

The Author as Collector: Kenneth Goldsmith's Aestheticism

“Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Walter Benjamin” remains one of the poet’s odder, throwaway efforts.¹ In this little *Singspiel*, available online as an mp3 file, Goldsmith chants Walter Benjamin’s “Unpacking My Library.”² The joke of the title is quite sweet—Goldsmith is doing cover versions of the greats. (He also “does” Wittgenstein, Barthes, Freud, Baudrillard and Jameson). But the performance—part Alban Berg, mostly Robert Ashley—turns the appeal of Benjamin’s very charming talk into something that is both cantorial and unpleasantly spooky, as if some still undefined Jewish Modernist repressed were in the process of returning in this odd, uncanny form. In this chapter I want to figure out what it is that is returning, and in what form. I argue that Goldsmith reworks Benjamin’s notion of the collector as it appears in “Unpacking My Library” to his own ends. By stripping Benjamin’s ideal of its Marxist armature and its utopian aim, Goldsmith turns the collector from the prototype of the revolutionary historian into the model of the poet as a postmodern aesthete, a collector of exchangeable cultural goods, who is not involved in an alternative economy of the gift, as he has claimed. His work—and here I include his creation of UbuWeb—relies on the rather well-established restricted economy of cultural goods. I show that Goldsmith is something of a nostalgist, working over the problems of narrative, which he poses through his reframing of old mass media—radio, newspapers and television. I address the charged issue of the racism of “The Body of Michael Brown” in Chapter 4.

So, I begin with Benjamin. We know that Goldsmith takes Benjamin very seriously. His most recent book, *Capital: New York, Capital of the XXth Century* (2015), is a full-on appropriative assault on Benjamin's monumental *Passagenwerk*. Here is how he presented it as he was pulling it all together:

For the past five years, I have been working on a rewriting of Walter Benjamin's *The Arcades Project* set in New York City in the twentieth century called *Capital*. The idea is to use Benjamin's identical methodology in order to write a poetic history of New York City in the twentieth century, just as Benjamin did with Paris in the nineteenth...I've tried to maintain as perfect as possible a mirror of Benjamin's project.³

Goldsmith's notion of "Benjamin's methodology" is idiosyncratic to say the least. Gone are Benjamin's complicated concerns with historiographic presentation, outlined in his sometimes painful correspondence with Theodor W. Adorno in the late 1930s, as well as in his last essay "Theses on the Concept of History." Gone too are all traces of the Marxism that motivated the *Passagenwerk* in the first place. By his own admission, Goldsmith does not care about Benjamin's Marxism in the slightest.⁴

Instead, Goldsmith takes Benjamin's unfinished study as "pure conceptualism" and he wants, as he says, to take Benjamin's project "to the next level." He gets rid of the glosses and the aphorisms that bind and explain Benjamin's encyclopedia of quotations—Benjamin collected some of the more important ones in "Central Park." Goldsmith's goal is an authorial asceticism. He wants to erase both Benjamin and himself from the text. As Goldsmith conceives it, *Capital* does not contain anything that Goldsmith has actually originated: "nowhere is a single word of my own present—not a thought, not a commentary, nor a sentiment." Benjamin's dense thought does not interest him. Rather, Goldsmith has claimed that the strength of *The Arcades Project* lies with Benjamin's choice of quotations. It is Benjamin's impeccable taste, not his thought, that makes the *Passagenwerk* so important.⁵

Although Goldsmith can claim the authority of Marjorie Perloff in reading *The Arcades Project* as both a Modernist citational epic and as a prototype of post-Modernist hypertextuality, there are objections to thinking about the *Passagenwerk* in this way.⁶ Leland de la Durantaye puts it succinctly: though the notes that make up *The Arcades Project* "are available in a book...for Benjamin they did not constitute a book. They

were carefully organized materials for a work still to be written.”⁷ Giorgio Agamben is more pointed:

There is no doubt [...] that the *Aufzeichnungen und Materialien* [the notes and materials, which constitute the bulk of the *Passagenwerk*] do not represent in any way a draft, however temporary, of the book on the Arcades, but only the documentary and theoretical research materials. Benjamin had a very clear sense in his work of the Marxist distinction between *Forschungsweise* [mode of research] and *Darstellungsweise* [mode of representation], which he expressly refers to in Section N: “Research must appropriate the subject matter in its details, must analyze its various forms of developments, and trace their inner connections. Only after this work has been completed, can the real movement be presented [*dargestellt*] in an adequate matter.”⁸

In other words, in his non-Marxist *Capital*, Goldsmith is not following Benjamin’s *methodology* at all. By taking research as presentation, *Forschung* as *Darstellung*, he is merely mirroring the form of the book that the editors created out of the mass of Benjamin’s literary remains. Benjamin never intended to present *The Arcades Project* as a book.

Goldsmith has dismissed philological complaints like these:

Benjamin people are angry about this project. I’ve gotten a lot of pushback from people who feel they own Walter Benjamin. A lot of people think they own him, and he’s an untouchable figure, and of course a saint on a lot of levels, so the fact that one would redo Benjamin and rethink Benjamin is blasphemous for a lot of people.⁹

Now, one could argue against Goldsmith’s high-handed treatment of Benjamin, that Agamben’s point is not about the *sanctity* of Benjamin or about blasphemy, but about *accuracy*. But Goldsmith is not fastidious about accuracy. He does not care. His appropriative methods have always made a hash of the niceties of both propriety and property. While he has no problem copyrighting his work, he feels free to play fast and loose with other people’s copyright. In short, Goldsmith sees Benjamin as a data bank to be plundered and as an image to be reworked. Anyone who cavils is on the wrong side of both poetry and history.

There is no way to mediate this dispute between the Uncreative artist and the philologist. So, the interesting question is not so much whether Goldsmith gets Benjamin right—he clearly doesn’t—but why Goldsmith

gravitates to the *Passagenwerk* or “Unpacking My Library” in the first place. You would expect Goldsmith to go for Benjamin the media theorist. But the author of “The Work of Art In the Age of Its Mechanical Reproducibility” is nowhere to be seen in “Unpacking My Library” and hardly figures in the *Passagenwerk*. What is more, as its critics have noted, “The Work of Art” essay, popular though it may be, is an odd fit in Benjamin’s oeuvre. That its positions prove to be untenable is a mark of Benjamin’s desperation in the late 1930s.¹⁰

“Unpacking My Library,” the essay that Goldsmith chants, is not about cutting-edge media but about an archaic ideal type—the collector as bibliophile and the bibliophile as collector. Given the range (or the limitation) of his interests, Goldsmith’s choice makes a good deal of sense. If you get rid of the Marxism of the *Passagenwerk* and Benjamin’s commentary on the quotations he has harvested, you are left with a Benjamin who is, as Goldsmith once described himself, “a collector of language.”¹¹ Goldsmith’s description of *Capital* makes this clear:

This is a book-based project; thus I have avoided web-based research. Digging through shelves of books, stumbling across page-bound treasures, and unearthing analog documents from the period the way Benjamin did seems an appropriate way to honor his unassailable methodology and spirit.¹²

Goldsmith emulates Benjamin by combing through yesterday’s media in old-fashioned archives. He is a latter-day rag picker. Benjamin once wrote an essay called “The Author as Producer.” Goldsmith presents us with a different proposition: the author as collector.

