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Kenneth Goldsmith's American Trilogy

Darren Wershler

Wilfrid Laurier University

Review of: Kenneth Goldsmith, *The Weather*. Los Angeles; Make Now, 2005, Goldsmith, *Traffic*. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2007, and Goldsmith, *Sports*. Los Angeles: Make Now, 2008.

I can't help it: trilogies are nerd Kryptonite. My childhood library was chock-full of science fiction and heroic fantasy books organized into epic troikas, all of which made grandiose claims about their ability to forever change my sense of literary genre, if not of consensual reality itself. As a result, any three books that self-consciously present themselves as a trilogy have for me an aura of importance about them, one that requires further interrogation. Kenneth Goldsmith's American Trilogy—*The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports*—is no exception.

In the first half of the last century, Ezra Pound claimed in his *ABC of Reading* that "artists are the antennae of the race" (73). In a global digital economy, though, both wireless and networked signals come at such speed and quantity that a set of rabbit ears will no longer suffice. In 1980, Canadian poet Christopher Dewdney updated Pound's metaphor in "Parasite Maintenance," comparing contemporary artistic sensibility to the satellite dish. From such a perspective, artists are devices for the accumulation and concentration of cultural data, cool and dispassionate. The quality of the objects and texts that they produce depends in part on what "Parasite Maintenance" refers to as "the will to select" (77). The individual's ability to receive and process the ambient signals that constantly bombard all of us helps constitute contemporary criteria for a successful artistic career.

As Craig Dworkin notes, self-declared "Word Processor" Kenneth Goldsmith's ongoing personal project—which Goldsmith has successively dubbed "nutritionless writing," "uncreative writing," and "conceptual writing"—falls squarely into this tradition of poetry as a sort of technologized, high-volume appropriation (34). This is especially true of recent works such as the massive, audacious *Day* (Figures, 2003): a volume that transcribes an entire issue of *The New York Times* and presents it in book form. In this context, even Goldsmith's curation of the decade-old UbuWeb <www.ubu.com>, a large digital archive of avant-garde sound recordings, concrete poetry, video, outsider art and related critical materials, is arguably part of the practice of uncreativity—perhaps even Goldsmith's greatest work.

Goldsmith normally 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* (*Day*), or the names of artists and albums from his extensive LP collection (6799). He then transcribes the contents of that repository meticulously, reconfigures the resulting digital manuscript as a book, and attaches his name to it. Though such projects have been common in the art world since the heyday of Conceptualism, they are relatively rare in what Charles Bernstein refers to as "official verse culture" (246), where even Jackson Mac Low and John Cage (two of Goldsmith's muses) occupy an uneasy position. By porting an established practice for aesthetic production from one field of cultural endeavour (gallery art) to another (poetry), Goldsmith has simultaneously constructed himself a career and staged an intervention that has changed the stakes of contemporary poetics.

As a kind of briefer epic, *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports* serve collectively as a formal denouement to *Day*, because they codify and professionalize the practice I've just described. The similar size, shape, and design of these books suggests what even a cursory read will confirm, that the same basic dialectical move is at work in all of them: a reframing of the "everyday" that defamiliarizes it and allows us to return to mundane moments in order to reexamine them in a new light. As such, The American Trilogy succeeds admirably, but also suggests that there are limits to the artistic shelf-life of the "uncreative" moment (more on this notion shortly). These books are united formally by more than their explorations into a series of neglected but omnipresent

cultural forms (the weather report, the traffic report, the sportscast). They all have a specific relationship to a specific medium: the radio-and, for the last two books in the trilogy, to digitally streamed radio broadcasts in particular. It is relatively easy to establish a typology of Goldsmith's work in relation to the particular medium he happens to be transcribing at the moment (and even to predict where he'll go next by considering the gaps in such a typology-film, video, and television being the most obvious omissions), yet literary studies often overlook material media. As a result, Goldsmith's long career as a DJ on New Jersey freeform radio station WFMU is an underexamined part of his practice as an artist.

The Weather, *Traffic*, and *Sports* are all profoundly aural texts, representative of particular patterns of listening to text and transcribing it. They are exercises in taking dictation, which, as Jacques Derrida and Avital Ronell (in *Dictations*) have argued, is always in part about a kind of negation of the transcribing self, but is also always a reassertion of the amanuensis as an author in her or his own right. Paradoxically, Goldsmith's considerable personal reputation as an "original" author is rooted in his ability to (for the most part) cleanse his transcribed texts of the most obvious signs of his own presence and, as Ron Silliman has noted in a blog post on "the Cult of Kenny," in Goldsmith's ability to choose which "boring" moments to transcribe (Silliman).

