

KENNETH GOLDSMITH
IN CONVERSATION

Critics in Conversation

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The series editor of *Critics in Conversation* would like to acknowledge The Museum at De La Salle University, its curator Ms. Lalyn Buncab, and its board member Ms. Della Besa for granting his request to reproduce the painting, *Yellow Trio (Musicians)* by National Artist Arturo Luz, from the Wili and Doreen Fernandez Art Collection for the cover art of the series.

KENNETH GOLDSMITH IN CONVERSATION

Kenneth Goldsmith

and

Francisco Roman Guevara



De La Salle University Publishing House
2014

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Published and distributed by
De La Salle University Publishing House
2401 Taft Avenue, Manila, Philippines 1004
Tel. No: (632) 524-4611 loc. 271
Telefax: (632) 523-4281
Emails: dlsupublishinghouse@dlsu.edu.ph
dlsupublishinghouse@gmail.com
Website: www.dlsu.edu.ph

*The De La Salle University Publishing House is the publications office
of De La Salle University, Manila, Philippines.*

Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

PN Goldsmith, Kenneth
81 Kenneth Goldsmith in conversation / Kenneth Goldsmith and
.G64 Francisco Roman Guevara.—Manila : De La Salle University
2000 Publishing House (2014)
z 50p. ; 15 cm.—(Critics in conversation : a DLSU Publishing
House series)

ISBN 978-971-555-596-8

1. Criticism. 2. Modernism (Literature) 3. Literature—History and
criticism. I. Guevara, Francisco Roman. II. Title. III Series: Critics in
conversation : a DLSU Publishing House series

Cover Design: Shedina de Guia
Layout: Althea Marie Mallari

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FRANCISCO ROMAN GUEVARA: *The reason why I wanted to be in conversation with you is because of what I perceive to be the significance of your recent work, Seven American Deaths and Disasters. It's significant precisely because of how it bends without breaking the rigors of uncreative writing you were grappling with in the afterword of the book:*

But after ten books of quotidian compilations, an unexpected thing happened: I began to tire of the everyday. After all, the job of retyping the entire Internet could go on forever, driving me to seek a new line of investigation. Still deeply entrenched in a digital ethos, I remained tied to a mimetic and uncreative way of writing, yet found myself struggling with how to expand my focus without radically altering my long-standing practice.

I think the book explores a variation of your digital ethos by opening up a remarkable amount of possibilities for thinking about the unreadability of your work, which you discuss in your poetics statement titled "Being Boring" from the anthology American Poets in the 21st Century: The New Poetics, edited by Claudia Rankine and Lisa Sewell:

I am the most boring writer that has ever lived. If there were an Olympic sport for extreme boredom, I would get a gold medal. My books are impossible to read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept.

Over the past ten years, my practice today has boiled down to simply retyping existing texts. I've thought about my practice in relation to Borges's Pierre Menard, but even Menard was more original than I am: he, independent of any knowledge of Don Quixote, reinvented Cervantes'

masterpiece word for word. By contrast, I don't invent anything. I just keep rewriting the same book. I sympathize with the protagonist of a cartoon claiming to have transferred x amount of megabytes, physically exhausted after a day of downloading. The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself. I think it's fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers. Some of us call this writing.

Seven American Deaths and Disasters, particularly "World Trade Center," becomes an interesting text precisely because of the way it explores multiple levels of unreadability from the boredom of what you call your "quotidian compilations" to the unreadability of the American deaths and disasters being transcribed and performed on the page.

I'd like to begin by addressing the implications of your beginning and how this has affected the interesting shifts of your long-standing engagement with readability from your sculptural work to 73 Poems (1994) to Soliloquy (2001) to Seven American Deaths and Disasters (2013). In an interview with Marjorie Perloff for Jacket Magazine, you discuss the shift from, to use Perloff's words, "A (TV culture in Long Island) to B (Cage and Joan La Barbara) and C (a combination of high/low)" by talking about the shift of your practice from art to poetry. Can you discuss your reading of poetry or the poetry you read from A to B to C and how they affected your inquiries with language and the levels of your strategic nonintervention or "quotidian compilations" from your sculptural work to 73 Poems to Soliloquy to Seven American Deaths and Disasters? I'm interested in the potential relationships formed by the poetry you read at the time you wrote your works and the works' engagement with readability. This is a roundabout way of asking you two things: 1) how your reading has informed the readability of your work and 2) an attempt to ask you about your personal and intellectual history via the art and poetry you've read.

KENNETH GOLDSMITH: I began in the 80s as a visual artist and became rather successful at it. I was selling everything I made and

showing in the best galleries. But I was miserable, mostly because I'd become what I went into art to avoid: a businessman. I had a studio full of assistants and was pumping out work for shows around the world. My values were becoming very much in sync with materialistic culture, and I was straying far from where I knew I needed to be. Eventually, these conflicts of values became too much for me to bear. And so I crashed and left the art world. I spent several years in the early 90s in limbo, trying to figure out what to do next.

The solution came in the form of John Cage. When I was a student, I picked up a copy of *Silence* and couldn't really understand it, but when I was looking for a way out of the predicament I'd gotten myself into, I remembered it. In the book, Cage proposes an inversion of logic, suggesting that through nonlinear thinking, one could find a kind of freedom, seeing possibility instead of fear in life's random events. While he adopted many of his ideas from Eastern thought, he couched them in terms of art and aesthetics, so I was able to adopt them in nonreligious ways.

After finding Cage, I became devoted to that kind of thinking, which led me to embrace anything having to do with the *avant-garde* (UbuWeb is a direct outgrowth of this situation). I spent the early 90s reading everything that I could get my hands on that could be termed *avant-garde*: the entire oeuvres of Joyce, Stein, Beckett, Pound, Cummings, and so forth. Joyce led me back to James, which led me to Zola (I devoured his entire Rougon-Macquart series, which taught me about documentary-based writing), and Zola led me to the everyday poetics of Boswell and Sterne. Moving in the other direction, I went deep into American experimental fiction—Gass, Markson, Gaddis—and fell into concrete and sound poetry, as well as some of the Beats: Kerouac's more experimental stuff (*Old Angel Midnight*), Ginsberg, and Burroughs's cut-ups. I found Gysin and Ballard through *RE/Search*, an early 80s San Francisco-based industrial culture zine, which opened up the world of punk writers like Dennis Cooper, Bob Flanagan, and Kathy Acker. On the other side, Cage led me to Mac Low, who led me to Language poets like Bernstein, Andrews, Hejinian, and Silliman. Silliman was particularly important with his use of overt conceptual procedures and constraints. Finally, Marjorie Perloff's critical writings framed many of these tendencies into something sensible to me.

In terms of readability, I read all those so-called unreadable texts. I spent a whole summer reading *Finnegans Wake* cover to cover. I read *Ulysses* twice—once in India, when it was the only book I took on my month-long trip. In my reading, I discovered—and reveled in—the range and flavors of difficulties. For instance, I found James's *The Golden Bowl* to be marvelously unreadable due to its density and mathematical structure while Beckett's trilogy was equally difficult, although it was written in the simplest language. I discovered that difficult texts were not unreadable, just differently readable. Texts could be objects—like concrete poetry and Stein's fields of visual language—or so ridiculously epic, as in the case of Benjamin's *Arcades Project*, that they begged engagement rather than reading.

GUEVARA: *I like the way your experience of literature was oriented around the experience of rereading John Cage's Silence. Instead of reading the literary tradition chronologically as most students of literature are required to do, you began seeking works from a concern with your perceived manifestations of language in an attempt to articulate this malaise you had with being an artist in the art world. So much of your interests with the concept of unreadability seem inextricably tied to the perceived literary trajectories and inheritances begun by John Cage and, as we'll discuss later on, Andy Warhol. Both made significant contributions to the field of literature (i.e., Silence [1961] and X [1983] for Cage and a: a novel [1968] and The Andy Warhol Diaries [1989] for Warhol) inasmuch as they were important practitioners of music and art, respectively. In this way, your idea of uncreative writing seems to be a careful negotiation of music, art, and literature. Can you talk further about the difference between conceptual and constraint-based or procedural writing given this interdisciplinary negotiation?*

GOLDSMITH: Cage and Warhol are rarely thought of as writers even though, as you say, they made significant contributions to the field. But I'm interested in the primary production of these artists so that their secondary lines of production, so to speak, become for me their main

occupation.¹ I'm also very interested in what happens when you work in a field for which you are not trained. You don't know the rules, so you can do new things. This is what happened with me and writing. What seemed to be a perfectly intuitive investigation for me required a radical self-questioning for my advanced-degree conceptualist peers like Rob Fitterman, Christian Bök, and Craig Dworkin, who were trained to know all the rules. As a result, they had to work much harder to unlearn them in order to do their present work. I don't wish to cleave too closely to the idea of the outsider, but it does open things up. Also, a training in visual art is not only about visual art: one learns about all types of experimental music, film, performance, and literature, which one feels free to incorporate into one's practice. Art schools are funny places like that: they tend to posit canons and are open-ended and flexible; you are encouraged to take bits and pieces from wherever you want and make them your own. The manner of education is very casual, intuitive, experiential, improvisatory, and fluid; it teaches you to totally ignore rules.

