THE IDEAL LECTURE
(In Memory of David Antin)

Kenneth Goldsmith

The Ideal Lecture (In Memory of David Antin)

There are a hundred of you just
sitting here watching me type as
I set up my laptop for this lecture.

Is there anything worse
than watching somebody
stare at their computer?

It's not that much different when,
often these days, you go to a
concert and watch somebody mix
on their laptop, which is as exciting
as watching somebody check their
email, which can be pretty exciting,
except that they're not checking
their email   they're staring at their
laptop, and all you can see is the
screen's glow on their face.

But think of how much better it
would be if that performer were
actually checking their email while
the music was streaming, and you

3

could watch the whole thing on a
screen projected behind them,
how intimate and embarrassing
and revealing it could be.

I remember when laptops were
introduced as the only instrument
on the stage in the concert hall.

It was around 1995 and I went to
see a classical electronic music
composer at a proper concert hall
on Manhattan's upper West Side
and I swear, for nearly two hours,
we stared at him staring at his laptop.

Perhaps the sounds were
great   I can't remember   but I do
recall thinking that there was no
need to have a human onstage for
this music.

He was nothing great to look
at either, a balding, middle-
aged, overweight guy dressed
in a tacky Hawaiian shirt.

That's why it's so important
to realize that when you get
up in front of people,
you are always performing.

You need to be in costume,
completely self-conscious
and hyperaware of
your presence.

There's a feeling that one's
onstage presence should
be truly authentic, but of
course it's anything but.

It's an act.

If I was being authentic right now,
you'd see me bitching at my kids,
or paying my electric bill, and you
certainly didn't come here for that.

You came here to see me do my
act   yes, poets do have acts
which is in some ways authentic,
and in other ways completely artificial.

5

You are seeing me
giving an ideal lecture
by my ideal self.

I wish I could always be like this.

Rock musicians are really good at this.

Watch some videos of, say, Led
Zeppelin or The Rolling Stones
from the early seventies and
you'll see what I mean.

They're so authentically inauthentic
that they spawned legions of fans
who imitated the authenticity of
their style, resulting in an
astonishingly convincing
inauthentic authenticity.

And later on, even when it goes
unauthentically authentic,
it shifts, becoming newly
authentically inauthentic.

I'm thinking of Nirvana's grunge
style, which reclaimed the dregs
of Led Zeppelin's artifice and
turned it inside out,
making it insincerely authentic.

But the grunge fans found no
insincerity in it; by de-glamming,
they reclaimed authenticity.

It's terribly complicated.

But most poets, somehow,
don't bother with these gymnastics.

They feel the need to present an
unchecked 'real' or 'authentic'
self, so they get up in front
of people in a stained T-shirt,
ill-fitting jeans, and bad shoes,
and mumble through their poems.

Perhaps you might think that they
were being grunge devotees, or
maybe anti-performative, but what
they're really doing is being lazy.

7

They're neither authentic nor artificial;
they're just flat and unconsidered.

This is why I feel that if it's
not pretentious or self-
conscious I don't trust it.

But getting back to my sitting
here and typing in front of you,
it reminds me of my book *Soliloquy*,
which consisted of every word I
spoke for a week in 1997 from the
moment I woke up on a Monday
morning, until the moment I went
to sleep the following Sunday night.

I transcribed it, completely unedited.

It was about four or five
hundred pages long, and
I said almost nothing of value.

It was really an exercise in humiliation.

The way I did it was with just
a little microcassette recorder

tucked into my pocket, that was
connected to a voice-activated
microphone, which I wore hidden
in my shirt.

When I spoke, it recorded.

Around that same time,
I had a related idea.

I wanted to connect my laptop to
a screen in Times Square, so that
everything I typed or did on
it for an entire year would be
publicly displayed   emails I wrote,
online banking statements I viewed,
porn I watched, every time I self-
googled   although Google was
not yet around, but you know
what I mean   manuscripts
I was working on, and so forth.

That would've been the most
intimate, revealing, humiliating,
and risqué thing I could've done.

9

It never worked out.

I don't think that it was technically
possible at that time, and beyond that,
no one in Times Square had any interest
in some unknown, young poet livestreaming
his life on the crossroads of the world.

Looking back on it, I was inspired by Felix Gonzalez-
Torres's poignant public art piece from around 1990,
which was nothing more than a static black and white
billboard-sized photograph of a bed that had just been
slept in by two people, reputedly Gonzalez-Torres
and his lover, both of whom later died of AIDS.

You could literally see the
imprints of their heads on the pillows.

