyber Scene*, April 21, 1997, http://www.thecyberscene.com/1997/04/methodfive-after-5-forum.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

8. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Re: [Conceptual-Writing] Blast from the Past: Kenny's Prose as a Business Guy," e-mail to the Conceptual Writing list in response to Darren Wershler, December 24, 2013, http://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/conceptual-writing/info (restricted). Accessed March 13, 2010.

9. See also Goldsmith's edited collection of interviews with Warhol (Goldsmith 2004) and his comments throughout Bluttal 2006.

10. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring," Electronic Poetry Center (SUNY Buffalo), 2004, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

11. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Unedited Transcript: Kenneth Goldsmith," interview by Marcus Boon, *Bomb* 117, 2011, http://bombsite.com/issues/117/articles/6071.

12. Kathleen O'Malley, "Definition of Freeform," WFMU.org. 2006, http://wfmu.org/freeform.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

13. These recordings are still audible at Kenneth Goldsmith. "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain," WFMU.org, n.d., http://www.wfmu.org/playlists/KG. Accessed March 13, 2010.

14. Brian Turner, "WFMU DJs Bound and Gagged," WFMU.org, n.d., http://www.wfmu.org/~kennyg/plu.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

15. Goldsmith, "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain."

16. Kenneth Goldsmith, liner notes from *64 Minutes of Anal Magic*, bootleg CD, n.p., n.d., http://cdtrrracks.com (inactive). Accessed March 13, 2010.

17. See Goldsmith, "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain," http://www.wfmu.org/playlists/shows/13585. Accessed March 13, 2010. No audio archive of the show is available.

18. See http://ahab.com/venom/up_the_ass_with_the_fcc.html (inactive). Accessed March 13, 2010.

19. Christopher Zinsli, "Indecency Fears Prompt DJ Suspension: WFMU's Kenny G Put on Seven-Week Hiatus for Station Policy Infractions," Hudsonreporter.com, January 8, 2005, http://www.hudsonreporter.com/view/full_story/2402486/article-Indecency-fears-prompt-DJ-suspension-WFMU-s-Kenny-G-put-on-seven-week-hiatus-for-station-policy-infractions?mobile_view=false. Accessed March 13, 2010.

20. See Goldsmith, "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain," http://wfmu.org/playlists/KG2008. Accessed March 13, 2010.

21. See Goldsmith, "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain," https://wfmu.org/playlists/shows/11266. Accessed March 13, 2010.

22. See Goldsmith, "Playlists and Archives for Kenny G's Hour of Pain," https://wfmu.org/playlists/shows/12931; https://wfmu.org/playlists/shows/12999. Accessed March 13, 2010.

23. "Kenneth Goldsmith, audio recordings, n.d., Center for Programs in Contemporary Writing at the University of Pennsylvania, http://writing.upenn.edu/pennsound/x/Goldsmith.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

24. Google search for "Kenny G" on December 29, 2013.

25. Kenneth Goldsmith, "From *the Kenny G Letters*," Electronic Poetry Center (SUNY Buffalo), 1999, http://epc.buffalo.edu/ezines/deluxe/three/kennyg.html. Accessed March 13, 2010; Kenneth Goldsmith, "A Selection of the Kenny G Letters," Brooklyn Rail, 2006, http://brooklynrail.org/2006/3/poetry/a-selection-of-the-kenny-g-letters. Accessed March 13, 2010.

26. See UbuWeb: Sound, Kenneth Goldsmith and Jonathan Zorn. http://www.ubu.com/sound/kg-jz.html. Accessed March 13, 2010.

27. Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice."

28. Goldsmith, "Uncreativity as a Creative Practice."

III • SOCIALITY AND IDENTITY