The Weather (2005), the first of the three books, was the result of a process that could have been executed at any point over the last half century. Beginning with the first day of Fall 2002 and continuing through the last day of Summer 2003, Goldsmith used a cassette tape recorder to transcribe New York City weather reports from the US's oldest all-news radio station, 1010 WINS. In *The Weather*, "uh," "er," and "eh," as in "We have, uh, cloudy skies, uh" (5), serve to mark the fidelity of Goldsmith's transcription process. Even if these signs are always approximations, they suggest that every noise, hesitation, and unintentional vocalization in the recordings finds its way into the typescript. Of course, this is a fiction that marks both the limits of what the literary form can convey and the impossibility of going back to verify the transcription itself. Goldsmith's earlier books, especially *Fidget* and *Soliloquy*, mobilize similar tropes to mark both what's gained and what's lost in the space between tape and print.

True to Silliman's hypothesis, though, these are not just *any* weather reports for downtown Manhattan. Beginning in the section titled "Spring," they also include the weather reported for downtown Baghdad during Operation Desert Storm-the US invasion of Iraq. At the moment when the announcer begins the sentence, "As for Middle East weather, it continues to be favorable for military operations" (39), the politics of the mundane become visible. This is a turning point in the book; by the next page, the announcer is referring to the "battlefield forecast" as a regular broadcast feature (40). Here are shades of Marshall McLuhan's arguments about the radio as a medium that, without requiring much from its listeners, sutures the nation together in times of war (**McLuhan 260**). *The Weather* suggests that even radio weather reports are not innocent. After the battlefield forecasts begin, the frequent mention of RADAR, for example, points to the origins of its instruments in the military-industrial complex. That the Baghdad weather reports eventually trickle down to nothing and the war continues is, in the end, more disturbing than their abrupt appearance. The result is a kind of pathetic fallacy that connects Goldsmith to the tradition of the American Transcendentalists and likely to Romanticism itself: as much as anything else, the weather in *The Weather* serves as an index of the national mood.

As a coda, it's worth noting that "Spring" is marked as the valuable section of *The Weather* in another way as well. It is an extremely limited edition of signed and numbered artist's books from Didymus Press (2005), with wood engravings by James Siena. The alchemy of letterpress can turn even the most mundane discourse into a rarefied commodity.

The cover text of *Traffic* cites Godard's *Week-End* (1967) as a major influence. This is one of many careful positionings of Goldsmith's work in the context of the 1960s art world. The epigraph, from an interview with Andy Warhol about his beginning the "Death" series after overhearing a traffic announcer cite the projected staggering highway death tolls for a coming holiday weekend, is another. These moments of name-checking indicate that by the time the books in The American Trilogy start to appear, the inspiration for Goldsmith's overall aesthetics had shifted from the investigations of Cage and Mac Low into boredom and the "found" poetry of Bern Porter to Andy Warhol and 60s pop's mechanical reproductions of popular culture (*I'll be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, which Goldsmith edited, was published in 2004; *Andy Warhol: Giant Size*, a Phaidon coffee table book to which Goldsmith contributed several essays, appeared in 2006).

Like *The Weather*, *Traffic* is a book that is ultimately about circulation and global-cultural flows. In terms of the emerging critical interest in circulation (after the recent work of scholars such as Benjamin Lee and Edward Li Puma, Dilip Gaonkar and Elizabeth Povinelli) this book is timely. Goldsmith's work is about nothing if not the circulation of cultural forms, bringing tropes from 60s visual art into the realm of poetry in ways that it had not previously been, deforming and transfiguring it in the process. As with its precursor, *Traffic* consists of text transcribed from the radio station 1010 WINS, but there is an important difference in terms of its production: Goldsmith sourced the text in *Traffic* from a digital stream rather than from an audiotape. Again, there are precedents in Goldsmith's earlier work for the transcription of large swaths of digital discourse, notably *No. III 2.7.93-10.20.96*, which consists largely of text copied from Usenet newsgroups between 1993 and 1996 according to their adherence to an "ə" (schwa) rhyme scheme, then arranged alphabetically and syllabically. Here, the material is audio, not text,

but it is important to note that Goldsmith was and remains an innovator in terms of the use of digital discourse in poetry.