The idea was to bring the most intimate space,
the bedroom, into the most public space, the street.

There are some great documentary
photographs of that piece.

One that sticks in my mind is what
appears to be a crowded on-ramp to a
bridge in the middle of rush hour.

Cars are stalled, the smog is dense,
and there is this billboard of a just
slept-in bed presiding over the whole affair.

It's a better version of one of
those billboards that you see on
crowded highways that say, 'If you
lived here, you'd be home by now.'

So twenty years passed and
in 2016, I decided to do *Soliloquy*
again for its twentieth anniversary.

What would my regular speech
look like twenty years down the line?

So much has changed in my life that would
make for a completely new type of book.

So I tried and I failed.

First of all, the technology
still had not yet arrived where you
could just speak and everything you
said would be automatically turned
into text and posted on the web
in real time, which was my dream.

Even today, when I speak to my phone, it kind
of gets it right, but it mostly gets it wrong.

And because of the sensitive touch
screen, it clicked off and much of
what I said wasn't actually recorded.

Finally, about five days
into it, I realized that I had
accidentally deleted all but one day.

The one day that was left was
Tuesday, the day I see my therapist.

I secretly taped my therapy session.

Listening back to that day, the
most interesting part was that one hour.

So after the project failed,
I decided that I would go into my therapy
session every Tuesday afternoon, secretly tape it,
and transcribe exactly what I said as a new project.

I did that for about eight weeks,
after which I thought it would be

a good part of therapy to tell my
therapist about what I had been doing.

As might be expected, he
freaked out and accused me of
treason, of exploiting an intimate
and ephemeral space, all for an artwork.

But, I responded, that is exactly
what I do in my artwork, to which
he replied, yes, that is exactly your problem.

Writing on a mobile device is in
some ways more, and in other ways
less work than traditional transcription.

I can't stand typing on a
mobile keyboard because my
fingers are too big and clumsy.

But it's not much better when
I speak into voice recognition, because
I've got to go back in and correct it.

And beyond that, even if I'm
speaking voice to text, I have to

say the word 'period' when I want
to end a sentence, the word 'comma',
when I want to put in a pause, and
'new paragraph', when I want a line break.

Moreover, sometimes the phone
understands 'comma' and 'period' and
'question mark', but just as often it doesn't.

So, if I'm asking a question
like, 'What time do you want to
have lunch today question mark', I
actually get a sentence back that says
'What time do you want to have lunch
today question mark' and then I feel
stupid when I've got to go back in and
make the words 'question mark' into an
actual question mark, to which my son,
who is eleven, says to me: 'But Dad,
why do you use question marks when
you type texts?' which is a good question.

I find it very strange when
people on social media post
questions as statements, without
question marks, and you know it's

14

a question but it appears to be a
statement, which is very disconcerting.

In the future, people will simply
stop using punctuation altogether.

Punctuation was one of the first
things to be attacked by the modernists.

John Cage, who was an
anarchist, saw syntax as the
government of language, with
the punctuation marks as policemen.

Adorno claimed that all sorts of
authoritarian structures like traffic
signals, were modeled on punctuation.

He felt exclamation points to be red
lights; colons, green; and dashes, yellow.

And Gertrude Stein felt that
possessive apostrophes were,
well, too possessive, strangling
the letters they were attached to.

But the most extreme punctuation I
ever encountered was by an American
ultra-modernist writer   his name
escapes me now   who, in the 1920s,
wrote an entire novel where he inserted
exclamation points in between each and every letter.

I remember that it was impossible to read.

I suspect that if you removed the
exclamation points you'd find a conventional
narrative, but of course nobody was going to do that.

I have no idea what he was
trying to do, but I like to fantasize.

Wouldn't it have been great if he took,
say, a boring novel by a boring writer and
simply inserted exclamation points in between each
and every letter and published it under his own name?

There's a great idea.

Somebody should actually do
that with, say, a Jonathan Franzen novel.

That would make it so much more
exciting   and so much more boring.

It reminds me of a piece by
a composer I once knew who
took a really thorny atonal
Schoenberg composition, erased
the notation for sharps and
flats, then signed his own name to it.

When he played it back, it sounded exactly like
new age music, blandly tonal and stupidly melodic.

With one simple gesture,
he completely defanged Schoenberg.

I think that the guy who
wrote the exclamation point
book wanted to make people aware
that language is material, that words
have physical qualities as well as semantic
ones   something we tend to forget in day-to-day life.

He might've also been listening
to the sound of technology
   perhaps the noise of telegrams
and trying to track it onto literature.