GUEVARA: When you outlined your ideas of conceptual writing in "Paragraphs on Conceptual Writing," you appropriated Sol LeWitt's "Paragraphs on Conceptual Art," which first appeared in the magazine Artforum in 1967, by substituting "Writing" for "Art" and all the corresponding shifts in nomenclature throughout the essay. You also strategically omitted parts of LeWitt's essay that engaged art in a way that I assume could not be translated to conceptual writing. You ended the piece with this statement: "Conceptual writing is good only when the idea is good." I'm curious about the way you negotiate the particularities of Sol LeWitt's "conceptual art" into your "conceptual writing." Perhaps one of the more significant aspects of this negotiation is the experience of idea. Can you discuss further this experience of idea from art to writing and the distinctions you make (if any) between conceptual and, to elevate the previous inquiry, nonconceptual writing? Also, how does this experience of idea relate to a writing that is considered creative and uncreative?

¹ UbuWeb is almost entirely based on this idea. On Ubu, for example, most visitors know about this amazing electroacoustic musician from the 1950s named Jean Dubuffet; later, they find out that he's also a painter.

GOLDSMITH: A pure LeWittian notion of conceptual writing has, over the past decade, been fully explored to the point where such provocations have become clichéd. You now have generations of poets data scraping vast portions of the Web, throwing their trove into InDesign, and uploading it to Lulu as print-on-demand books that, most likely, will never be printed. Just today, for instance, I was shown an impressive-looking first book called *Supergroup* from a young author, Andy Sterling. It was four hundred pages long. The contents (poems) were lists of session players from long-forgotten LPs from the 70s, clipped from Discogs, pasted onto a Word document, and sent up to Lulu. It's a big, dumb, sexy thing—a sort of move that Seth Price might do in visual art—and plays with ideas of authorship and value in ways that are very different than what I did with *Day*. My works always had some kind of denouement and were heavily reliant on “value” (although I heralded valuelessness) in order to make some larger point about language and culture. In hindsight, compared to these younger works, my books feel conservative, clinging closely to the Author, with a capital A. Yet there's something really contemporary about *Supergroup*—from conception to production to distribution—that goes against the LeWittian/Apollonian ideas of what conceptual writing can be. There's something marvelously *wrong* and impure about *Supergroup* that I never could've done. It really does feel like the next step.

If we map this onto the history of the visual art world, we might get a glimpse of where the poetry discourse is headed. The first generation of 60s conceptualists like LeWitt used the pure grid as the basis for their primary structures. But the next generation—needing to deconstruct or expand or soil their gestures—took the grid and proverbially wrapped it in cloth, making it soft and organic; the grid was still there, but it had changed. Fast forward a few years ahead, and by the mid-70s, the grid was completely buried and was no longer necessary as an armature, hence the opening up of neo-expressionism and the return to figuration. I see gestures from younger writers like Sterling, Trisha Low, and Steven Zultanski (but to name a few) adhering pretty closely to this narrative: in their work, the grid is still very much visible, but it's been softened and twisted in ways that first-generation conceptualists wouldn't have dreamed of. The result of this sort of history, in the best-case scenario,

has produced artists like Mike Kelley, whose work I see these younger poets being very much related to.

But this whole model is to be taken with a grain of salt as visual art and poetry are very different in terms of production, distribution, and economics, not to mention the fact that this is playing out nearly a half-century later; nor can we underestimate the impact that technology is having on both worlds. So while it's a historical reference point, things most likely will play out very differently.

GUEVARA: *In a note on the process of selecting the texts that made up Seven American Deaths and Disasters, you narrowed down your choices by beginning with the John F. Kennedy assassination and the American post-Kennedy era because “all seven events depicted [there] were ones that [you] lived through which changed [you], and a nation, forever.” Why was it important that these transcriptions were based on events you lived through? And how do you understand the dynamic between the author and the idea in Seven American Deaths and Disasters, the New York Trilogy (i.e., Weather [2005], Traffic [2007], and Sports [2008]), and your older works?*

GOLDSMITH: I must answer these questions as an American, as my relationship to them is tied into this country's narrative and mythologizing of itself. This book presents and problematizes ideas of patriotism and xenophobia, reinforcing stereotypes and mythologies that are very particular to my country (when I read from my book abroad, the readings are, generally speaking, poorly received, whereas when I read them in America, they're very hot, emotional events). My work could even be termed “local,” but of course, due to America's large presence in the world, it's global as well, adding yet another layer of complexity—and problematics—to the text. I think that someone, say, from Mexico would construct a very different book called *Seven Mexican Deaths and Disasters*. Indeed, anyone could have written any of my books, and they would be completely different from my version. If you wrote down every word you spoke from the moment you woke up on a Monday morning until you went to bed on the following Sunday night, you would write a completely different book than *Soliloquy*. Likewise, someone in Hong Kong or Los Angeles writing *Traffic* would end up with a completely

different—but equally intriguing—artifact. I like to think of my books as open concepts, ones in which anyone could inhabit and come up with something unique.

We never forget where we were when we first heard news of tragic events, which are instantly rendered iconic. The power of the icon is the way in which it penetrates and inhabits our subjectivity, thereby internalizing that which is external, so that public discourse is transformed into private, woven into the narrative fabric of our own lives. Through this process, one witnesses the collapsing of dichotomous concepts (objective/subjective, public/private, external/internal), resulting in an iconic event. As a devout Catholic, Warhol (from whose series of paintings this book takes its name) understood the transformative nature of the icon and effectively deployed it throughout his career, somehow turning the very public image into something at once both shared and personal. He also understood how the iconic grows more powerful through repeated exposure, making savvy connections between icons and advertising—no icon or ad is good if viewed only once: they both become more effective through repetition. Warhol felt that art should be experienced in the same way.

In this way, all my works are autobiographical, being predicated upon framing devices which are expressive of the time in which I am living. In *The Weather*, for instance, all I had to do every day in 2003 was turn on the radio and tape. Yet the fact that the Iraq War was begun the first day of spring that year is where the historical and the autobiographical collide.

GUEVARA: In a recent interview conducted by Christopher Higgs for The Paris Review, you talked about the way you identify your work as poetry:

I suppose that the work has become more novelistic as time's gone on, but when I started down this path some twenty years ago, it was only the poets and the poetry world that could accept what I did. So I hung out with them. You take your love where you get it. But you're right, I've never really written a poem—I don't think I'd know how to. Yet there's some sort of openness in

the poetry world concerning writing that I haven't been able to find elsewhere. Some of the Language poets, in particular, sort of blew apart notions of prescriptive lineation in favor of margin-to-margin madness.

Can you discuss the conditions of this openness in the poetry world that has allowed you to identify with your work as poetry? Why do you think this sort of openness cannot be found in other forms and genres of art?

GOLDSMITH: Not all of the poetry world is so open; it's just that I tapped into a vein that was founded upon innovation and therefore unusually open to different approaches. After having read all that modernism, I sort of assumed that it had pretty much died out by the time I arrived on the scene in the early 90s, when I was, by chance, introduced to Language Poetry, which was then on its last legs. Nonetheless, I was thrilled to find warm, living bodies in New York City who actually seemed to be interested in extending the modernist ethos. I honestly had no idea they existed. It was through them that I encountered the writing of Marjorie Perloff, who went on to become a great champion of my generation's work. While many people feel that Conceptualism challenged the dominance of Language Poetry, time will show that Conceptualism is, in fact, an outgrowth of Language Poetry, one which extends a century-long investigation of radical poetics. On many levels, they're the same project, with Conceptual writers adapting time-tested avant-garde strategies for the digital age.

Other forms and genres of art have something to lose. Not ours. If you're a successful painter, the last thing you want to do is change your style or try something too new for fear of rattling your market. Anywhere where a market is concerned, you'll generally find aversion to experimentation. But these are not poetry's troubles. Of course conceptual art long ago became a commodity, but poetry still holds out that radical potential. Warhol once said that if you want to collect anything in New York, you've got to find what no one else wants, hence his hoarding of weird ceramic cookie jars. Once Warhol started collecting them, everyone wanted one, and they became very valuable. If Warhol were alive today, he'd be interested in poetry.

GUEVARA: Speaking of Warhol's preoccupation with the valences of value (i.e., the power of the icon and the unwanted weird ceramic cookie jars), you say that Andy Warhol is "the single most important figure for uncreative writing" in the chapter "Infallible Processes: What Writing Can Learn From Visual Art" from your book *Uncreative Writing*. You also edited a book of Warhol's selected interviews titled *I'll Be Your Mirror* in 2004. At the end of your afterword to the book, you discuss the significance of Warhol's interviews:

After an encounter with the words of the words of Andy Warhol, one's relationship to language is never the same: long-held assumptions of place, time and self are all up for grabs. Although Warhol was known for his surfaces, what we are left with is an unusually strong sense of interiority. In the end, Warhol's mirror reflects on us; as such, this book is really about us and who we are as filtered through the apparition of Andy Warhol.

You said that the title of your book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is a reference to Warhol's Death and Disaster series, which he composed during the 60s, much in the same way you appropriated E.E. Cummings's 73 poems for your similarly titled collaboration with Joan La Barbara. Can you discuss the ways in which *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* engages with Warhol's Death and Disaster series?

GOLDSMITH: What was uncanny about Warhol was how he was able to sense in the heat of the moment that a particular image would become iconic. For instance, how could he possibly have known that the image of Jackie mourning would still resonate fifty years later? One answer might be that Jackie herself was aware of her media presence during that event; she was performing the role of the mourning First Lady for the cameras, and Warhol picked up on this. So the whole thing becomes self-reflexive, with mirrors bouncing off mirrors. And the image of the mirror—or Warhol's use of silver—in the early 60s signifies the beginning of simulacra-infused media culture, which in the digital age has gone into overdrive.