Benjamin did not use print out of nostalgia. Newspapers, magazines and books were the media he had to hand. He did think, however, that the passions that motivate collectors are anachronistic.¹³ We must be careful here, because Benjamin was talking about a very specific kind of collecting: collecting as a form of historical vocation. Unlike the normal consumer who is interested in putting her purchases to use, and unlike the capitalist who is interested in the future exchange value of an object, the vocational collector wants to free the object from “the drudgery of being useful.”¹⁴ According to Benjamin, collecting establishes “a relationship to objects which does not emphasize their functional, utilitarian value—that is their usefulness.”¹⁵ That is why the collector is an atavism. She removes herself and her objects from the everyday circuits of getting and spending.¹⁶

By freeing the object from utility, the collector seems to treat it as a work of art. But we must be careful here as well. Like the work of art, the collected object serves no purpose. In this case, though, this purposelessness does not arise because the particular cannot be subsumed under the abstracting totality of a concept. As we shall see, the whole point of collecting is to contain the particular within a totality. While the collector, like a person engaged in aesthetic contemplation, is radically disinterested, it is not because his claims for beauty take the form of binding, universal judgments.¹⁷ The collector is not so much an aesthete as a *physiognomist*, who reads not only the whole history of the object—Benjamin calls it its “fate”—in the face of the object, but all of history itself:

[F]or the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopedia of all knowledge of the epoch, the landscape the industry and the owner from which it comes. It is the deepest enchantment of the collector to enclose the particular item within a magic circle...¹⁸

Benjamin goes on to call this “magic circle” a “magic encyclopedia.” The magic of the circle and of the encyclopedia lies in this: the object becomes a synecdoche for the entirety of its own history, not only of the period in which it was made, but also of the periods through which it has passed.

Benjamin tells us that for the collector “the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects.”¹⁹ The spatial and temporal order that the collection embodies and describes are of utmost importance. In it lodges the utopian aspect of collecting. Collectors are the sworn enemy of *Zerstreuung*, which Benjamin’s translators accurately construe as “dispersion.”²⁰ But the word also means “diversion” or “distraction.” Struck by “the confusion, the scatter, in which the things of the world are found,” and worried about the distractions which lead us away from those things, collectors insist on a kind of historical *concentration*. They bring together “what belongs together... keeping in mind their affinities and their succession in time.”²¹ The collection, then, is a “newly devised historical system”²² which is not the “customary ordering and schematization of things” any more than a dictionary describes the natural order of language.²³ In fact, as he makes clear in his essay on Eduard Fuchs, Benjamin sees vocational collecting as the model of an effective Marxist historiography. Collecting is thus redemptive in two ways. It frees the object from consumption and from exchange. It also restores both the object to its history and its history to the object. As Benjamin puts it, “collecting is a form of practical memory.”²⁴

It is not surprising that “Unpacking My Library” concentrates on the collector’s *mood*, because the collector presents the upbeat counter-image to Benjamin’s more famous ideal type, the melancholic allegorist. In the *Passagenwerk*, Benjamin writes that “[t]he allegorist is, as it were, the polar opposite of the collector” and his dialectical double. “In every collector hides an allegorist and in every allegorist, a collector.”²⁵

Benjamin’s emphasis on the world-disclosive aspect of mood leaves the collector open to the objection that Adorno raised to Benjamin’s account of the melancholic allegorist in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*. Mood will always be tainted by the suspicion of subjective projection.²⁶ There is nothing to guarantee that the collector’s uncustomary and extraordinary schematization of objects and thus of history is an accurate account of the world. In fact, because vocational collecting has structural similarities to aestheticism, it is vulnerable in precisely the ways that aestheticism is. The judgments of taste might be phrased in terms of universals, but they can never be conclusive. In just this way, the collector’s historical constructions might turn out to be nothing more than expressions of personal idiosyncrasy. Just as the object freed from the drudgery of use in the collection hews closely to the work of art, so the historical vision of the collector comes to look a lot like personal taste.

To some like Adorno, this might present a problem, but not to Goldsmith. He stakes what he sees as Benjamin’s greatest collection—the *Passagenwerk*—on the exquisiteness of the author’s taste: “[I]t’s an act of conceptual writing where what one chooses—one’s taste—either makes or breaks the book.”²⁷ Goldsmith is not worried about being charged with aestheticism or even subjectivism, just as he does not care about Benjamin’s Marxism or about the difference between *Forschung* and *Darstellung*. Goldsmith, who reads the contingent organization of the *Passagenwerk* into folders as a *methodology*, collapses research into presentation and therefore elides the distinctions between the collector, the artist and the aesthete. He simply does not see any difference between them.

This elision might make Goldsmith a dodgy reader of Benjamin, but it has made him a very productive and visible poet. Goldsmith has wide and interesting tastes, as witnessed by his radio show on WFMU, by the magisterial array of avant-garde materials on UbuWeb and by his books. Funnily enough, for a man who has been such a cheerleader for the opportunities presented by new media, his taste is peculiarly backward looking.

Even though he has been remarkably enthusiastic about the Web and the brave new digital world, Goldsmith is hiply retro, from the tips of his saddle shoes up to his pork-pie hat. Goldsmith's projects always end up as *books*.²⁸ Even when they are presented on the Web, they are formatted as documents and codices—that is to say, as files of more or less nicely laid out text. You do not need Flash Player to read *Fidget* or *Soliloquy*. The online edition of *Sports* is a pdf file with the loveliest of 1970s typefaces. Stéphane Mallarmé famously said that everything exists in order to end up as a book. Goldsmith, who has initiated a project to type up the whole, is trying to fit the Web into just that book.

What is more, the content of Goldsmith's books is also retro. Look at his most important published works of the new millennium—*Day* (2003), the New York trilogy [*The Weather* (2005), *Traffic* (2006), *Sports* (2008)], *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013) and *Capital*. They all rework old-style media (newspapers, radio, television). Even the entry for Columbine in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is old school. It is the transcript of an emergency telephone call.