17

In those days, when you wrote a
telegram, all punctuation marks
cost extra money except for STOP,
which for some reason was free.

Telegrams became unpunctuated
except for the STOP, which became
a catchall punctuation mark: a comma,
colon, semi-colon, dash, em dash,
question mark, and period all in one.

It might've even become an exclamation point too.

People just wanted to save
money and had no problem
bending language in order to do so.

Maybe the guy who wrote
the exclamation point book was
saying fuck you to the telegram
and fuck you to the cost of punctuation.

Remember, back then,
words cost a lot of money to print.

Inadvertently, though, he
triggered another expensive situation.

18

At a time when many books
were hand-set with lead type, I'm
sure that the shop setting the book
didn't have enough exclamation points
to insert between each and every letter.

If you took, say, Ernest Hemingway's
A Farewell to Arms and inserted
exclamation points in between each and every
letter, you'd need 494,177 exclamation points.

And nobody had that many exclamation points.

What did they do? Did they buy more?

That would've been a shitload of money.

And then, what would they possibly do
with them after they finished setting the book?

I imagine that they'd be hard to sell en masse.

Who needs nearly half
a million lead exclamation points?

Maybe they sold them as
scrap metal and melted them

down and made new letters from
them, the ones that everyone
wanted instead of a bunch of
exclamation points that no one wanted.

Which reminds me of when,
a few years ago in the U.S., when gas
prices hit the $5 mark and they didn't have
enough 5's for their plastic price displays, so they
started using S's instead, which they had plenty of.

And when things got really desperate,
they turned 2's upside down and used them.

It always strikes me as strange
that, still today, in most American
gas stations, they have plastic letters
for prices, not LED screens, where
all letters and numbers are in perpetual supply.

Nobody ever runs out of LED letters.

Which reminds me of when ISIS
destroyed the ancient city of Palmyra.

While the world watched in
horror, one local guy, when asked

about the devastation just shrugged
and said, these stones have been
knocked down so many times before.
We'll just put them back
together like they always have been.

It reminds me of letters and words.

All our words are used
ancient, and worn, stacked
and demolished   then reassembled
in both very new and very old ways.

There's no need to create more;
a giant freely circulating stockpile
exists, so we really don't need to worry
about either paying outrageous prices
for them or running out of words any time soon.

Today we have an endless
supply of letters and numbers   we're
drowning in language   which can start
to feel like an embarrassment of riches.

Sometimes, I feel guilty
about how much language I
consume, so guilty that I sometimes

actually reuse notes in my notes app
on my iPhone instead of making new ones.

I'll just erase everything that's on my
current note and write new text into it.

Not because it's easy   it takes a lot
more work to delete old text; it would be
much easier just tossing it out and cracking
a new one   but because it feels more, what   ecological.

This is hard wired into me.

I was a kid during the energy
crisis of the seventies, when we were
not permitted to leave a room with a light on.

To this day, when I brush my teeth,
I turn the water on and off between rinses.

I know.

It's crazy.

But it all somehow relates
back to my need to cherish

resources rather than to waste them,
which is one of the reasons I prefer to
use other people's words rather than my own.

I'd rather recycle them.

Appropriation feels more
ecologically sound than having
to invent your own words anew each time.

And then when you're done,
you can toss them back into
the recycle bin so someone
else can use them once again.

Like the exclamation point guy
who was listening to telegrams, I'm
listening to the connections between modernism
and the digital, between Twitter and the telegram.

So while the average bro
trolling around on Twitter probably
knows nor cares very little about
modernism, he's unconsciously hard-wired to it.

That's funny to think about,
but just think of the way that URLs

or hashtags look exactly like all those
compound words in James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*.

Reading has always been a sort of
parsing but hashtags take it to a new level.

Reading hashtags is a two-step process.

Because they have no spaces, you first have
to mentally add them before you can read them.

When I see a hashtag, I parse it,
breaking down an unfathomable-
looking beast of a word into its
constituent parts until it becomes
legible, which is exactly the way
Joyce challenged us to read his book.

We've learned to read long
hashtags so well that at this point,
we don't even bother to capitalize the
words in them anymore the way we once did.

Now small letters just run into one another.

It's so strange to think that
on the internet, in the twenty-

first century, we're reading the way
James Joyce predicted we would eighty years ago.

While URLs and hashtags are airless,
the web itself is full of gaps, riddled with holes.

We like to think that the web
is instantaneous   and in some
cases, such as fiber optics, I'm told
it is   but for most of us, it's really not.