Warhol's *Deaths and Disasters* was not a portrayal of grand, historical events the way mine is. His was much more quirky, focusing on smaller, eerier tragedies like people who died from eating contaminated tuna fish or anonymous victims of car crashes. He was magnifying the hidden death and disaster in the weave of American culture. I am taking national tragedies and examining them through the lens of language. We all know the outcome of my pieces; the narrative isn't as compelling as the language is.

None of my books are original; they're all based on historic precedents. You already mentioned Cummings for *73 Poems*; *Soliloquy* jumps off from Warhol's *a*; *Fidget* responds to Beckett; *The Weather* is a tribute to Cage's *Lecture on the Weather*; *Traffic* is inspired by Godard; *Capital* is a rewriting of Benjamin's *Arcades Project* for New York in the twentieth century. *Day* is in dialogue with an obscure book called *One Day*, which reprints every word of a 1928 single day's issue of *The Philadelphia Evening Bulletin* except for the advertising. The entire newspaper was reformatted to fit into a book. The reason for this was that the newspaper was accused by readers of pandering too much to advertisers at the cost of content. So the publisher decided to take one day's newspaper and turn it into a book to show how substantial its news really was. My book, of course, has no point to make. It just is.

GUEVARA: *This idea of the mirror comes up again in a chapter titled "Why Appropriation?" from your book Uncreative Writing. You talk about the significance of appropriation using an analogy of the candle and the mirror in relation to Picasso's Still Life with Chair Caning (1911-12) and Marcel Duchamp's Fountain (1917):*

A useful analogy is Picasso as a candle and Duchamp as a mirror. The light of the candle draws us to its warm glow, holding us spellbound by its beauty. The cool reflexivity of the mirror pushes us away from the object, throwing us back on ourselves.

...

Instead, Duchamp invokes the mirror, creating a repellent and reflective object, one that forces us to turn

away in other directions. Where it sends us has been exhaustively documented. Broadly speaking, we could say that Duchamp's action is generative—spawning worlds of ideas—while Picasso's is absorptive, holding us close to the object and close to our own thoughts.

Towards the end of the chapter titled “Infallible Processes: What Writing Can Learn From Visual Art,” you discuss Warhol’s value in this way:

His ongoing strategic removal of himself as author let the works live on after all the day’s drama was done with. As Barthes says, “Once the Author is gone, the claim to ‘decipher’ a text becomes quite useless.” What on the surface appears to be a web of lies in Warhol’s life is actually a smokescreen of purposeful disinformation in order to deflate the figure of the author.

Can you discuss further this preoccupation with the mirror in your appropriation practice and the way it relates to how your books function, to quote from your response to a previous question, as “open concepts, ones in which anyone could inhabit and come up with something unique”? What is it about the “ongoing strategic removal of [oneself] as author” that speaks to your writing practice? I’m also interested to hear about how these concerns function as both a way to speak to the conditions of reproducibility and readability today and as a form of ethics.

GOLDSMITH: In the digital age, language is a shared resource. The mere cutting and pasting of another’s words into your document makes them yours temporarily until someone else reuses them, claiming them as their own. The removal of oneself is essential to contemporary authorship. On the Web, ownership of concepts and language is an illusion.

In such an environment, ethics needs to be reconsidered. Here, stealing—or sharing—is not wrong; it is native to the environment. Where authors run into trouble with plagiarism is when they try to

sneak it by; no one has ever gotten angry at me for my acts of plagiarism because I state from the outset that I am plagiarizing. In the *New York Times*, a poet whose poems were swiped by another award-winning poet wrote an editorial piece, admitting as much when she said, “I can admire conceptual poets like Kenneth Goldsmith, whose pieces are often a transparent pastiche of borrowed texts. This is none of that.”²

Barthes talks about the difference between the writerly and the readerly texts. The readerly is the master or tutor text, that which is sprung from the singular genius of the Author. The writerly text is the deconstructed text, the one that is open to remixing and reinterpretation. I tend to view these categories in terms of computer language and UNIX permissions: the writerly text is the open-source text—the shared text—the readerly is read-only, unable to be tampered with. Read-only is controlled by a distant sys admin who doesn’t have your best interests in mind. The writerly, on the other hand, courses through the networks, open to all, embracing instability. In terms of hardware, the readerly is like an iPad, a device meant for the consumption of prepackaged objects; the writerly is like a laptop, with the ability to download, alter, manipulate, and remix cultural artifacts that were once read-only. The idea of my books being open concepts fully champions the ethos of the writerly.

GUEVARA: *I appreciate your call for doing the impossible in poetry precisely because of poetry’s marginality. And the removal you mention reminds me of what Cage said when he was asked about whether or not he viewed his compositions as his compositions:*

Instead of representing my control, they represent questions that I’ve asked and the answers that have been given by means of chance operations. I’ve merely changed my responsibility from making choices to asking questions. It’s not easy to ask questions.

I’m interested in the obligation you talk about and how it gestures towards a way of thinking about unreadability in relation to your

² www.nytimes.com/2013/04/28/books/review/nice-poem-ill-take-it.html?pagewanted=all

comments on Cage and the Language poets. You discuss Cage to Perloff in the interview for Jacket magazine in the following way:

It's one of my peeves with Cage. If Cage truly was to accept all incidental sound as music, then that's what he should have done. Obviously this was not the case and this is where claims for poethics comes into play. I don't have a problem with an overriding ethical structure guiding an artist's work, but in Cage's case, an ethical agenda is in conflict with his philosophical structure of accepting all sounds equally. There were a lot of sounds that weren't permitted in the Cagean pantheon and a lot of times when the sounds that were permitted happened at inopportune moments, it could ruin a performance. Likewise Cage's feathers were easily ruffled at what he considered to be wrongheaded interpretations of his works by musicians and orchestras.

I find that Warhol took Cage's ideas much further. And although the results aren't as pretty (or ethical), I feel that Warhol truly accepts the quotidian world—with all its lumps and bruises (as well as beauty)—into his work. He was completely permeable in ways that Cage could only theorize.

My own work has tended recently to move more toward the Warholian model than to the Cagean.

In the hour-long documentary on your work titled Sucking on Words, which premiered at the British Library in 2007, you mention the Language poets, which I summarize here:

A primary concern of Language writing was its political concern, the collapsing of the reader and writer. If the author presented a field of disparate and disjunctive language, then the reader could put those words together in any order they chose, thus making the reader the writer. But the project failed when few readers actually bothered to do the work, resulting in the same author / reader relationship that they began with. The act was actually a coercive one, akin to putting a gun to the reader's head and saying, "Now put me back together." It's rather

tragic and speaks of a failed politic, one which demanded a relationship. I don't demand a readership. I sort of start off by saying I assume no readership, which frees one up to engage with the work in which ever way they choose, which includes the option to not read it at all.

Also, you mention your disagreement with Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman's claim that "failure is the goal of conceptual writing" in the Paris Review interview with Higgs in favor of what Peli Grietzer calls an "aesthetics of sufficiency" in Grietzer's review of the anthology you coedited with Craig Dworkin titled Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing for the LA Review of Books. Can you discuss further this aethicality or amorality and the way your perceived outsider or "fraudulent" status productively shapes the way you think of the success and failure of your texts specifically and conceptual writing in general? (This is a question I'm asking in the hopes of setting up the question about collaboration.)

GOLDSMITH: Aethics or amorals permit a poet to claim words that they didn't write as their own, even when the poet doesn't agree with those words. Fiction or screenwriters do this all the time in the service of narrative—those who write biopics of serial killers or Nazi dramas—and nobody has a problem with that. But when Vanessa Place re-presents the words of a rapist in her prose poems, she is accused of exploitation. Somehow, poetry is still very much wedded to notions of authenticity and sincerity. I don't disagree that poetry can express subjectivity—I just prefer it not to be exclusively my own. Authenticity is another form of artifice. It is possible to be both inauthentic and sincere. I trust self-consciousness and pretension—they're indicative that a position has been considered, distanced, objectivized, and, in some way, theorized. Things should be double thought. Fraudulence is correlative to these ideas. By admitting fraudulence, conceptual writers immediately distance ourselves from authenticity. Once we get past that, ethics and morals become consensual, flexible, and playful. As Marcel Duchamp said, "Every word I say is stupid and false. All in all, I am a pseudo."

GUEVARA: Let's go back to the circumstances that began your twenty-year investigation. Can you talk about 73 Poems and your collaboration with Joan La Barbara? How does the process of collaboration figure into

your conceptual practice from 73 Poems to current investigations like Seven American Deaths and Disasters and Capital?

GOLDSMITH: I had made this beautiful suite of drawings over the course of a year—I think it was 1990 or 1991—and a small publisher approached me with the idea of making them into a book. The title came from E.E. Cummings's *73 Poems*, a book that I was very enamored with at the time due to its use of visual language—similar to but so different from concrete poetry. Cage had set two of Cummings's poems to music, and one of them, "Forever and Sunsmell" (1942), was performed by Joan La Barbara on her album *Singing Through: John Cage*, which I was listening to a lot of at the time while making the drawings. When we were working on the book, the publisher suggested that we might like to have someone use the poems as a score for a vocal piece, and naturally, I thought of Joan La Barbara. We contacted Joan, and she fell in love with the project. While she's primarily known as an interpreter, she's also a wonderful composer, and this was a chance for her to compose an epic work for her voice. I passed off full-scale reproductions of the drawings to her, and she set to work, emerging with a stunning interpretation of my poems. I couldn't have been more delighted with the result. I had no input whatsoever into her music, so it wasn't so much of a collaboration as it was her interpretation of my works, which is the only way I feel comfortable working with someone else.