In other words, from *Day* to *Capital*, not one of Goldsmith's books has been born digital. Goldsmith might have found his sound-check files online, but in each case, the Web has merely acted as a rather user-friendly, old-fashioned archive. Consider how different Goldsmith's process is from, say, that of Robert Fitterman or Ara Sharinyan, who feature in my next chapter. They cull and edit large chunks of prose they find online. Consider how different Heath Ledger's death looks, spread across a sea of Web detritus in the collaborative work *Heath Course Pack*, in comparison to the neat cable reportage of Michael Jackson's fatal heart attack in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (to which I return later in this essay). Goldsmith's transmediations are made easier by the Web, for sure, but not one of them depends for its actual existence on the Web. The police in Colorado have a copy of the Columbine 911 tape. In the old days, Goldsmith would have had to travel to the Denver suburbs to listen to it. Now he can find what he needs without leaving his home. Shirinyan's *Your Country Is Great* or Fitterman's *Sprawl* are different. They curate material that the poets find in chat rooms and on consumer review sites. The existence of those review sites depends on the Internet. On the other hand, while the Web makes Goldsmith's collecting easier, it does not serve as the necessary or sufficient cause for his work.

Let me be clear: Goldsmith translates now-traditional media from one form to another. Newspapers, television news, radio reports become books,

and more importantly, they become art. What is the effect of this trans-mediation? Goldsmith's defenders have made much of his innovative "uncreativity," but one has to wonder how innovative "uncreativity" actually is. It makes good copy, but the unoriginality of the avant-garde is hardly news. As everyone has recognized for a long time, the avant-garde is a tradition—Harold Rosenberg published *The Tradition of the New* in 1959—and Goldsmith is part of it. In fact, UbuWeb is the great online museum of that tradition and it lays out a lineage of appropriation and re-mediation that goes back for a good century now. Perloff's genealogies of the avant-garde in general and of Goldsmith's own Uncreative Writing in particular—as well as Goldsmith's own frequent claiming of kin—indicate that his particular version of unoriginal genius is actually well-established. Uncreativity, then, is a recognizably traditional vanguard means and no longer a provocative or a revolutionary end.

This suggests that uncreativity is not the real issue in Goldsmith's work. After all, Goldsmith is a collector who always works with the already given. Nor is "conceptualism," at least not in any sense that Goldsmith invokes, really the point. Goldsmith is fond of recycling this meme:

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." I've come to embrace Huebler's ideas, though it might be retooled as, "The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more."²⁹

This is all very nice, but aren't Goldsmith and Huebler doing very different things? Aren't they up to very different tricks? Huebler was not interested in creating traditional retinal objects or art commodities that you could sell. Goldsmith, however, is demonstrably interested in creating traditional textual objects—and rather hefty ones at that—that you can indeed sell. When he retypes the *New York Times* and publishes it as a 900-page book or when he transcribes news reports from CNN or when he pulls together the quotes that make up the nearly 900 pages of *Capital*, he is in fact adding new textual objects to the world of both texts and objects.

We should also note that Goldsmith is *not* a Conceptualist in the sense that he ascribes to Andy Warhol. Goldsmith has claimed that once you know the idea behind his books, you do not have to read them.³⁰ Now, when Warhol told us that we didn't have to see his movies, he was engaging, as I argue in the next chapter, in a form of tease that was typical of his form of avant-garde provocation. And in the nature of such

provocations, Warhol's self-description was not particularly accurate. The *procedure* that produced those early movies does not exhaust what it feels like to actually see them. No description of *Empire* or *Sleep* can actually replace the difficult experience of sitting through those films. They are excruciating essays in the aesthetics and an-aesthetics of duration. If you do not read *The Weather* you will miss the part of the book that every critic who has written about it takes pains to note: the sudden and unexplained switch from weather reports about the "tri-state area" to reports about the weather in Baghdad. In other words, you will miss Goldsmith's back-handed recognition of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Not only does an account of the procedure not replace the experience of the book, it does not even provide an accurate description of the book itself.

And while we're at it, we have to admit that Goldsmith does not practice Conceptualism in the way that Vanessa Place and Robert Fitterman describe it in *Notes on Conceptualisms*. He is not particularly interested in performing failure.³¹ He does not, to borrow Ron Silliman's succinct description of *Notes*, subvert "old, patriarchal *bad bad* mastery," at least not his own.³² Where Fitterman has written "Failure: A Post-Conceptualist Essay" (which I discuss in the next chapter), Goldsmith's essays, like the combative, unironic "My Career in Poetry," are about his considerable successes.

So, to put it in a nutshell: our interest in Goldsmith's work lies elsewhere. It does not lie with his elimination of the textual object, because he does not eliminate the textual object. It does not lie with the elision of the experience of reading, because the books (like Warhol's movies) are not exhausted by a description of their procedures. It does not lie with his undermining of his position as author, because, uncreative as he might be, Goldsmith keeps himself front and center. The action in Goldsmith's work lies with transmediation. Our interest in Goldsmith comes from our curiosity about what happens when you carry chunks of language from one context to another.

Perloff takes as the epigraph to *Wittgenstein's Ladder* that moment in *Zettel* where Wittgenstein reminds us that a "poem, although it is composed in the language of information, is not used in the language-game of giving information." One could say that Goldsmith's published work over the last decade has been engaged in moving text from the language-game of information to the language-game of poetry. This process, while it might raise questions about some of our more shopworn notions of lyricism and poetic voice, leaves poetry intact in a very precise way. It asks its readers to subject the transmediated text to the kinds of attention we associate with

literature. The supposed transparency of information is presented as if it was marked by the opacities of literature. Freed from utility—from the frictionless transfer of the news—the *language* of the news is laid open to close scrutiny as if it was poetry. Goldsmith's kind of aesthetic nominalism ("it is poetry if I say so") does not undo the privileges of poetry in the slightest. Rather, it extends those privileges to a wider variety of texts.

Presented this way, Goldsmith's often-avowed debt to John Cage becomes clear. (Goldsmith has covered "Lecture on Nothing" rather reverentially on different occasions.)³³ Here is Goldsmith on Cage:

Cage taught us that there is no difference between what is called "noise" and what is called "music," just as Duchamp taught us that there are no distinctions between what lives on the shelves of a store and what sits on a pedestal in a museum.