Think of the interval between
the time you dial someone on your
phone and the time it takes to start ringing.

Or the interval between
sending a text and getting a response.

Or the interval between
clicking on a link, and when
your web page actually loads.

Or the interval it takes for a video to buffer.

There's even an ecology of interval
signs: the loading symbol that looks
like a white clock dial which ticks away in

a circle, or that spinning beach ball of death
when your browser is hung, or that little
wristwatch, with its hands ticking away the time.

But my very favorite is those
three bouncing dots you see when you
text someone and someone is typing back at you.

It's really creepy.

You're actually feeling another person's presence.

And you hang in that interval,
trying to anticipate what is coming,
already forming your own response
to a text you haven't even read yet.

It's superanticipatory and very nineteenth-century.

We've all become mind-readers, soothsayers, and psychics.

The web has really become a giant electronic Ouija board.

Who knew that in the 21st century, the occult would be back?

But the web is just a mirror of what happens in real life.

Look at what's happening here.

I'm feeling bad about speaking
English to a hundred people for
whom English is not their first language.

I'm really self-conscious of this
so I'm trying my hardest to speak
simply, slowly, and clearly so that
you'll be able to understand what
I'm saying, but still, I'm not entirely
sure you're really understanding me.

There's no way of knowing.

You appear to be understanding
what I'm saying: you're nodding
your heads, and laughing at my bad
jokes, so I think you're getting
some of it, but I'm not sure you're
getting all of it   at least the way I intend it.

But then again, even when
I'm talking to other native English
speakers, I sense that they're not getting
all of it exactly the way I intended it either.

27

In English, I constantly get embroiled in all sorts of
fuck-ups, miscommunications, and misunderstandings.

I mean, you would think that
the people I love most in the
world   my family and my
friends   would understand me.

In some ways they do, but in most ways they don't.

Sometimes, they're the ones
that have the most trouble
understanding me, and yet they
speak the same language that I do.

If we don't understand each
other, how can I expect a roomful
of strangers   for whom English is
not their first language
to understand me as I intend it?

In fact, understanding exactly as I intend it never happens.

We're better on the web in
that anticipatory interval,
but in real life, we still seem to
be saddled with misunderstanding.

Can we see this as being good?

Can we see this moment
a poetry reading   as being a way of
embracing our mutual misunderstanding?

After all, hasn't misunderstanding or
ambiguity been the hinge upon which art has swung?

There is no consensus,
just interpretation, a conversation
that takes disagreement, conflict,
and misunderstanding as its basis,
one in which we agree to disagree.

Can we extend this lesson into our lives, like this moment?

Could our lack of understanding be a
demonstration of the power of poetry?

Instead of trying to solve it, can we
learn to accept it and even embrace it?

Then misunderstanding ceases to be a
problem and begins to be an opportunity.

This is what I've been trying to do
with my work for many years, to
misunderstand the language that it's written in.

For years I would begin my readings
in non-English speaking countries
with a pre-prepared statement that
had been translated into the language
of the country in which I was reading.

It would start: 'I am an American poet, and
like many Americans, I speak only one language.

When asked to speak to you here,
I figured that the last thing that your
country (or the rest of the world)
needed was more imported American culture
(remember the Clash's *I'm So Bored With The U.S.A.?*).

So, I've decided to start my reading in your
language, a language that I have never spoken or written.'

And then I would continue to
read this longish statement in the
worst Spanish or French or Norwegian
that anyone's ever heard, so that even the

native speakers of that language couldn't
understand what was supposedly their own language.

I would finish the talk   still in
their language   with: 'I could
continue and do the whole reading in
your language but I think you get the point.

After this rough beginning, you
can better understand what I'm trying
to do with my work: to approximate the
utopian situation we find ourselves
in at the moment, one of willful ignorance.'

Sometimes, when I do a talk in a
non-English speaking country, they
hire a translator for simultaneous translation,
which attempts to reduce the noise and mitigate
the ambiguity, but in reality, translation
inadvertently adds another sort of noise
the noise of approximation,
which is another form of misunderstanding.

No matter how hard we try, we can't win.
Yet here we are pretending that nothing is wrong.

But nothing is wrong.

When you appropriate someone else's
words, you intentionally misunderstand them.

For one early book, I appropriated
the entire short story, *The Rocking Horse
Winner*, by D.H. Lawrence, and published it
as the last chapter of my book, only because
the last syllable of the last word of the
story fits in with my conceptual scheme.

To this day, I still haven't
read the story, and I have no plan to.