GUEVARA: *The references constellating 73 Poems are quite interesting. You have John Cage as a historic precedent for setting Cummings's poems to music performed by Joan La Barbara, Joan La Barbara herself interpreting your 79 poems, E.E. Cummings as a reference to 73 Poems (inasmuch as there are in fact 79 poems in the book), and concrete poetry. What I appreciate about your work is the multiple levels of interpretation it permits from their community of references and historic precedents, their function as performable open concepts, the way they propose a thinkership, and how it follows an "aesthetics of sufficiency," yet these levels aren't necessarily dependent on each other during the act of reading.*

You've talked a great deal about the implications of moving information today as "a significant cultural act in and of itself" in

Uncreative Writing, other interviews, and this interview, but I'm curious about how your compositions (i.e., composing via historic precedent, performable open concepts, thinkership, and "aesthetics of sufficiency") engage with the way information is produced and received via language today.

At the same time, how do you understand the experience of the book today, and how does it activate and participate in your mode of composition and their multiple levels of interpretation? I'm interested in your ideas about information and the book precisely because of the apparent death knell of the book today, yet so much of the interesting work you do seems to be a circumstance of moving information into a book, specifically the page, in contrast to hypertext writers who compose for the computer screen.

GOLDSMITH: I'm very old fashioned. For all my talk about the digital world, when it comes right down to it, I barely use the Internet in my writing, other than as a way to gather materials. *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, my most recent book, is all transcriptions of old radio and TV broadcasts, as is *The Weather, Sports, and Traffic*. And my massive one-thousand-page book *Capital* is done by digging into dusty old books in libraries and retyping passages from them. But the ethos of the digital permeates my work. The digital has allowed me to express myself in an analog medium. Furthermore, my literary career has been built upon my production of paper books and the subsequent commentary on them by established critics. My career—like all those before me—was constructed vertically. Books still signify milestones for me.

The challenge to the new generation—the ones who publish entirely on the Web—is how careers and critique will function. In *Uncreative Writing*, I posited the writer's career might function more like a meme, unsigned and rippling over the networks like wildfire, extinguishing just as quickly. I'm fascinated by a literary career modeled after the meme. Imagine the writer as meme machine. It's thrilling. On the other hand, if everybody is published by Lulu, where are the critical systems to determine that one work or author is better than another? Perhaps this is of no concern to them, but it could signal a new opportunity for

criticism, which is currently dormant. But I don't see any signs of this—perhaps it's too early in the game.

I'm also keeping an eye on how these writers forge careers on the vast horizontality that is the Web. So far, the only one who's been able to do it has been Tao Lin, who, like so many YouTube stars, has spun Web success into a successful conventional career with a mainstream publishing house. But many others appear to be comfortable producing machine-based, anonymously authored books. While I'm very interested to see how this plays out—and am envious—I don't think I could ever do what they are doing.

GUEVARA: You published a blog entry for Harriet (the literary blog of the Poetry Foundation) on April 26, 2012, titled "The New Aesthetic and the New Writing," where you talk about this mapping of the digital world onto the physical:

While it's hard to say where writing fits into all this (thus far, The New Aesthetic has been primarily focused on visual forms), much of the digital page-based writing over the past decade—based on strategies such as sorting, parsing, remixing, culling, collecting, scraping and republishing—has insisted on multiple identities, born of one process while materializing in another. Marcel Duchamp's concept of the Infrathin—a state between states—might apply here. Duchamp defines the Infrathin as "The warmth of a seat (which has just been left)" or "Velvet trousers- / their whistling sound (in walking) by / brushing of the 2 legs is an / infra thin separation signaled / by sound." Like an electronic current, the Infrathin hovers and pulses, creating a dynamic stasis, refusing to commit to one state or the other. Like much contemporary writing, it is concerned with the expansive fusing of opposites: ephemeral and permanent, digital and analog, becoming multidimensional, flexible, and radically distributive.

Can you elaborate on your understanding of the ethos of the digital further and the way it potentially relates to Marcel Duchamp's concept of the Infrathin?

GOLDSMITH: It seems that the whole digital world is *Infrathin*. What interests me is the changeability of media states, their flexibility, their instability. For instance, the very simple act of printing something out from the Internet. In one small move—you could call it *Infrathin*—we have a completely different materialization of the same material: from pixels to paper. I wrote about this in *Uncreative Writing* when I delimited various digital/textual states as an ecosystem, the way that media fluidly morphs from one state to another, both materializing and dematerializing at the same time. The *Infrathin* is an embrace of the unstable, which strikes me as a particularly prescient way to describe much of our digital world.

Take the torrent file. On my computer, it begins as a complete file, but as it is uploaded and distributed, it is broken into untold amounts of data packets, scattered about the network, at once exploding and reconstituting in unknown places. The torrent is the equivalent of a fourth-dimensional object, at once expanding and contracting, remaining unified whilst exploding, at once singular and multiple. Separated from its tribe and flung to far corners of the earth, it is reunited not just once but many times over, day after day, year after year, an eternal return, a ceaseless yet always satisfying outcome to a blind pilgrimage.

Data packets are by nature both stable and nomadic; like restlessly dividing cells, they are the circulatory system of the Internet, providing much of the body heat for our machines. Taken on their own, they don't add up to much, but swarmed—as they tend to do—they constitute whole and vital parts. Like the image of a fish made up by a school of fish or a flock of migrating geese that constitutes a picture of a singular goose, they are at once both distributed and stable, unique and regimented.

In a way, it goes back to Duchamp's infatuation with optical illusions and puns; the idea that an object can exist in two states at once—the *Infrathin*—really seems to articulate what it means to be digital.

GUEVARA: You often use the word “investigation” when you talk about your conceptual practice. Cage also uses the notion of

investigation vis-à-vis questions when he thinks of his compositions. Can you discuss what it is you've learned and what you continue to learn from your aforementioned investigations (i.e., The Weather, Sports, Traffic, and Seven American Deaths and Disasters)? I'm interested in the way they are grounded on an experience of the digital expressed in the analog medium of the book and how you think they have reconsidered the way you think about both the digital and the book.

GOLDSMITH: I continue to be fascinated with the quantity of language, more than the meaning of it. In some ways, I feel meaning and content take care of themselves. There're too many interesting things in the world—viewed in a certain way, everything is interesting—so I try to take a step back and embrace container as the new content, rather than what it contains. It's similar to what Flusser says when he discusses the apparatus in photography. He claims that the artifact—the photograph—carries much less information than does the camera, the apparatus that produced it. He goes on to say that the apparatus is overwhelmingly determinative of the content that it produces. This is quite different from the writings on photography by Barthes and Sontag, who tend to focus on the literary qualities of the artifact while ignoring the apparatus that produced it. The upshot of this is that we are now realizing that literary criticism will only take us so far in the digital world; if we want a vocabulary with which to adequately theorize and frame today's production, we need to look to media and communications theory.

GUEVARA: Continuing with the literary manifestations of the digital today, you state the following in your blog entry for Harriet on April 19, 2011, titled "Archiving Is the New Folk Art": "Writing on an electronic platform is not only writing, but also doubles as archiving; the two processes are inseparable." You also talk about the way our present experience of the digital has changed the way we think about the archive during your MoMA Poet Laureate lecture on March 20, 2013:

What we've experienced is an inversion of consumption, one in which we've come to engage in a more profound way with the acts of acquisition over that which we are acquiring; we've come to prefer the bottles to the wine.

This, then, could be proposed as a form of institutional critique of artifacts and the ways they circulate in the digital world...The new creativity is pointing, not making. Likewise, in the future, the best writers will be the best information managers.

Can you talk further about the ways in which the archive is being reconstituted today? I'm interested in the way an archive's aims towards preservation can function in the Infrathin quality of the digital world. UbuWeb seems to be a response to that. How has your experience with UbuWeb informed your understanding of the simultaneity of writing and archiving? I'm interested in the inseparability of UbuWeb and your investigations, specifically the way UbuWeb has affected your investigations and vice versa. How has UbuWeb determined and reflected your investigations since its inception? And how can current books that hover between the digital and paperbound potentially change today's notion of the archive?

GOLDSMITH: One of my great inspirations is aaaaarg.org, which is the UbuWeb of critical theory. Whenever I have time, I try to grab as much of that site as I can, downloading it to my hard drive. Over the past few years, we've seen great ecosystems of culture wiped out by the file-sharing wars. I'm still kicking myself for not having downloaded such-and-such artifact, naïvely believing that it would be there forever. Now what's on my drives locally is absurd; there are literally gigabytes of books, more than I'd ever be able to read in the next ten lifetimes. And yet I keep getting more. Same with MP3s. And videos. We've become digital hoarders; instead of stuffing junk into closets, we keep buying more hard drives. I don't mean this to be dismissive or judgmental in any way; instead, it's a fact of our digital lives. We archive because we can, thus making each of us an unwitting folk archivist as our focus has moved away from the artifact itself to the management of that artifact.