I'm interested in extending these ideas, dissolving traditionally constructed boundaries and definitions between art and life. I feel that the art of the 20th century was only the tip of the iceberg in terms of investigative possibilities.³⁴

Now, it is not altogether clear that Duchamp wanted to extend the reach of the aesthetic and of aesthetic delectation in this way, but it is clear that Cage wanted to:

I BELIEVE THAT THE USE OF NOISE...TO MAKE MUSIC...WILL CONTINUE AND INCREASE UNTIL WE REACH A MUSIC PRODUCED THROUGH THE AID OF ELECTRICAL INSTRUMENTS...WHICH WILL MAKE AVAILABLE FOR MUSICAL PURPOSES ALL SOUNDS THAT CAN BE HEARD...³⁵

Where Duchamp tried to divest visual art of the retinal thrill of the optical, there is no indication here that Cage wanted to free music from the pleasures of the ear. Far from it: Cage wanted to lend the dignity of music and of musical pleasure to noise. By broadening the definition of music to mean "the organization of sound," Cage wanted to get us to listen to noise, because when we listen to it, he claimed, "we find it fascinating."³⁶ Cage would like us to lend the same attention to static (the example is Cage's) that we do to the work on the "pedestal in a museum" or, more appositely, to the performance in the auditorium. After all, is not one of the major points of *4'33"* to get the audience to listen to the ambient sounds of the concert hall with the same care that it would devote to a sonata?

In its deep and stringent aestheticism, Cage's agenda is as democratic as it gets: "Beauty is now underfoot wherever we take the trouble to look. (This is a deeply American discovery.)"³⁷ Goldsmith takes this claim very seriously. In fact, he criticizes Cage for not living up to his egalitarian word:

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...There were a lot of sounds that weren't permitted in the Cagcan pantheon and a lot of times when the sounds that were permitted happened at inopportune moments, it could ruin a performance.³⁸

Anything and everything should get its crack at being art.

In the end, this aesthetic program leads Goldsmith to fashion what he has called "unboring boring" art—works such as *Fidget* (1994), *Soliloquy* (2001), as well as *Day*, *The Weather*, *Traffic* and *Sports*. He quotes Cage's koan:

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.³⁹

The stress in this aesthetic lies on repetition and durance: *every* word Goldsmith said for a week; *all* his movements in one day; the *whole* newspaper; weather reports for a *whole* year; "*every* traffic report given *every* ten minutes on the ones over the course of *24 hours* on a New York City radio station"; *every* word of the *entire* broadcast of the game.⁴⁰ The effects of this durance and duration are exhilarating, but they can be stupefying, at least at first.

Let us think about that stupefaction, that moment of avant-garde resistance to absorption. Here is a small taste of *Traffic*, from which Goldsmith read at the White House on May 11, 2011:

4:21 And we are still gonna have to get through, uh, a pretty bad rush hour. Already we've got major delays on, uh, Seventh and Eighth Avenue as you, uh, make your way through the Midtown area. Seventh Avenue delays begin right out of Central Park, all the way down through Times Square. Broadway's impacted obviously, Ninth and Tenth Avenues seeing more traffic as well, but not as bad as, uh, heading through the Times Square area.

Meanwhile, on the East Side it's a torture test, because a lot of the, uh, side streets are taking a beating, especially through the 40's and 50's.⁴¹

It is worth noting that the original traffic reports on which *Traffic* is based were essentially constraint-based performances. The broadcaster only had a minute to get all that in and for that alone, we might want to admire the virtuosity to which Goldsmith pays homage. But before we notice anything about the nature of his transmediated language—before we can listen to it with Cagean wonder—we might want to pay attention to what could stop us from noticing anything in particular, the sheer intractability of the text itself.

The Stanford anatomist of our contemporary aesthetic reactions, Sianne Ngai, has called the effect of this intractability “stuplimity.” Stuplimity does not mean, as Goldsmith has suggested, the spot where “the stupid meets the sublime,” where “the fumes and data-trails the web leaves in its wake” envelop us.⁴² Rather stuplimity is “a concatenation of boredom in astonishment,” an effect just short of sublime transcendence.⁴³ It names that state of near stupefaction where the overwhelmed reader is unable snap back with a renewed sense of her power and her agency (the way she does when confronted with sublime objects). Ngai notes that in the kind of stuplimity that marks exemplary Modernist works—she cites writings by Samuel Beckett and Gertrude Stein’s *The Making of Americans*—formal differences in quality (words, sentences, paragraphs) give way to modal differences (variations of intensity or length).⁴⁴ This change of emphasis leads to what she calls “retardation by weak links.” Reading is brought to a near standstill “by the absence of causal connectives that would propel the work forward.”⁴⁵ The “boredom” that stuplimity registers is actually a mark of frustration, of not seeing how to go on, of not knowing what is going on. The lack of causation means that the reader cannot conceptualize the details, cannot see how they might add up. Such formally reductive or apparently undifferentiated aesthetic objects, as Frances Colpitt has noted, require commitment and attention—they require a lot of work.⁴⁶ The audience, confronted by such an object, does not know at first what precisely should be the focus of its attention. It takes a while to figure out what is what.

In the case of a very repetitive work, such as *The Making of Americans* or *Traffic*, the audience will need to pay attention to the differences signaled by those repetitions. The trick for readers, as Ngai points out in a canny quotation from Stein, will be for them never to lose “themselves so in the

solid steadiness of all repeating that they do not hear the slightest variation." If they get "deadened by the steady of repeating," they will not develop "an open heart." This "open heart" is the ethical end of Stein's writing. She means to increase the reader's sensitivity to "all the slightest variations" that repetition displays (283). Traffic reports on the radio are nothing if not repetitive. They describe a limited number of phenomena in a very limited space over a limited time. The broadcaster does not have a lot of verbs or adjectives to spruce things up. He will repeat the same names over and over again. This can also lead to felicities. There are two or three Whitmanesque places in *Traffic* where, in order to fill up the minute, the broadcaster starts listing the names of all the bridges with pedestrian access in New York City. Who knew that there were *that* many ways to walk across a river?

By the same token, for all that sameness, every ten minutes the emphasis changes. Sometimes the Brooklyn Bridge is packed. Sometimes it is empty. Freed from the utility of being news—all the events in the book were long over by the time the book was published—the traffic report becomes a question of changing but urgent rhythms. Its language becomes a record of stoppages and flows. It sometimes seems almost pastoral and often quite violent.