I took his story and did
something he hadn't intended with it.

It worked   at least, for me it did
and in this way, his story became my story.

Could we see appropriation
as literary communism, an
acknowledgment that no one owns
words, that they are a shared resource?

When I copy other people's words,
I write in English as if it's foreign
to me, with ideas that I don't
invent and sentiments that I don't share.

I often write things I disagree with, things that disgust me.

It's really liberating.

No matter what you do with
words, whether you write them
or find them or steal them
they always mean something.

And depending on what you
do with them   where you put
them or how you frame them
they have different meanings.

As writers, we try too hard to
make meaning, when the
material we use is saturated with it.

Even the most abstract uses of language
phonemes and single letters   mean something.

No matter how much we hack them or remix
them, they still resonate with profound meaning.

Our job as writers is much easier than we think.

Soliloquy had a postscript that
went: 'If every word spoken in New York
City daily were somehow to materialize
as a snowflake, each day there would be a blizzard.'

I just love the idea of language
accumulating, like snow.

Just before I wrote *Soliloquy*,
there was a huge blizzard in
New York, one of the worst ever,
and when it snows in New York,
what they do is they scoop up the snow,
load it onto trucks and dump it into the river,
where it dissolves, flowing back into the ocean.

And I thought, if speech was
materialized as snow, at the end of every day,
they would have to do a similar thing with
language: they'd collect it, shovel it onto big
trucks, and dump it into the river in order to make
it melt away into the ocean, and start again the next day.

Which reminds me of Rabelais,
and a story he told about a battlefield
that was so cold that on the day of the battle,
even the sounds of the battle froze and fell to the ground.

And there they lay all winter long until
spring, when the frozen sounds began to melt.

And as they melted, the sounds
were replayed, not in the order in
which they were originally made,
but in the order in which they melted.

It was a cacophony.

But certain people on this
battlefield picked up these sounds
before they melted and brought them into
an ice cellar, where they remained frozen for centuries.

When they finally thawed, sounds were
heard from six or seven hundred years ago.

Which reminds me of a very dear friend of mine
who is a very successful painter and a very wealthy man.

When you make that kind of
money, you trade paintings for wine.

But the problem is that he loves
wine but his wife doesn't drink, so his
greatest joy is to invite friends over to his
house where he starts taking out these
incredible bottles, simply because he is
just dying to share them with someone.

It's just the most amazing thing.

And I remember him taking out a
bottle of port from the early 1800s.

And it wasn't the best port
that I ever drank, but the idea
that I was drinking a liquid from
over 200 years ago was really incredible.

I find all of these things very fluid, rife with history.

I find the materiality of liquid, or the
materiality of sound, or the materiality of language
to be interchangeable, with words taking many forms.

Maybe this is why I love digital language so much.

I love the ways that the digital has liquidated language.

I've often thought that the
metaphor of the water cycle describes
the ways in which language moves through the
digital ecosystem, from frozen, solid artifacts
like AVIs, to flowing liquid states like torrents.

Sometimes they are slushy, partially
frozen and partially melted, like when
you're simultaneously playing an MP3
while it's seeding a torrent up to the
cloud (even the metaphors we use to
describe the digital ecosystem are
atmospheric and weather-inspired).

I love the idea that like urine, we stream our media.

Like Dali's watches, when an MP3 plays, it
unfurls, melts, loosens, lessens, deflates, and softens.

But no matter how hot my computer gets, it
never actually softens, nor does it sweat or wet itself.

I sometimes half expect to pick
up my laptop after a long session
and find a pool of liquid beneath it.

I'm disappointed to find that it's bone dry.

It hates water and it hates grease.

Yet its surfaces are slathered with both:
morsels of a croissant drop into the crevasses
of my keyboard, ground into smaller crumbs each
time I punch my keys; specks of saliva fling from
my lips and land on my screen, drying there,
waiting until I pick them off with my fingernails;
desiccated sweat from the heels of my hands
create ghostlike washes on either side of my
trackpad; stray eyelashes fall between my
arrow keys, devoured by my machine's innards.

If you hold my Android up to the
light in just the right way, you can see my
swipe pattern, created by the grease from my
finger that's been run in the same shape so many
times that it might as well have been channeled into stone.

From time to time, I wipe my pattern
away but it reappears moments later,

when I run my finger
back over it to unlock my phone.

My device's oleophobic layer sits atop gorilla glass.

Like my skin, it wears thin and
dries out, losing its lubrication.

Buckled and cracked, brittle with age,
and eaten away by the acidity of my sweat,
my Android is in an eternally semi-nude state.