UbuWeb is symptomatic of this tendency. I've always been a collector of books and records. When the Internet came around, I started throwing my collections online to share with other like-minded collectors. At the same time, I began displaying my collection on UbuWeb, which has been growing for the past two decades. I'm not trained as an archivist

or librarian. UbuWeb is an example of the folk archive, wrapped in the clothing of an institution.

Documenta 13 asked me to claim UbuWeb as an artwork, which I did for them in my book *Letter to Bettina Funcke*. It's not something I've ever done before, and I don't really like to frame it that way because then it becomes a vanity project. I try to keep myself out of it as much as possible. But my experiences in curating and building UbuWeb have reinforced—or at least grown simultaneously alongside—my writing practices, particularly in the beginning with archival writing projects like *No. 111* and, more recently, *Capital*. Both books are giant accumulations of found material, organized into complex schemes. There's something I adore about gathering, organizing, and archiving preexisting materials. It's the collector in me, I think.

GUEVARA: How did your WFMU radio show change your relationship to language? In the PennSound archive, you have these humorous audio performances of texts from theorists and philosophers that you sing with accompanying music (i.e., Walter Benjamin with the music of Eyvind Kang, Ludwig Wittgenstein with Igor Stravinsky, Roland Barthes with The Allman Brothers, Jean Baudrillard with Francis Lai, Fredric Jameson with John Coltrane, etc.). How do you understand these performances in relation to the theories and philosophies you're performing? And in what way are these performances related to the work you did in your radio show? I'm curious about this aspect of your relationship to language because you talk about it in the afterword of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, specifically in your transcription of 9/11 radio broadcasts in "World Trade Center." I'm curious about how your time in radio created this spectrum of investigations from singing philosophical texts to transcribing radio broadcasts of American historical events.

GOLDSMITH: As time has passed, I realize how much WFMU played a role in my work. I learned to perform language on the radio, which has strongly influenced the public readings of my own work to this day. I learned how the voice works (pitch, timing, delivery), how to improvise when needed, how to read things that I didn't write in my own voice, and so forth. I learned about audience as well. I learned that the radio has an

off switch, thus making it easy to indulge in extremely long and difficult things—something I would never do in a live performance situation. Also, being on the radio concretized and materialized speech for me. I never tried to use the broadcast medium in a transparent way; rather, I chose to use my voice more as sound poetry, focusing not so much on what I said, but on the way I said it.

Like most DJs, I began as a presenter of other people's music but got bored of that and began to insert myself more as time went on. It soon morphed into a weekly three-hour performance, which is how the sung theory pieces evolved. Some weeks, I'd just sing for three hours—and I have a lousy voice. I also began to merge my own work with my radio show, so that for several weeks running, I'd read all of *The Weather* on air without explanation. Then the next few weeks, I'd play the tapes of the radio reports that I had used to transcribe them. Mind you, this was all in the middle of the day—prime time—and it befuddled and drove many listeners crazy. But who cares? I was allowed to do it, so I did.

I love the sound of the voice. And I love transcribing it even more. Transcription is such a personal act—no two people can transcribe an audio clip in the exact same way, so it's wildly interpretative and subjective. And those decisions we make in transcription tell us as much about who we are as do more tradition types of autobiographies and personal narratives.

My years at WFMU contributed to the writing of *The Weather*, *Traffic*, and *Sports*. It was natural for me to seek out radio air checks of deaths and disasters and transcribe them for *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*. The sound of radio haunts the texts over the fifty or so years that the book spans—you can almost hear the crackling of the AM static in the JFK assassination piece. The Lennon piece was taken from a tape someone made the night Lennon was assassinated—they just kept flipping through the dial with the cassette player on record. Even the 2009 Michael Jackson death air check has time traces in it, mirroring the coldness of today's slick media landscape, littered with shock jocks and national corporate broadcast affiliates.

GUEVARA: *I'm interested in exploring this dynamic between UbuWeb, your WMFU radio show, and your pedagogy further. How is your relationship to language affected by your experience teaching in a*

*classroom? In what way are your investigations implicated by your pedagogy? What is it about your participation in the university that feels generative? I ask because you devote a whole chapter from *Uncreative Writing* to teaching a class with the same title. At the same time, you are currently MoMA's first Poet Laureate, as which you deliver lectures and readings and organize other events in the MoMA that seem to reflect your temperaments as an archivist, DJ, and teacher.*

GOLDSMITH: Pedagogy is a great way of testing hunches in a real situation. I would have no way of proving, say, that transcription can be an individual and personal act unless I was able to try it with my students. So I use my classroom as a way of bolstering my own practice and poetics. My next critical book is going to be about the cultural artifact in the digital age, and again, something I'm feeling might be true can be confirmed or challenged by my students. Oftentimes, in the case of Web culture, they live it much more intensely than I do; they tell me about things I'd otherwise have no access to. So for my thinking, my students are really both a sounding board as well as a lifeline.

At MoMA, I'm trying to be expansive in my curatorial vision by bringing in a variety of essayists, novelists, journalist, musicians, poets, and so forth, many of whom fall far outside of my own aesthetic purview, yet I admire them greatly. During my "Transform the World! Poetry Must Be Made by All!" event at MoMA held in April of 2013 during National Poetry Month, I was given the entire fourth floor for an hour during the busiest time on a Saturday afternoon. The space is huge, consisting of many galleries, so I was able to bring in over 150 poets to read simultaneously in each and every gallery on the floor so that no matter where you went, you'd hear poetry. My goal was to show the entire spectrum of American poetry, rather than just, say, conceptualists or experimental poets. My MoMA series is much closer to my WFMU radio show, where I would play a much greater range of things than I would listen to at home. For FMU, if it sounded right—regardless of what type of artist made it—I used it.

GUEVARA: On May 31, your residency at the MoMA will come to an end with a tour of New York titled "Astonishing City Free of Microbes and Captive Elephants: A 'Pataphysical Bus Tour With

Kenneth Goldsmith.” The tour will be followed by a reading of your work-in-progress Capital, which you discussed in an earlier part of this interview. In conjunction with our previous discussion about pedagogy, I’m interested in hearing more about your work-in-progress Capital, the ‘Pataphysical Bus Tour, and the constellation of references it utilizes, specifically Alfred Jarry, Walter Benjamin’s The Arcades Project, and New York in the twentieth century. The tour seems like, as you discussed in the previous response, “an opportunity to test hunches in real situations.” Can you discuss the hypotheses you’re currently working on and how you hope this can affect the composition of Capital?

GOLDSMITH: I’ve been preparing for the tour, and I’ve come to realize that the tour itself is going to be rather different from the book. The tour will narrativize various NYC landmarks and streetscapes in the twenty-first century, whereas the book very much lives in—and imagines—the twentieth. The overlaying of one century on top of another is psychogeographic, resulting in a ‘pataphysical bus tour. Bus tours usually give accurate information; I’m doing the opposite.

So for the tour, I’ve been going through the book and extracting all sorts of cool mentions of, say, the Empire State Building in the twentieth century, which I will be reading as we pass by the building itself. Or when the bus is going by the South Street Seaport, which is completely boarded up and shut down after Hurricane Sandy, I’ll be reading these eerie passages from an H.P. Lovecraft novel written in the 1920s about a flood that destroys New York. So, in essence, I’ve been writing a completely new piece (all culled from *Capital*), for the bus tour. *Capital* is marvelously sprawling and massive; it’s great to make several books from this one book. But the bus tour is literally a detour, and when it’s done, *Capital* will proceed on as usual, probably to be finished in about three to five years from now. The process will take about fifteen years all told to write.

GUEVARA: *In the number of years it has taken you to write Capital, what have you learned about the architecture of Benjamin’s The Arcades Project? What about your relationship to language has changed in your engagement with Benjamin’s book and its architecture on the page?*

GOLDSMITH: The first thing to know is that this really isn't a rewrite of *The Arcades Project* since it was a book that was never written by Benjamin. It was just a bunch of notes sorted into various folders. We're still not sure what final form the book was meant to take by Benjamin. So the book itself was actually written when it was constructed as a book decades after his death.

I began with Benjamin's identical *convolutes* but, over the course of time, have replaced just about all of them with my own and then have added dozens of original ones. But still I admire the architecture of his project because it so closely resembles UbuWeb's: simple categories into which an infinite number of artifacts can be filed. And it's flexible: new categories can be added or subtracted at will. The architecture is the perfect form for collections—in this case large collections of language—which is what I have done for decades in my own writing practice: finding language and sorting it into categories. Benjamin proves that the act of collecting and sorting is enough to make a beautiful work.

GUEVARA: *The act of sorting in Capital, your understanding of the architecture of The Arcades Project, and UbuWeb seem to reflect your idea of archiving as the new folk art, which you discussed earlier in the conversation. At the same time, you are also involved in a project to print the Internet. In the site, you propose the following:*

LABOR, UbuWeb and Kenneth Goldsmith invite you to participate in the first-ever attempt to print out the entire internet.

The idea is simple: print out as much as of the web as you want—be it one sheet or a truckload—send it to Mexico City, and we'll display it in the gallery for the duration of the exhibition, which runs from July 26 to August 30, 2013.

The process is entirely open: If it exists online and is printed out, it will be accepted. Every contributor will be listed as a participating artist in the show and will be listed on this Tumblr.