To get to the point where you can lend order and urgency to the weak links and merely contingent details, you have to be able to perform a sophisticated set of abstractions and conceptualizations. Goldsmith, as collector, has not brought together these things to make a point about the past, as Benjamin might, but to get us to see them for themselves and as art. The challenge he presents us with is precisely this: he is daring us not to get "deadened by the steady pounding of repeating," but to see these reports aesthetically, to find enough stimulation in their small differences for us to invest in them. Now, for a reader like me—a middle-aged, eighth-generation New Yorker—this is not a problem. There is enough retrospective music in the place names to keep me going for a long time. But there are other points of entry as well. Judging by the video of the event, the audience at Goldsmith's White House reading felt enough recognition and found enough drama in Goldsmith's text (and his person) to keep it interested for the two minutes or so that he devoted to *Traffic*.

The length of his reading was clearly key to their interest, and its brevity misrepresented his project as a whole. Goldsmith stacked the deck at the White House by making *Traffic* just too damn easy. He preceded his selection from *Traffic* with moments from Walt Whitman's "Crossing

Brooklyn Ferry” and from the end of Crane’s magnificent “Proem” to *The Bridge*. These two poems are symbolist in the broadest sense. In Whitman, nature and the poet exist in a perfect face-to-face relationship, as do the past and the future. The Pauline echoes of Whitman’s crossing render the poem’s redemptive freight quite clear and make poetry itself the bearer of that freight. Of course, by the time Crane comes around, Whitman’s stage machinery begins to creak. The Brooklyn Bridge is not a “natural” emblem of eternity or of redemption, as the ferry was for Whitman. The bridge will have to “lend a myth to God” (as will the poem). Neither the poem nor the bridge itself can rely on God. Crane’s language—his Mallarméan syntax coupled with an arcane, often Jacobean, vocabulary—shows how much effort his mythmaking actually takes. The “Proem” is tough going and you can almost hear the audience’s relief when Goldsmith gets to his own work.

Goldsmith’s own poem at the White House reading shows that at the beginning of the twenty-first century, our metropolitan secularization is now complete. The language of poetry is nothing special. There are no Pauline echoes on the ferry, no theological tropes on the bridge. In fact, the Brooklyn Bridge is itself no longer a trope. It is just an artery for getting from one place to another. The poet shows us the city untransfigured, the city that we know. There is nothing at all to challenge us or our attention, at least not as long as it lasts for no more than a minute or two. In other words, at the White House in 2011, Goldsmith presented *Traffic* as a relief, not a problem. It was neither sublime nor stupefying.

Goldsmith’s performance before the Obamas—winning as it might have been—marks an inconclusive victory for his version of Cagneyan aesthetics. Goldsmith has called his appearance that night a kind of avant-garde populism, but he left the avant-garde out of the populism. He did not ask the POTUS and FLOTUS to sit through the whole of *Traffic* or even a full day’s worth of *Soliloquy*. He did not confront his audience with the task of making boredom unending, or ask them to attempt the complicated and concerted acts of attention that his books demand. In fact, he did not show them how his own works actually work.

Perloff has suggested that *Traffic* describes a perfect Aristotelian plot with a beginning, middle and end. The image of “the nightmare city gives way to a momentary vision of the open road—one big green light pointing us into the future” and she compares its ending to the ending of *The Great Gatsby*.⁴⁷ The references to Aristotle and F. Scott Fitzgerald are telling. In *Fidget, Day, Traffic, The Weather, Sports, Soliloquy* and in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith has behaved a lot less like a poet and more

like a novelist. This becomes starkly clear in *Capital*, where the chapters follow rather traditional narrative lines. Absent the all-important connective tissue of Benjamin's commentaries, the quotations—often from a single writer or two—come together to retell a story. In the end, *Capital's* chapters are highlight reels from books and essays by Ford Madox Ford, Theodore Dreiser, E.B. White, Meyer Berger, Luc Sante, Adam Gopnik and Philip Lopate, to name an obvious few. And the story the book tells is not that new. It resembles a mid-century Hollywood biopic whose plot is as familiar as Honoré de Balzac's *Lost Illusions* or Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby* itself. It's about the way dreams don't coincide with reality. It's about "pluck." And it's about the way that good writing—other people's good writing—finally wins the day.

Goldsmith's fascination with narrative goes back a long way. As a number of critics have noted, *Fidget* takes on Beckett's rigid Cartesianism and the Irishman's often excruciating parataxis. The book also takes place on Bloomsday and therefore places itself as an ironic demystified, secularized version of *Ulysses*. Once you take all the mythology out of Joyce and get rid of all that interiority, you are left with Leopold Bloom eating, masturbating and going to the toilet and Stephen Dedalus getting drunk. Goldsmith gets to play all those parts in *Fidget*, his unBloomsday book. What is more, Goldsmith has spoken of *Day* as a novel: "the daily newspaper—or in this case *Day*—is really a great novel, filled with stories of love, jealousy, murder, competition, sex, passion, and so forth."⁴⁸ *The Weather* provides the narrative arc of a year and *Sports* is perhaps the most Aristotelian of them all—at least in terms of the unities of time, place and action.

Goldsmith's narratives are slow going, to be sure. Their refusal to draw causal connections emphasizes the time it takes to read them as well as the process of trying to make the parts make sense. In the face of this intransigence, readers often resort to second-order abstractions. While the Cagean ethos might urge us to stay with the details, in practice readers seem unwilling to undergo the hard labor of the micrological. As Arthur Danto noted in his theory of indiscernibles (which he developed in reaction to Warhol's early appropriations), Goldsmith's readers like to reduce his books to themes and thus locate their "aboutness."⁴⁹ Thus for D.J. Happutz, *Traffic* is about "New York City's...decrepit, overburdened infrastructure and problematic auto-dependency" while for Steve McCaffrey, *Day* becomes legible as an "effective exposé of human habit and expectation."⁵⁰ Because Goldsmith's books resist the reader in a way that is particular to

twentieth-century fiction, I tend to see them as being *about* storytelling. Their narratives (the way they are presented) do their best elude their minimal plots (their logic, the causal framework they describe); their *saying* always threatens to overwhelm the little “what” that is *said*.⁵¹

The *saying* necessarily succeeds in overwhelming the *said*. Taking *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* as our guide here, we can see that the problem with breaking news is that it never breaks all at once. (This is the flip side of the problem presented by *Traffic* and *The Weather* where the news never ceases to break, but never breaks conclusively.) The President gets shot. A rock star gets killed. At first, we don’t know by whom or why. A plane flies into a building. We don’t know if it is an act of terrorism or the result of stupidity. A second plane flies into the building next door and we begin to see a pattern. But what kind of pattern is it?