My finger no longer glides, it skitters,
resisting my touch rather than courting it.

I reach for a tube of grease and a Q-tip,
and with a circular motion, caress its surface.

Newly moistened, my finger glides across
its surface like an ice dancer traversing the ice.

On hot summer evenings,
driblets of sweat plunge from my
brow onto my screen and slither over
its rounded edges, saturating its ports.

Lifting my device, I notice my desk is wet.

I wipe it up, then wipe my brow.

My device and I are one.

I paw my keyboard until
the letters wear off
always a's, d's, s's, e's, and t's
    never p's, u's, c's or v's.

If I continue pounding my machine at this rate,
I won't have any letters at all, just bare, unadorned keys.

Desperate, I purchase a skin
impregnated with a silky smooth
lubricant for comfort and sensitivity,
so thin, they say, that I won't even know it's there.

I unbox it.

Using both hands, I unfurl it
over my keyboard, form fitting.

It is powdery and smells like latex.

The next day, I return it to Amazon.

When they ask me why, I tell them
that typing feels like having safe sex.

Rust never sleeps.

Flesh to machine,

Pixel to paper, and back again.

I'll never forget how astonished
my grandfather was in the 1970s
when he first saw a fax, which he received
from my grandmother who was traveling abroad.

He was stunned: how could someone's
handwriting he knew intimately   had received
love letters from   dematerialize, get sent
over the phone lines, then reappear as an
identical facsimile of what used to arrive in
the post in the morning, or on his pillow at night?

People say that technology
makes us cold and separates us,
but if my grandfather is any
example, it's anything but that.

41

His reaction to that primitive machine was hyperemotional.

Just think of all the invisible
language, rife with emotion, flowing
through this room right now   WIFI signals,
text messages, radio waves, TV transmissions.

With every breath we take, the air is thick with language.

It's a wonder we don't choke on it.

There's this great moment in the
original *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate
Factory*   the one with Gene Wilder
where Mike Teevee gets teleported
from one side of the room to the other.

Willy Wonka explains it like this:
'You photograph something and the
photograph is split up into millions of
tiny pieces, and they go whizzing through
the air, and down to your TV set where
they're all put together again in the right order.
If they can do it with a photograph,
why can't I do it with a bar of chocolate?'

42

Mike Teevee forces his way in front
of the camera as his body disintegrates
into millions of pieces   visualized as television
static floating through the air   only to
rematerialize in miniature on the other side.

I was trained as a sculptor
and learned about transformative
materiality in foundries and ceramics
studios, where masses of liquids were
alchemically transformed into imagistic solids.

Sometimes people ask me if I
miss making sculpture and I tell
them that the digital has the
same physical qualities as stone.

When I'm hammering away on
my keyboard all day, I might as well be
chipping away at marble or pounding a piano.

When I'm really typing, judging by the flourishes
my hands are making, I could be playing a Liszt sonata.

When I code HTML, with a mere
keystroke, all that language somehow becomes
image, exactly as it does when I post to Facebook.

It's no different really than taking a pot out of a kiln.

Today, technology and writing are inseparable.

But while almost everybody writes
on a computer, the effects of technology
rarely show up in the actual writing itself.

Word processing programs crash all the time:
you're writing in mid-sentence and the machine hangs.

You force quit the program and then
resume as though nothing had ever happened.

I'm always curious why hiccups like
'recovered documents' and
'temporary files' don't make it into books.

Why doesn't the bug become the literature?

How come you can't buy paperback
books at the airport that have glitches in them?

Most of our textual environment is
glitch: wads of spam, miles of quoted
text, or infinitely mirrored retweets, all

44

born of the refractive platform upon
which they are composed and distributed.

When we read and write on
the network, they're everywhere,
but in our books, they're nowhere.

It's so different in other fields like music where
technological errors are the basis for entire aesthetics.

I'm thinking of musique concrete, where tapes were
manipulated, warped, and stretched to create new sounds.

It reminds me of one musician I knew who,
back in the 70s, accidentally left her 8-Track
copy of Led Zeppelin's *Zoso* on his car's
dashboard, where it melted on a hot summer day.

Knowing it could only be played once,
she made a recording of it, capturing
a glorious wobbly version of *Black Dog*, and
an elongated *Stairway to Heaven*, before it died.

Today, nobody would argue with
the terms industrial or noise music.

But for some reason, we
don't have industrial writing.

Imagine hip hop without scratches,
sampled music without samples,
or autotuned pop without autotuning.