As with *The Weather*, Goldsmith's connection to the tradition of American letters in *Traffic* is stronger than might initially appear. Like the previous book, and in keeping with much of Goldsmith's output since the art project "Broken New York", *Traffic* is a psychogeographic exploration of a key aspect of New York City. The concern with highways and traffic raises inevitable comparisons with the American tradition of writing about the road, even if the text that, say, Kerouac transcribed was considerably more inchoate.

Sports, the final volume of the trilogy, is the most ambiguous of the three. Is Goldsmith's kind of writing a sort of athletic event, or does it attempt to lay bare the machismo of the Great American Pastime as an accountant's recital of numbers, statistics, and trivia? The book is a complete radio transcription of the longest 9-inning Major League Baseball game on record (New York Yankees vs. Boston Red Sox, August 2006), and thus not boring or mundane at all. Brian Kim Stefans has observed that, counter to Goldsmith's claim that he doesn't have a readership because his books are unreadable, this is actually quite a gripping text. Like *Traffic*, *Sports* was transcribed from digital audio, more precisely from the WFAN broadcast of the game on the YES (Yankees radio) Network. Goldsmith's original idea was to transcribe the game as a broadcast from WEEL, a Boston station, and to publish the two versions of the game as a mirror-text, but he could not locate a source for the Boston transmission. As the old cliché goes, history is written by the winners.

A well-developed mythology has developed about Goldsmith's absolute refusal to alter his source material in any way. The cover text of *Sports* invokes Goldsmith's "exact parsing of language," but the idiosyncrasies of transcription and copy editing are all over the book. For example, p. 117 presents "baked lays" for "Baked Lays." And how are we to read "\$39.95 per month" (43)? Did the announcer say "thirty-nine ninety-five per month" or "thirty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents per month," or something else entirely? Whether Goldsmith is concerned with or even capable of "exact parsing," part of what makes these texts intriguing is that they demonstrate over and over again the slippage that is part and parcel of every instance of signification.

As media history scholar Susan J. Douglas has described, many early radio "broadcasts" were actually recreations from textual notes (201, 210 and passim). Thus, this book's aesthetic move is already part of a long tradition; it's easy to imagine someone using this text as a performance score. Like Goldsmith's *No. III 2.7.93-10.20.96* (one of the few print samples of the kind of text that was typical of the pre-Web Internet), *Sports* is a valuable historical document, because it includes all ads and other information normally cut out of game transcriptions.

In the cheeky tradition of much appropriation art (e.g. Emergency Broadcast Network's 1992 classic *Commercial Entertainment Product*), *Sports* begins with the reproduction of the full copyright statement from the New York Yankees, explicitly forbidding reproduction or transmission in any form. Goldsmith sent copies of this book to as many people as he could identify in the Yankee organization in an attempt to provoke them, but nothing happened. Goldsmith had a similar experience when he approached the Warhol estate to secure the necessary permissions to reprint Warhol's interviews. They laughed and told him that for all they cared, he could take the words; the multimillion dollar branding deals in which media juggernauts like the Warhol estate and the Yankees are constantly involved are in the realm of images and branding, not script. Stakes are low in poetry.

The Weather, *Traffic*, and *Sports* together mark an ending to the "uncreative" or "boring" phase of Goldsmith's larger project. Goldsmith has already remarked on several occasions that his next book, whose working title is *Capital*, will be a spiritual sequel to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, focusing on New York in the 20th century rather than Paris in the 19th. In what appears to be a move away from the refusal to explicitly edit his source material, Goldsmith insists that in *Capital*, "all the lines are zingers." This reiterates earlier moments in Goldsmith's oeuvre (particularly *No. III 2.7.93-10.20.96*) as much as it does something new.

Goldsmith has always been a movement of one. His work will inevitably spark imitators as various innovative writing practices did before it, but there is a unique trajectory here—what Deleuze & Guattari call a "line of flight" constituted by nothing so much as the avoidance of what others have done before, and the careful resuscitation and poaching of moments of potential betrayed by the actual events of history.

Darren Wershler

Darren Wershler is the author or co-author of ten books, most recently *The Iron Whim: A Fragmented History of Typewriting* (McClelland & Stewart, Cornell UP), and *apostrophe* (ECW), with Bill Kennedy. Darren is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Wilfrid Laurier University, part of the faculty at the CFC Media Lab TELUS Interactive Art & Entertainment Program, and a Research Affiliate of the Ip Osgoode Intellectual Property Law & Technology Program.

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