The assassinations of Jack and Robert Kennedy were confusing, as was the shooting of John Lennon. Just as confusing, but for a different reason, are reports of the death of the “King of Pop,” Michael Jackson. As the section of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* devoted to Jackson shows, it is hard to find a narrative for that death. Once we are sure that he has indeed died, we do not know what his death and his life might have meant. While we wait for the details to come in, the good folks on the spot (because they are on the air) have to fill up empty space. They spin details into plausible plots and look for things to say that somehow seem apposite. As it happened, Jackson’s death coincided with the death of Farrah Fawcett. This is mere accident, but perhaps it can be made to mean something, anything:

There’s some real parallels between these two people—Farrah Fawcett and Michael Jackson—in that they both had overwhelming, huge effects of popularity in their heyday

Um hum. Um hum.

I mean, Michael Jackson did have the same sort of...different effect, but he had the same sort of all-encompassing effect on...on the world as Farrah Fawcett did, you know?

[....]

For a brief period of time she had at least, domestically...she was about as famous as you can get within the confines of the United States of America.

Absolutely. *Charlie's Angels* was the biggest hit on television. That poster, the famous poster of her...

The poster, yeah.

...was the biggest seller. I mean, she did...she did a spread for *Playboy* in the 90s and that was the biggest selling issue of the decade. I mean, she was a big star as well. (159)

The broadcasters' problem comes down to that odd phrase, "the same sort of...different effect." Farrah and Michael had the same effect—they were both famous—but for rather different reasons. Beyond the peculiar trajectory of American fame, they had nothing to do with each other. That does not matter here. The broadcasters are fighting the enemy of all newscasts—dead air—with a mixture of conjecture and inanity. What is important is flow, not the truth.

Even so, Jackson presents an interesting dilemma for the broadcasters. His behavior and his story were just a little too weird. The people composing his obituary in real time have to decide whether or not to concentrate on his prodigious talents or his ample peculiarities:

I think this was really one of the great American stories of what celebrity can do to a human being. I think this guy became so famous, I think he became such a huge celebrity, that he was isolated from the real world as most people know it. He was living on Planet Michael and he called it Neverland, of all things. And I think that if anyone else behaved like that, someone would tell you to knock it off and you'd have to get your act together, whereas Michael Jackson was almost free to live in a world where he made up and lived by his own rules. It's a really almost Greek-tragedy-like story. (165–166; emphasis added)

Goldsmith's coverage of Jackson ends at precisely the point where the broadcast is able to lend his life and death a recognizable story line. He was a man undone by celebrity. The banality of this emplotment is signaled by the way Goldsmith pulls his punches. Jackson's was not a Greek tragedy. A Greek tragedy has grandeur. It has cultural authority. Jackson's life had neither. It was "Greek-tragedy-like" (or "lite") and even then, not completely. It was *almost* like a Greek tragedy, which makes it a tragedy at a third remove.

Seven American Deaths and Disasters keeps returning to this dying fall. Here is the odd epitaph that ends the account of Robert Kennedy's assassination:

So, very early this morning, his press secretary Frank Mankiewicz, his eyes... tears in his eyes, announced that Robert Francis Kennedy, Sen. from Massachusetts, had died this morning at good Samaritan Hospital at the age of forty-two. There's no word other than that. There is not much to say other than that except that America has lost a man, and lost a senator, and has lost an image that perhaps will not be replaced. (69–70)

This is a grave statement, to be sure, but strange beyond its inability to get the facts right. (Kennedy was a senator from New York, not Massachusetts.) Kennedy's substantive platform and substantial achievements—his opposition to the Vietnam War and his commitment to civil rights and social justice—get vaporized in this epitaph. In the course of one sentence, the man becomes an image.

With all its interest in the way that events become images, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* keeps returning to the way “breaking,” and therefore undeciphered, news is transformed over the course of its retelling (not its enfolding) into the cliché of an easily assimilated headline (“one of the great American stories about what celebrity can do to a human being” or “America Under Attack”). It pays careful attention to the dilations that breaking news engenders—the spinning of tales and the filling of space—before the plot becomes clear and everyone agrees on the storyline.

What is odd about *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* though, is how quick these dilations actually are. At the center of the book, both in terms of the book's center of gravity and of Goldsmith's account of the genesis of the project, is the destruction of the Twin Towers on 9/11. But that section is not the longest in the book. Even the lengthiest one clocks in at no more than 34 pages. Thus *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* is “unboring” in two ways. It does not require the reader's endurance in the way that *Day* (840 pages) or *Soliloquy* (296 pages) or even *Fidget* (116 pages) demand. What is more, it deals with the way emotionally charged public events are contained and banalized by the way that they get covered.

Notice, however, that the banalization never quite holds. In his afterword to the book, Goldsmith takes care to tell us that when he read from the book before its publication, “the audience was often moved to tears by mere transcription” (173). This makes sense. *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* might chart the neutralization of trauma by cliché, but by re-performing the trauma itself, it neutralizes the effect of the cliché by showing it at work.

While *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* marks a new turn in Goldsmith's work away from the quotidian (traffic, news, weather, sports) and from the rigors of stuplimity, it also provides a retrospective gloss on Goldsmith's books over the previous decade. It highlights his interest in the construction of narrative and it highlights his work as a collector. On the surface at least, Goldsmith's previous books did not reveal much about Goldsmith's choices or his editing. He copied the *New York Times* or transcribed WINS 1010 news. The technical notes at the end of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, on the other hand, emphasize Goldsmith's research and his editing. These are not mere transcriptions. These are the products of careful *curation*.

One could say that in *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith is engaged in collecting and presenting history, much as *Capital* presents a narrative of the glory days of New York. The dying fall that marks almost all the sections of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* can be seen to mark the trajectory of the book as a whole. It is tempting to suggest that it enacts a Debordian critique of the way that the spectacle crowds out experience. Thus the book charts this trajectory from the beginning of televisual politics to the present reign of the globalized digital image. In this way, Goldsmith as collector begins to look like Benjamin's collector, that is to say, he appears to be a practical historiographer.

But we should beware reading *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* as a critique. Goldsmith is neither Debord nor Benjamin. At the end of "Unpacking My Library," Benjamin dissolves the collector into the collection and thus into history, or at least into historiography. As the collection becomes the spatial configuration—the embodiment—of historical truth, it is only fitting, as he says, for Benjamin to vanish within it. Here again we see that for Benjamin the collection and the work of art, though similar in their rejection of utility, are different. The collector is a physiognomist and a soothsayer in reverse. He is not an aesthete. Benjamin's collection is not about beauty and is clearly *not* about judgments of taste.