Then you have some idea of
how literature sounds today.

So why the hesitation in writing?

I think it's fear of language itself.

After all, unlike, say, an atonal piece
of music or an abstract painting, writing
is comprised entirely of language, the very
material we use to communicate with one another.

Language is what makes up everything from
business proposals to recipes to love letters.

We have so much trouble
understanding each other
using our own, normal language
why would we want to make it

that much more difficult by
purposely adding more noise?

Language is delicate and people
get touchy when you fuck with it.

I think that's why people err
on the side of caution with
words even in literature, which
is arguably a safer and less loaded
linguistic realm than business, law, or love.

Interfering with language is breaking a societal taboo.

From childhood, everybody learned to write,
and we all learned to write in the same way.

There were rules: there were right
ways to spell, and wrong ways to spell.

There were proper uses of grammar
and improper uses of grammar.

And there wasn't a whole lot of room for leeway.

For most people, it never changed.
Language stayed strictly functional.

But the strange thing is that
the web has forced writing and
books to change in unexpected ways.

Ten years ago, we heard that
the web was going to kill books,
but that turned out not to be true.

Now there are more books than ever
and they're more beautiful than ever.

I think people got tired of shitty PDFs.

I think people got tired of piles of pixels.

So, like painting did when the camera arrived,
books had to take a turn in order to survive.

Their move was to become
completely gorgeous, the sort
of things that you have to have.

I go into a bookstore today and
everything is unbelievably designed,
printed on thick paper, and
bound in the most luscious covers.

Even poetry books.

I mean, for years, poetry books were the ugliest
things on the planet because they had to be made cheaply.

Their ugliness signified an anti-
consumerism, a claim to a certain truth,
a resistance which rebutted the idea of glossy culture.

But today, even philosophy books
have been repackaged to be beautiful.

I'm thinking of a recent series
of the selected works of Walter
Benjamin, which are a rainbow-colored
books with grainy, romantic black-and-
white photos from the period on the cover
images of stainless steel fans, old fashioned
cameras, and wet city streets shot at night.

The content is of course the same.

But because of the web, the packaging is over the top.

And the weird thing is, that
in spite of their good design,

Benjamin doesn't mean anything less
than he did when he was swathed in ugly covers.

Good design didn't hurt him one bit.

You wonder why this didn't happen long ago?

Because the worst designed thing in the
whole world   the web   made good design possible.

Paradoxically, the web has given us back the artifact.

So instead of asking what the web can do,
it might be better to ask what it can't do.

The web cannot produce
a beautiful book.

The web cannot produce a
thick piece of vinyl.

The web cannot produce a
delicious locavore meal.

The web cannot produce a
glazed piece of ceramics.

The web cannot produce a
soft woven sweater.

And the web cannot produce a
unique oil painting.

Yet.

And this is why painting
continues to live.

The web keeps painting relevant for the
exact reason that the web cannot make a painting.

Everyone says, 'Oh, the web is
destroying this, the web is destroying
that…' but for all it's destroying,
it's also rekindling and reviving an
entirely other set of cultural artifacts,
making them more valuable precisely
because the web can't do them.

Just when we were supposed
to be liberated from our objects, we're
drowning in them, getting swept away by the flow.

51

The web is flow; artifacts are islands in that stream.

There's something sort of Zen about
living in the flow, but there's something,
well, drifty and meaningless about it also.

The web is liquid; it flows through
our fingers; there are no handles.

Amnesiac and ludic, the twenty-four
hour cycle renders traditional markers of
time obsolete; one day flows into the next;
things float downstream   current events,
catastrophes, deaths, obituaries, photos, politics, videos
only to be displaced by the next thing
barreling down from upstream.

I'm often asked why
I still publish books.

I think the reason is to stop the flow.

In order to make an argument,
you need to freeze that flow for a
moment, where you draw upon the

past and speculate upon the future,
in one crystalized present   a book.

Books become markers in that stream,
which continues to flow about them.

But they feel solid,
like totems to which
discourse can cling.

The idea that literature could
be flow came from the surrealists.

I love their idea of automatic writing.

I want all writing to be automatic.

I want writing to be as
easy as speaking.

I want writing to be as
easy as washing the dishes.

I want writing to be as
easy as looking at a web page.

I want writing to be as
easy as thinking.

But the downside of flow is that it's
not that interesting.

But the best surrealist
literature was not flow at all.

They went back and fine-tuned
everything to produce very high-end literature.

They cheated in a lovely way.

I like the idea that you can actually
go back in and make it a little bit better.