What you decide to print out is up to you—as long as it exists somewhere online, it's in. We're not looking for creative interpretations of the project. We don't want objects. We just want shitloads of paper. We're literally looking for folks to print out the entire internet. We have over 500 square meters of space to fill, with ceilings that are over 6 meters high.

There are many ways to go about this: you can act alone (print out your own blog, Gmail inbox or spam folder) or you could organize a group of friends to print out a particular corner of the internet, say, all of Wikipedia, the entire New York Times archive, every dossier leaked by WikiLeaks for starters. The more the better.

The whole project is in memory of Aaron Swartz, who passed away shortly before going to trial early this year for the alleged use of MIT facilities and Web connections to access the JSTOR database in order to make academic essays available to all online for free. Can you talk about the act of sorting you're trying to negotiate with this project and how it relates to Aaron Swartz?

GOLDSMITH: In 2010, Pamela Echeverria, the owner of LABOR in Mexico City, held a conference called “Who Owns the Image?” which focused on the way that images and their reception have been changed by digital culture. Echeverria, like so many of us, was living a double life; on one hand, she dealt in exclusive and unique objects at the gallery while at the same time, she was downloading the infinitely replicable materials that file sharing had to offer. The conference sparked numerous heated conversations, many of which Echeverria and I continued to discuss long after the conference ended.

In early 2013, Pamela asked me to curate a show dedicated to the memory of Aaron Swartz shortly after he passed away. I was intrigued and honored. Although I had never met him—I had only learned of him after his arrest—many of his ideas and actions resonated with my ethos in building and maintaining UbuWeb, an all-volunteer effort that distributes hard-to-find avant-garde materials—often ignoring

copyright—for free. You could say Swartz and I were working on parallel tracks yet operating in very different theaters; his pirating of intellectual materials from a multimillion dollar corporation carried a much higher price than does my bootlegging of concrete poems.

When I began working on the show, I pondered the sort of immensity that Swartz, Bradley Manning, and Edward Snowden were dealing in. What would it look like if their hauls were somehow materialized, and how would it make us think differently about them? With a more conventional exhibition in mind, I began by seeking artworks that explicitly dealt with concretizing the digital. For instance, I discovered a huge book that consisted of every photograph of Natalie Portman on the Internet. I also came across a piece by an Iraqi-American artist that was a collection of every article published on the Internet about the Iraq War, bound into a set of 72 books, each book a thousand pages. Displayed on long tables, they made a stunning materialization of the quantity of digital culture. I even stumbled upon something called the Library of the Printed Web, a vast collection of dozens of books comprised entirely of Internet flotsam and jetsam, all printed in beautiful editions.

But somehow these gestures, although immense, were not immense enough. They were too precious, too boutique, and too small to get at the magnitude of huge data sets that I was seeking to replicate. I wondered how I could up the ante. The Iraq War books showed that printing out even a small corner of the Internet was an insane proposition. My mind made a poetic leap: what if I was somehow able to crowdsource printing the entire Internet?

GUEVARA: *What I find interesting about the project is the speculation over the amount of paper that will be used, which is to say that so much of the backlash seems to stem from defending the potential waste of paper in the process of using it to print the Internet. This is interesting precisely because of the ways in which the value of paper is being negotiated through the conceptual nature of the project. At the same time, the project seems to make a remarkably amplified argument for the materiality of language in relation to our current experience of the digital and contemporary poetic practice.*

In one of the entries to your site devoted to printing the Internet, you mention the following:

I'm a poet and I feel the internet—comprised completely of text-based alphanumeric language—is the greatest poem ever written. As users of the web, we are all contributing to this poetic project—let's call it the ultimate crowdsourced poem.

You explore the idea of digital images as alphanumeric language in Uncreative Writing, specifically the first chapter titled "Revenge of the Text." How do you potentially plan to curate the material you're currently receiving? And do you plan to accept or reject printouts based on their un/creativity?

GOLDSMITH: This project is an extension of everything else I've done for the past 25 years, be it quantifying the amount of words I spoke for a week in *Soliloquy* or the insane accumulation of UbuWeb. If we begin to weigh all of this material around us, we'll find that we are surrounded by a culture of abundance (or an abundance of culture). Even our ephemera and code are more raw material, begging to be transformed into art. So you see, as artists, our work is never done, nor can we ever lack inspiration once we begin to move outside of our individual egos. The Internet is, in fact, a crowdsourced poem, one being written every day—just as *Day* showed us that every day, the best novels are effortlessly being written daily. It's just a matter of reframing it as such, theoretically proposing it as possible.

The show will consist of whatever is sent to the gallery, be it two sheets of paper or one billion sheets of paper. There will be no judgments made—everyone is welcome to contribute what they like. But like conceptualisms, the conversation surrounding the action is more interesting than the result, and judging by those standards, it's already a massive success. The fact that a mere proposal can set the world ablaze in argument and conversation proves the importance of this provocation.

GUEVARA: *This attempt to quantify the immaterial can be seen in your ideas about the project from an article on myspiltmilk.com:*

"If you had to store all your music in your apartment, you couldn't move," Goldsmith says. "Instead, you keep

it on hard drives. The whole idea is also a critique of consumption. If you were aware of how much shit you actually have there, maybe you'd think twice. Why are you consuming all of this? It's a concretization of our consumption. The problem with digital culture and our consumption of digital culture is that it's entirely untheorized. This provocation has made you have to theorize something you do every day."

In the previous response, you talk about the quantification of the immaterial as an artist. By creating a conversation about spatializing the Internet using paper and crowdsourcing, what are you beginning to understand about the nature of our digital consumption today as a consumer? In what way has this project and its accumulating paper and conversation affected your own practice of digital consumption?

GOLDSMITH: Well, it makes me *not* want to print out or materialize everything that's sitting on my hard drives. It also reminds me of how big my own physical library is and how few books or records on my shelves I've actually read or listened to. It serves as a reminder that long before the Internet, we had more cultural materials than we knew what to do with. It also made me want to materialize things that had long been languishing on my hard drive in order to feel their magnitude. So this project has forced me to look at my meatspace through a different lens.

GUEVARA: *In the Twitter account you set up for printing the Internet, you mention that the piece is "an enactment of capital accumulated to the point that it becomes an image." Can you clarify this further? I'm interested in the way this enactment is crowdsourced in contrast to the printing of currency, which is another form of enacting capital. Also, in what way does this act of printing render the enactment into an image?*

GOLDSMITH: The quote comes from Debord, of course, who was prescient in theorizing the mechanics of the spectacle, which this project has become. I found that quote apropos in the way that this project is about rendering something completely ephemeral literally into an image. The blowback around the project is about its accumulation and

is a great discourse about the nature of global capital and our feelings of guilt surrounding it. We crave spectacle, we desire capital, and when it happens, we feel the need to prevent it, guilt, and redemption.

Printing money might be a better idea than printing the Internet or poems. Charles Bernstein has said that a piece of paper with a poem on it is worth less than a blank one. I think that we can extend that idea to this project. All that paper, which could be used for invoices and legal documents—the language of logos: the word of the citadel, the fort, the court, the boss, the suits—is being “wasted” on art. It calls into question, really, what is waste and what is value.

GUEVARA: *The questions you pose in your response to the previous question seem to highlight a significant provocation and curatorial dilemma. Part of the project is based on the material you receive; however, you ask an interesting question in a Tumblr entry you wrote on July 5, 2013, titled “Printing the Internet: It’s Getting Personal”:*

It's shocking how much personal information people are contributing to Printing out the Internet. We're getting thousands of bank statements, credit card numbers, legal documents, divorce settlements, and of course, lots of nude photos. All leading us to wonder, how do we handle privacy issues when displaying this in the gallery?

While I appreciate the conceptual nature of the work and its focus on the conversation, I'm also interested in how the conversation is taking place from a curatorial level. I want to ask the same question I previously asked in terms similar to the question you asked in your entry: how do you potentially plan to curate the material you're currently receiving? And what other curatorial dilemmas have you been encountering since you put out the call to print the Internet? How do you understand the responses or suggestions you have received (if any) to the question you posed in the Tumblr entry? I'm curious about how your curatorial decisions might productively reflect or push against a shape to the experience of guilt towards global capital you mentioned in the previous question. I'm also curious about what you think of the notable (and provocative) forms of the Internet you're currently

receiving including the ones you discuss in the aforementioned entry.

GOLDSMITH:

(Before the show)

This is an open process—everything sent will become part of the show. However, I'm probably going to go through much of it and choose to display certain pieces on long tables in the gallery. But I won't know what curatorial decisions I will make until I am with the work. At this point, I have no idea of what's there. When I get there, what I need to do will become apparent.

(After the show)

What happened was that the amount of material I received for the show was so vast—over ten tons of printed Internet, contributed by over 20,000 people—that concerns about content and privacy were rendered superfluous. This was yet another case in which our notions of content were inverted by magnitude. What ended up being received didn't matter—instead, we could literally weigh the words, all of which were thrown into a giant pile, some six to seven meters high.

So the curation took care of itself: if it was on the Internet and it was printed out, it was included. Everyone who submitted something to these guidelines was able to be a part of the show. This is a crowdsourced and inclusive act, one which works against the elitism and singularity of the art world. In the end, the spectacle was far from guilt ridden; instead, everyone was carried away in the joy and ‘pataphysical absurdity of the proposition. In the show's aftermath, interestingly enough, the critical voices have subsided, and instead, mainstream media have picked up on the fact of the show—in all its incumbent spectacle—as a thing of wonder, beauty, and amazement. In the end, I won.