Seven American Deaths and Disasters might be Uncreative in Goldsmith's sense of the word—he did not actually *write* any of it—but it is not an act of self-effacement. Uncreative work of this sort, because it stresses what Richard Wollheim called the "pre-executive" function of the artist—her choices rather than her craftsmanship—does not eliminate the artist in the slightest. Quite the contrary, it makes her intention, that is, the question of her choices, central to her work and to its reception. In her review of *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Vanessa Place says that

subject (in all senses) of the book is “the Poet in History,” because the events that it re-enacts are significant only to the extent that they were important to Goldsmith himself. But Goldsmith makes a larger claim for these events. Place quotes his afterword: “all seven events depicted here were ones that I lived through which changed me, and the nation, forever.”⁵² The oddest thing here is not the claim that the death of Michael Jackson changed America forever or that anything changed after Columbine (the greatest tragedy of Columbine might be that *nothing* changed after it), but that Goldsmith equates the poet and the nation, as if the death of Jackson really did affect everyone the way it affected him.

It would be a waste of time to try to score points against Goldsmith here. His purity or lack of it, his hubris or lack of it, are largely irrelevant to his achievement, consecrated by his 2011 performance at the White House “where the canonical trajectory from Whitman to Crane to Goldsmith became a *fait accompli*.”⁵³ I am interested, rather, in what his books and his performance tell us about what his conception of the author as collector might entail. As I said above, though Benjamin’s collector might buy the objects that make up her collection (and Benjamin makes it clear that the collector “borrows” them as well), she is not interested in either the use value or the exchange value of her collection. This makes her something of an atavism. Her distance from capitalist circulation gives her collection its redemptive cast. Benjamin’s collector is an ideal type of a particularly utopian kind. Like most figures for the utopian in his work, the collector is the mark of an untapped historical potential, not a historical actuality.

The actuality of collecting is hardly exempt from the circuits of profit and consumption that mark our world. Now, Goldsmith has argued that poetry is hardly an economically profitable activity and he has also claimed that UbuWeb, which McCaffrey has seen as his greatest collection, presents the model of a gift economy. No one pays for it and no one gets paid. It is all donated (or borrowed or stolen) in one way or another—from content, to servers, to maintenance. This makes UbuWeb sound as if it were somehow free from capitalist circulation or, more importantly, as if it presented an alternative to such circulation. It would thus mark a small but significant victory for the gift over the commodity.⁵⁴

But we might not want to take Goldsmith at his word. Most collectors, as Benjamin would be the first to admit, are not Marxist historians. They create small monopolies of scarce cultural goods. They are in it for the money. Or they are in it for the prestige. Or both. While you famously

"cannot eat prestige," you can turn it into money and position. Prestige, in this sense, is a form of cultural capital.

As Pierre Bourdieu noted, the realm of cultural production—especially the world of art production—seems to invert the logic of the general market. Its investment cycles are long—and this is particularly true of the avant-garde—because value in this sphere is not determined by immediate profit. In fact, the opposite holds. The more it appears to kick against the pricks of the present and the heteronomous world of the market, the more autonomous the avant-garde appears and the more legitimacy it can claim.⁵⁵ Whereas the movement of monetary capital rules the market, the coin of the realm in cultural production is recognition—by fellow producers (in the form of blurbs, word of mouth, recommendations), by critics (in the form of reviews), by publishers (in the form of publication) and by academics, universities and foundations (in the form of grants, teaching positions and prizes). This cultural or symbolic capital differs from monetary capital most significantly in that it is capital that is "disavowed, misrecognized."⁵⁶ The misrecognition works because cultural capital pretends that it is not interested in profit. But it is. The only difference is that its cycles are longer and its rewards, though no less tangible, are slightly more indirect. You might not make money from your book of poems or from your website, but you get to teach at the University of Pennsylvania and you get to appear at the White House. In other words, the economy that UbuWeb represents is not an alternative gift economy but a misrecognized capitalist market in culture.

Benjamin presented his collector as an atavism, like the *flâneur*, but in truth his collector signals a missed historical chance, an unrealized utopian possibility that lies dormant within high capitalism. In real life, the collector is a product of history as it has actually happened. As a result, Goldsmith's poet as collector is now a settled player in our poetic history and in the established economy of cultural goods. This poet collects his chips in a tightly controlled game of literary prestige. So, it does not make sense to argue for the radicalism of the "gift economy" of the UbuWeb, wonderful resource though this is. Nor is uncreativity breaking news—we have been enjoying its products for a century now. Even Goldsmith's argument that he is radical in bringing vanguard poetics to the halls of power through the old mole of institutional critique is not necessarily all that convincing:

We're peeling radical poetics off the page and marching them into the science lab, into the court of law, onto the psychoanalyst's couch, and into the East

Room of The White House, forcing poetry to become a driver of discourse, at once fondly caressing these institutions, while at the same time driving a stake into their backs. To imagine it in any other way would be insulting.⁵⁷

Place deflates this balloon by imagining the situation in just that other way:

[I]nstitutional critique has become the institution of critique described by Andrea Fraser and celebrated by Kenneth Goldsmith, and poetry is ensconced more or less popularly in art galleries and museums, and we—or rather you—poets provide a soundtrack to that form of institutionalized cultural capital.⁵⁸

There is no reason to suppose—as Place sometimes, but only sometimes, begins to seem to hint—that one could escape this fate and find a space outside the cultural institutions that transmute that cultural capital into the real thing. By the same token, there is no reason not to recognize that fate. And it is a strange thing to imagine “Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Walter Benjamin” as precisely the soundtrack that Place refers to—the background hum of cultural capital at work.

NOTES

1. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Walter Benjamin,” accessed February 1, 2014, http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Goldsmith/Theory/Kenneth-Goldsmith-Sings-Benjamin_WFMU_2007.mp3.
2. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Kenneth Goldsmith Sings Walter Benjamin,” accessed January 15, 2014 http://mediamogul.seas.upenn.edu/pennsound/authors/Goldsmith/Theory/Kenneth-Goldsmith-Sings-Benjamin_WFMU_2007.mp3.
3. Kenneth Goldsmith, “Rewriting Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Arcades Project’,” accessed February 1, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2011/04/rewriting-walter-benamins-the-arcades-project>.
4. “I don’t understand Benjamin the way most people do. I’m not too concerned with Marxism. You know, media theory I like; *the collecting stuff I like*. I’m not a huge Benjamin fan” (italics added). Michael Romano “After Kenneth Goldsmith: an interview,” *Buenos Aires Review* 1 (2013), accessed February 3, 2014, <http://www.buenosairesreview.org/2013/11/after-kenneth-goldsmith/>.