You need to adjust the signal-to-noise
ratio in order to get decent literature.

So much literature is being
produced by bots and algorithms these days.

One of the great mistakes that
the new automatic writers make is to
accept exactly what the machine produces.

Machines produce too many good
ideas, which need be teased out and sorted.

Otherwise, you're just reproducing flow.

So let's talk about flow.

Speech is flow, but as a book,
Soliloquy was a marker in that stream.

I wrote that book in the third week of April of 1996.

Can anybody in this room
remember exactly what they said,
in the third week of April of 1996,
or third week of April of 2006,
or third week of April of 2016?

Even if you knew what you did,
you have no idea of what you said.

But I remember everything that I did during that week.

Of course I don't remember
what happened the week before,
and I don't remember what happened

the week after, but I remember everything
from that one week because of what I said.

It was remarkable that through those
words, today I can precisely conjure up
events and emotions from over twenty years ago.

I think it was the most meaningful week
of my entire life precisely because I captured it.

There have been traumatic weeks,
and there have been great weeks,
yet none of those have any meaning
compared with that one week
when I captured everything I spoke.

Which reminds me of a man
I met a few years back in Berlin.

We were both at a conference
speculating about the future of literature.

He was a university scientist
working on building actual automatic
writing programs, programs that
could take sets of statistics and
transform them into natural language.

So he would take things like the
stats of a football game and write
a program that churned it into a
report for the newspaper, so believably
written that you couldn't tell that
whole thing had been done by machine.

It was pretty amazing.

Then I spoke about my
practice of automatic writing.

He listened and
was completely puzzled.

Why would I want to do the
opposite of what he was doing?

Why in the world would I want
to write more like a machine?

As a scientist,
he was trying to solve a problem.

As an artist,
I was trying to create a problem.

And to him, that was
just unbelievably weird.

Afterword

In early 2017, I was invited to be an artist in residence for a week at a small art school in Belgium. It was the 20th anniversary of my book *Soliloquy*, where I recorded everything I said for a week from the moment I woke up on Monday morning until the moment I went to sleep on Sunday night in 1996. The idea was for me to come to Belgium and for them to record everything I said during my week there. They intended to produce a book of it.

Early one morning, I stumbled off a plane—jetlagged and bleary—into a classroom filled with 100 students, where I was to give my keynote lecture. I hadn't prepared a thing, and for the next hour or so, I just improvised, rambling about whatever came to me off the top of my head. It wasn't bad, it wasn't great; it was just sort of my standard act. The rest of the week continued on in this fashion. True to their word, they taped everything I said. And true to their word, they made a book of everything I spoke that week.

The resultant book was a lovely disaster. They got everything wrong. Because English was their second language, my words appeared completely unrecognizable to me, full of misspellings, errors,

and invented language. It was an object lesson in the difficulties of translation, and it was made clear to me how, in spite of best intentions, mutual understanding across languages is nearly impossible.

The book was published by het balanseer. When I saw what they had produced, I got an idea: what would happen if I took the book and corrected it? Then they could publish another version of the book—a corrected edition, so to speak. So I spent this past summer correcting everything. But as I was doing that, I realized that much of what I had actually said, even in English, was less than perfect, full of overstatements, conjecture, and in some cases, plain lies. Then it hit me: here was that rare chance to correct the past, to perfect my words, to say what I had meant to say, rather than what I had actually said.

What you have in your hands is an idealized version of that bleary keynote I gave upon my arrival, hence the title *The Ideal Lecture (In Memory of David Antin)*.

As I was correcting my talk, it occurred to me that this process was similar to the way the poet and art critic David Antin (1932-2016) constructed his 'talk poems.' Antin, a great talker, would stand up before a crowd and just speak. He taped those

talks, then went home and transcribed them, tweaking them slightly, arranging them on the page, and publishing them as poems. David felt that the simple act of speech constituted an act of poetry, a lesson I took to heart and into my own practice.

This lecture premiered at The Louvre auditorium as part of FIAC's public programs in October, 2017. To give it, I loaded the talk into a teleprompter program on my laptop. The linebreaks in the piece are a result of the way the teleprompter program broke them up in order to facilitate the reading of the work. Although I have never written lineated verse, I love the idea that a computer lineated the verse for me.

This lecture, then, reads an awful lot like the way I talk, but it is truly nothing like the way I talk. As I said that foggy Monday morning:

You are seeing me giving an
ideal lecture by my ideal self.

I wish I could always be like this.

Kenneth Goldsmith
New York City, January 2018