GUEVARA: You recently wrote an essay titled “Being Dumb” for The Awl on July 23, 2013. In it, you talk about the different combinations between being smart and dumb:

There is dumb dumb and there is smart dumb. There is also smart smart. Dumb dumb is plain dumb and smart smart is plain smart. Smart dumb rejects both smart smart and dumb dumb, choosing instead to walk a tightrope between the two. Smart dumb is incisive and precise. In order to be smart dumb, you have to be really smart, but not in the smart smart way.

Dumb dumb is rednecks and racists, football hooligans, gum-snapping marketing girls, and thick-necked office boys. Dumb dumb is Microsoft, Disney, and Spielberg. Smart smart is TED talks, think tanks, NPR news, Ivy League universities, The New Yorker, and expensive five-star restaurants. By trying so hard, smart smart really misses the point. Smart dumb is The Fugs, punk rock, art schools, Gertrude Stein, Vito Acconci, Marcel Duchamp, Samuel Beckett, Seth Price, Tao Lin, Martin Margiela, Mike Kelley, and Sofia Coppola. Smart dumb plays at being dumb dumb but knows better.

Variants of smart dumb also miss the point but in a different way. Twee (McSweeney's, Miranda July, Ira Glass, David Byrne) feigns dumb but won't allow itself to be dumb, for fear that someone might actually think it's dumb, god forbid. Hipster appropriates chunks of dumb (trucker hats, facial hair, tattoos) but as a fashion trend, refuses to theorize its dumbness, thereby falling squarely into dumb dumb. Smart dumb refuses to commit to either one state or the other. Smart dumb, for instance, incorporates elements of camp but refuses to be camp enough to actually be camp. Dumb vs. smart is not a rehash of hip vs. square. Dumb is both hip and square. Smart dumb has its theorists—de Certeau, Goffman, Debord—those who articulate the mysteries of the mundane and the extraordinariness of the everyday.

In a previous essay on Jackson Mac Low titled “The King of Boredom,” which was published in The Brooklyn Rail’s March 2006 issue, you use the same type of rhetorical maneuver to talk about boredom:

He was boring in a way that I call boring boring; as opposed to the general tendency today toward the unboring boring. I’ve written elsewhere: “John Cage said, ‘If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all.’ He’s right: there’s a certain kind of unboring boredom that’s fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there’s the other kind of boring: let’s call it boring boring. Boring boring is a client meeting; boring boring is having to endure someone’s self-indulgent poetry reading; boring boring is watching a toddler for an afternoon; boring boring is the seder at Aunt Fanny’s. Boring boring is being somewhere we don’t want to be; boring boring is doing something we don’t want to do.” Jackson was the king of boring boring.

There were many stories about Jackson’s famous ability to bore. My favorite one comes from a David Antin talk piece where he describes an antiwar poetry reading where Jackson went on and on, refusing to stop until the auditorium—was it the Fillmore East?—was emptied, taking the air out of that specific anti-war event.

Never mind. Jackson and his generation had a mandate to be boring.

I’m curious about how these rhetorical maneuvers function as theoretical interventions and how they permit you to conceptualize your ideas about being dumb and boring, especially since being dumb and boring seem to be important tenets for your work. Slavoj Zizek, in his video lecture The Reality of the Virtual, does the same thing when he

discusses the psychoanalytic profundity of Donald Rumsfeld's statement on the known and unknown and the triadic structure of the Lacanian Real. I'm also curious about how you philosophically and theoretically map the experience of being unboring boring similar to your accounting of being smart dumb. Apart from Cage, who are the writers and thinkers you look to when you think about being unboring boring?

GOLDSMITH: I have an unfinished manuscript that's called *I Look to Theory Only When I Realize That Somebody Has Dedicated Their Entire Life to a Question I Have Only Fleetingly Considered*. Honestly, that's true. I try to do a kind of critical writing that almost no longer exists, one free of citation or credentials. I think of Barthes or Sontag and how they rarely felt the need to reference anyone outside of their own empiricism. I love that writing because you can feel someone trying to think through issues. You almost never saw a footnote or citation in either one of those authors' works. Somehow the professionalization of academia has created a critical writing that can't exist without such references. I'm not trained in these things, nor am I particularly interested in them. If anything, I come to critical theory after the fact to shed some additional light on my own empirical conclusions.

You are correct that both of these essays are siblings; I wrote "Being Dumb" all the while thinking about "Being Boring," although they were written, I think, nearly a decade apart. It's funny, but my critical writing is circular and repetitious; nothing I write is 100% new. I take pieces from old essays and slide them into new ones. Or, as in this case, I reuse forms, write things that are almost identical. Here it starts with "I am the dumbest writer who has ever lived," and there it started with "I am the most boring writer who ever lived." The critic Judith Goldman was infuriated by this so much that, referring to my book *Uncreative Writing*, she wrote, "In the maze of self-quoting brief essays, introductions, and interviews on Conceptual poetry published prior to this book, which also includes self-citation, Goldsmith continually re-mounts the argument that versions of 'uncreativity' based on strategies of textual appropriation are warranted because the old versions of creativity are beyond worn out." And that's exactly my point. I am unoriginal; I just keep stealing, plundering, and robbing myself.

GUEVARA: In the essay “Being Boring,” you cite John Cage’s quote on resolving boredom through repetition, and you cite John Cage’s staging of a twelve-hour performance of Erik Satie’s “Vexations,” which constitutes a single piano sheet with the instruction that it be played 840 times, in your essay “Being Dumb.” Can you talk further about your engagement with time and, specifically, the nuances of repetition you harness in your conceptual practice? And how does repetition participate in the dynamics of being dumb?

I also ask the question because there have been some interesting mainstream durational performances in the last couple of months, and I’m curious about what you think about them in relation to your practice. On May 5, 2013, Ragnar Kjartansson presented a piece called “A Lot of Sorrow,” where he had the US rock band The National perform their song repeatedly for six hours live in MoMA PS1. On July 10, 2013, Jay Z performed his song “Picasso Baby” at New York City’s Pace Gallery for six hours to an audience, notably Marina Abramovic—whose exhibit “The Artist Is Present” is the inspiration for Jay Z’s performance.

GOLDSMITH: My works unfold over the course of many years. I only need one good idea every five or ten years. Most of my time is spent realizing that one idea, exploring it in a very deep way. I love the pace of writing. From the time that I get an idea, it might take a decade to finish a manuscript, another few years to get it produced into a book, and then up to a decade longer before it’s finally reviewed and digested. I also notice that these books tend not to die. People are still debating the merits of books like *Soliloquy* or *Fidget* many years later; both of those books were performed in 1996 and conceived of much earlier, so we’re getting on a twenty-year shelf life for them. UbuWeb works on the same time scale—we’re now closing in on twenty years.

I like the idea of celebrities adopting art strategies. I mean, they must be so bored with their “creative” worlds that they’re ready to be uncreative. You see, strategies of boredom, appropriation, repetition, and so forth are the new frontier of creativity—since they fall so far outside the scope of what’s known to be creative, they are creativity’s only hope for reviving itself. But the recent durational pieces by Jay Z,

Swinton, and The National are making boring mainstream. Soon, we'll have to find another line of work.

GUEVARA: *How do you understand these recent conceptual practices by celebrities in relation to your engagement with Andy Warhol and his investigations on iconicity?*

GOLDSMITH: These celebrities are performing art, whereas Warhol was performing celebrity, which actuated celebrity. The new celebrities will never actuate art, and so they are dilettantes, playing at being artists. This is a much less interesting game than what Warhol was playing.

GUEVARA: *Where do you see the avant-garde or potential lines of investigating creative acts in the near or far future? What recent technological developments do you think will pave the way for radical reorientations of our sense of creativity?*

GOLDSMITH: Darren Wershler has a theory that he calls "conceptualism in the wild." He cites the precedent of "Elvis has left the building" as being true of poetry today. He says that in the digital world, poetry has left the building and is now running rampant all over the Internet, and it doesn't resemble poetry as we know it. Poetry as we know it—the penning of formal sonnets or free verse—is akin to the practice of throwing pottery or weaving quilts, artisanal activities that continue in spite of their irrelevance. They are easily ignored. Instead, he says that meme culture is producing more extreme forms of modernism than modernism ever dreamed of, mostly without ever having known its precedents, such as a guy on YouTube singing a Web site's terms of service agreement, without ever having seen Baldessari singing LeWitt, or another guy who used his iPhone to shoot one second of video every day for a year, with no prior knowledge of Tehching Hsieh. Sometimes I feel that guys sitting in cubicles understand contemporary culture better than most curators and critics do. When E-poetry can produce something as compelling as Twitter, I'll start paying attention to it.

GUEVARA: *In a previous response about celebrities adopting art strategies, you mentioned the following: "You see, strategies of*

boredom, appropriation, repetition, and so forth are the new frontier of creativity—since they fall so far outside the scope of what's known to be creative, they are creativity's only hope for reviving itself.” Is uncreativity a perpetually shifting position depending on the logic of creativity of a particular time? Is uncreativity the necessary counterpoint to acts of creativity? What's the difference between conceptual writing and uncreative writing? And if today's uncreativity becomes tomorrow's creativity, then what will be tomorrow's uncreativity?