5. In his interview with *Buenos Aires Review*, Goldsmith says that he has "never read the thing." I assume that that means that he has never read it straight through. Not surprisingly, he has grazed in it, treating it as that most unmodern of genres, the *florilegium*. Romano, "After Kenneth Goldsmith."
6. "Benjamin's *Passages* become the digital passages we take through websites and YouTube videos, navigating our way from one Google link to another and over the bridges provided by our favorite search engines and web pages." Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010) 49.
7. Leland de la Durantaye, "Sedan Chairs and Turtles," *London Review of Books* 35:22 (2013) 21.
8. Giorgio Agamben, "Cronologia dell'opera e notizie sul testo," in Walter Benjamin, *Parigi capitale del XIX secolo* (Turin, Einaudi, 1986) xviii–xix.
9. Romano, "After Kenneth Goldsmith."
10. See, among others, Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things Beyond Resemblance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006) 124–153; Miriam Hansen, *Cinema and Experience* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012) 75–206.
11. As Bessa and Kenneth Goldsmith, "6799," *Zing Magazine* 11 (1999), accessed February 6, 2014, <http://zingmagazine.com/zing11/bessa/index.html>.
12. Goldsmith, "Rewriting Walter Benjamin's 'The Arcades Project.'"
13. "I fully realize that my discussion of the mental climate of collecting will confirm many of you in your conviction that this passion is behind the times." Walter Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library," *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1969) 66.
14. Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 209.
15. Benjamin, "Unpacking My Library" 60. See also Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 204: "What is decisive in collecting is the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. This relation is the diametric opposite of any utility..."
16. That is not to say that the collector's objects do not circulate in the capitalist economy. They most certainly do. But that is not their function.
17. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 207.
18. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 205.
19. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 207.
20. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 211.
21. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 211.
22. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 205.

23. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 207.
24. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 205.
25. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 211.
26. Max Pensky, *Melancholy Dialectics* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001) 240–249.
27. Goldsmith, “Rewriting Walter Benjamin’s ‘The Arcades Project.’”
28. For a more sympathetic account of Goldsmith’s relation to new and old media, and his relation to the book/codex, see Scott Pound, “Kenneth Goldsmith and the Poetics of Information,” *PMLA* 130:2 (2015) 315–330.
29. See, for instance, Kenneth Goldsmith, “It’s Not Plagiarism. In the Digital Age, It’s ‘Repurposing.’” *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, September 11, 2011, accessed February 9, 2014, <http://chronicle.com/article/Uncreative-Writing/128908>; “Being Boring,” accessed February 6, 2014, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html; *Uncreative Writing* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011) 1.
30. Here is Goldsmith in his Warholian mode: “In the same vein, as I said before, I don’t expect you to even read my books cover to cover. It’s for that reason I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence.” He says more or less the same thing, this time refunctioning Sol LeWitt’s own words, when he writes, “In conceptual writing the idea or concept is the most important aspect of the work. When an author uses a conceptual form of writing, it means that all of the planning and decisions are made beforehand and the execution is a perfunctory affair. The idea becomes a machine that makes the text.” See Kenneth Goldsmith, “Being Boring”; Kenneth Goldsmith, “Kenneth Goldsmith and Conceptual Poetics,” *Open Letter: A Canadian Journal of Writing and Theory*, Twelfth Series, Number 7 (Fall 2005) 98.
31. “Failure is the goal of conceptual writing.” Robert Fitterman and Vanessa Place, *Notes on Conceptualisms* (New York: Ugly Duckling Presse, 2009) 24.
32. Ron Silliman, *Silliman’s blog*, June 3, 2009, accessed February 17, 2014, <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2009/06/notes-on-conceptualisms-appears.html>.
33. See for instance, his performance at the AV Festival 12 at <http://vimeo.com/64003942>, and his performance of the complete text in Mexico City at <http://vimeo.com/65158507>, both accessed February 10, 2014.
34. Ben Baumes, “What Else Can this Thing Do?” *Repellent Magazine* (2005), accessed February 9, 2014, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/repellent_interview.html.

35. John Cage, "The Future of Music: A Credo," *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 263–264.
36. John Cage, "The Future of Music: A Credo," 4.
37. John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961) 98.
38. Marjorie Perloff, "A Conversation With Kenneth Goldsmith" *Jacket* 21 (February 2003), accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/21/perl-gold-iv.html>.
39. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring," accessed February 11, 2014, http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html.
40. "Kenneth Goldsmith Reads Poetry at White House Poetry Night," accessed February 11, 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hMSvrIPhA4Y>.
41. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Traffic*, Editions Eclipse: 2006, 55, accessed May 11, 2013, <http://eclipsearchive.org/projects/TRAFFIC/traffic.html>.
42. Kenneth Goldsmith, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (Brooklyn: Powerhouse Books, 2013) 169–170.
43. Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2005) 271.
44. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 250.
45. Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* 250.
46. Frances Colpitt, "The Question of Boredom: Is it interesting?" *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 43:4 (1985) 359–365.
47. Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 217–218.
48. Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring."
49. Arthur Danto, *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace* (Cambridge MA: Harvard University Press, 1981) 68–69.
50. Steve McCaffrey, *The Darkness of the Present* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2013) 89.
51. Peter Brooks, *Reading for the Plot* (New York: Knopf, 1984) 3–36.
52. Vanessa Place, "What Makes Us," *The Constant Critic*, August 12, 2013; accessed August 30, 2013, http://www.constantcritic.com/vanessa_place/what-makes-us.
53. Vanessa Place, "What Makes Us."
54. Craig Dworkin makes a similar claim for his work on the equally invaluable Eclipse archive:

Additionally, although Eclipse has always been hosted on servers at my university employers (first at Princeton and now at the University of Utah), the archive has little value for an academic career because it is electronic and Web-based, a mode of publication that is no longer seen as detrimental to a CV is still not recognized as constituting a legitimate contribution to scholarship. Professionally, the relation of time and reward with respect to

the digital archive is directly inverse. Moreover, one of the founding principles of the project, and one I have had to insist on when negotiating with university administrators, is that it must be available entirely free of charge, and to anyone. Eclipse, in short, operates as part of a gift economy. Labor intensive—the site is coded and tagged by hand, with each of the thousands of pages scanned and proofed and processed in time stolen from sleep—and unremunerated, Eclipse accrues no interest and makes no investments. Craig Dworkin, “Hypermnesia,” *boundary 2* 36:3 (2009) 94–95.

55. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, ed. Randal Johnson (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993) 37–40, 70–75, 113–120.
56. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* 75.
57. Kenneth Goldsmith, “My Career in Poetry or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institution,” *Enclave Review*, Spring 2011, 8–9.
58. Vanessa Place, “I Is Not A Subject,” *Harriet The Blog*, accessed January 30, 2014, <http://www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2013/04/i-is-not-a-subject-part-3-of-5>.

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