GOLDSMITH: It's hard to say how this will all play out. But what's important to note is that in *writing* (and I mean this specifically concerning literary production, since the visual arts and music have long dealt with this) notions of creativity are being questioned again. I've been teaching Barthes this semester, and upon rereading “Death of the Author” and *S/Z*, I'm taken aback by how little impact his ideas have ultimately had outside of their own time. I recently tweeted “Death of the Author” on the UbuWeb feed (we host a copy of it on the site), and someone responded about how much this text used to mean to them and how long it had been since they thought about it since then. I think that's pretty typical of alternative ideas. It reminds me of how John Cage used to say his audience was perpetually students. He felt that as students, people have the time to engage with and try out ideas that, for a lack of a better word, we would term *countercultural*. But when they “grow up” and enter the “adult” world, such idealism is left behind when one is forced to deal with more practical matters—a state that Cage seemed to be quite content with.

GUEVARA: *In an earlier response, you discuss the reception of Seven American Deaths and Disasters in and outside America. This past year, you've traveled all over the world to give talks and hold exhibits. Can you talk about some of these lectures and exhibits that we didn't cover in the interview? And with all these conversations all over the world, is it possible to theorize an international conceptualist writing? And who are these international practitioners currently engaging with the idea? How do you understand Heriberto Yépez's claim that “[Conceptual writers] reiterate colonialist practices. By means of manifestos, anthologies and membership, they erase or take over other histories...Conceptualism is*

a cultural manifestation derived from expansionist North American politics. That's why appropriation is its foundation”?

GOLDSMITH: Conceptual writing is the first international avant-garde writing movement since concrete poetry. Both are predicated upon the idea that you don't need to read the text to be able to understand it. Concrete poetry did this by using phonemes instead of words and by treating language visually, often providing a key so that you would understand what the writer was trying to do. In this way, American readers were able to “read” a poem written entirely in Japanese. Conceptual writing is based on concepts, which are often made apparent to the reader before it is read, so that the reading of an actual textual body is beside the point. In this way, I am able to read the work of, say, a Finnish poet written entirely in Finnish and still get what the writer was trying to do. Naturally, this has spawned a vast international scene. Technology has played a role too—with such vast and efficient networks (social and otherwise), the whole world is literally watching. How could it be anything other than international?

That said, there is a perceived hegemony that the Western world is leading, which seems to be true. Again, that might have to do with economics and access to technology. Yepez and others have decried the omission of certain international conceptualists from *Against Expression*, which is true—we missed a lot, but we also included a lot, which I think can be said about any anthology (and is the most common form of criticism leveled at anthologies—who's in and who's out). My problem is that those complaining often seem to do nothing about it—what's preventing anyone from making an anthology of conceptual writing that completely reshuffles the deck, proposing a new order? But, alas, that doesn't seem to ever happen. Being critical on a blog post takes much less work than editing a book-length canon-challenging response—something I and everyone else involved in the movement would welcome. And let's not forget that the first international journal of conceptual writing, *Crux Desperationis*, edited by Riccardo Riccardo Boglione, emerged from Montevideo, Uruguay.

Yepez's idea of appropriation is also too narrow and outmoded. In literature, it has much more to do with the fluidity of digital culture than it does with robbing non-Western cultures. In fact, digital appropriation

is based on the idea of the perfect copy and its infinite replicas, an action that permits artifacts to flow abundantly without loss to the “owner.” This is our digital world, regardless of where one resides; file sharing is the same in Mexico as it is in North America; it’s no coincidence that UbuWeb’s servers and bandwidth are donated by an art school in Mexico City, not North America. Such is the reality of our world today. Yepez is wrong on so many accounts.

Keep in mind, also, that Yepez is very late to the game here. As a response to Yepez’s post, Julián Herbert wrote a poem called “(pretencioso) REMAKE,” which included these lines:

I read Kenneth Goldsmith before Heriberto Yepez.
 Transcribed fragments of an engineering manual
 mechanical and signed as poems in 2000.
 [Leí a Kenneth Goldsmith antes que Heriberto Yépez.
 Transcribí fragmentos de un manual de ingeniería
 mecánica y los firmé como poemas en el año 2000.]³

Finally, since the long, slow demise of Language Poetry, there was a reluctance to claim any dominant discourse, leading to an inoffensive and bland landscape where one style was as relevant as the other. It was a landscape lacking argument and discourse, which came to be known as the post-avant. When in the mid-2000s, two dominant technology-based and inspired movements—Flarf and Conceptual Writing—began to emerge in a broad way, many poets were shaken out of the post-avant malaise and forced to confront the fact that new discourses—complete with anthologies and manifestoes—were being embraced by many people internationally, which naturally put many on the defensive.

GUEVARA: I previously referenced an interview you gave with the Paris Review about the distinctions between Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman’s claim that “failure is the goal of conceptual writing” and your utilization of Peli Grietzer’s description of conceptual writing as an “aesthetics of sufficiency.” How do you understand the convergences

³ <http://brillasobreti.tumblr.com/post/6709043775/pretencioso-remake>

and divergences with regard to how you and Place approach or theorize conceptual writing?

GOLDSMITH: Like many conceptual writers, Vanessa is expansively moving writing off the page. One of the things that bother many people about conceptual writing is that it doesn't *look* like writing. They wonder: how can a poem being inserted into a strand of DNA be a poem? Or how can Vanessa's incorporating herself be poem? The entire *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art*⁴ show was filled with such questions. As a result, poets dismiss poetry in the expanded field as not being poetry. This was—and still is to some extent—the response that my own work gets from older poets, that what I do is “text art” and not “poetry,” which is impossible since I circulate my work exclusively through the channels of literature and rarely in galleries.

Vanessa is powerfully moving poetry into the social space, proposing ways of using language that have never been tested as *writing* strategies. As her work progresses, I see her appropriating forms from the visual arts—relational aesthetics and institutional critique—and using them as strategies for poetry. It's terribly exciting.

GUEVARA: *Is there anything that conceptual writing can learn from the successes and failures of concrete poetry, especially as an international avant-garde writing movement?*

GOLDSMITH: The avant-garde of any stripe is bound to be of limited appeal and have a short shelf life. So our expectations are pretty low

⁴ *Postscript: Writing After Conceptual Art* featured the work of over fifty artists and writers exploring the artistic possibilities of language. Presenting works from the 1960s to the present, the exhibition included paintings, sculpture, installation, video and works on paper that raise questions about how we read, look at, hear, and process language today. A major current underlying the exhibition argued that the field of literature known as “conceptual writing” could be seen as engaging in a provocative dialogue with the field of contemporary art, producing new insights into the meaning of both literature and art. Co-curated by Nora Burnett Abrams and Andrea Andersson, *Postscript* was the first exhibition to examine the work of conceptual writing, investigating the roots of the movement in the art of the 1960s and 70s and presenting contemporary examples of text-based art practices. The show began at Museum of Contemporary Art in Denver in 2013 and traveled to The Power Plant in Toronto, and The Broad Museum in Michigan.)

coming into this. But in a globalized world, the fact that some flavor of global writing can occur seems to make sense. The way concrete poetry connected with larger cultural movements in design and advertising reminds me of the way that conceptual writing overlaps with programming and Web-based production. Both are moments that very much reflect their time, which is about as much as a movement can do, I think. It's also what renders that movement obsolete. Conceptual writing as practice ended several years ago—after the basic moves had been codified. I find the fact that people are either joining it or getting angry about it at this point in time to be amusing.

GUEVARA: *How do you see yourself and your contributions in relation to this developing international avant-garde movement? How do you understand your contributions to the current global conceptualist writing practice? I'm curious about how you understand conceptual writing and your place in it amid this negotiation between a global communication system and national cultures.*

GOLDSMITH: It's all about the network. Because UbuWeb was out there very early, I was able to understand the way that network cultures worked, in a hands-on way. I saw the way that people were being connected and what way the wind was blowing, so to speak. From that, I envisioned a poetics/poetic movement that adopted those flows in the same way that the type of writing that conceptual practices produced mimicked the workings of the computer (cut and paste, etc.). These hunches turned out to be correct and very much in sync with the growth of network culture to the point where even if you disagreed with the tenets of conceptual writing, it was clear that the production and distribution mirrored larger international trends that were technology driven. The many complaints lodged against conceptualism are couched in its embrace of technology and how it is seen to be complicit with nefarious neoliberal global capitalist tendencies. Ironically, all of these complaints are lodged not with pen and paper, but on the same corporate networks and interfaces from that conceptualism exploits and deconstructs: Facebook, Twitter, Gmail and various blogging systems. This is our environment and it's not going away any time soon.

GUEVARA: At the end of an interview with the philosopher Christopher Norris, Tetsuji Yamamoto asks Norris the question, “So what is philosophy?” I’d like to end this interview by asking you a similar question. So what is poetry?

GOLDSMITH: Poetry is an underutilized resource waiting to be exploited. Because it has no remunerative value, it is liberated from the orthodoxies that constrain just about every other art form. It’s one of the great liberties of our field—perhaps one of the last artistic fields with this privilege. Poetry is akin to the position that conceptual art once held: radical in its production, distribution, and democratization. As such, it is obliged to take chances, to be as experimental as it can be. Since it’s got nothing to lose, it stirs up passions and emotions that, say, visual art hasn’t in half a century. There is still a fight in poetry. I can’t imagine a more thrilling place to be.

