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**ENCLAVE REVIEW**

My Career in Poetry or:  
How I Learned to Stop Worrying and  
Love the Institution  
Kenneth Goldsmith

Over the past few months, we've seen a remarkable outpouring of what could be called activist poetry: poetry that makes things happen, poetry as an occupying force. One activist poet has framed current events in historical terms, calling it 'a powerful extension of the role that poets have played in recent decades - in the civil rights, anti-Vietnam War, and women's rights movements... in the anti-apartheid movement of the 1980s; and in the more recent movement against the current war in Iraq.<sup>1</sup> And in December of 2011, the poet John Kinsella withdrew from the T.S. Eliot prize after learning that the award was sponsored by a nefarious hedge fund. In a statement, Kinsella proposed an 'activist poetics' agenda based on what he terms 'linguistic disobedience', a practice concerned with 'pushing language to work both in unexpected ways and outside the expected

poetic modes of the officially sanctioned.<sup>2</sup> This is encouraging, particularly in light of what we continually hear: that poetry is powerless, useless and is so marginal and hermetic that it can't possibly engage with culture in any meaningful way. Poetry, we're told time and again, has been reduced to a hobby, a craft practiced by few, speaking to an audience of even fewer. While this one type of activist poetry has been very much on our minds lately, it's a good time to note that poetic resistance can take many forms. Sometimes this refusal involves disrupting normative modes of syntax, as in the case of many modernisms, which proposed new social orders by questioning the traditional roles of readers and writers. Encouraging, too, has been the Eco and Slow Poetry movements that have worked to engage communities, both local and global. These are but a few examples of what I would term activist poetry. While there are many others, even such a short list makes me wonder where we got the idea that poetry doesn't matter?

I'd like to focus on another destabilizing strategy, one that directly engages institutions, critiquing and deconstructing them from within. For the past half century, there's been a strain of conceptual art known as institutional critique, which takes as its subject matter the way that institutions frame and control discourses surrounding the art works that they exhibit rather than focusing on the content of the art works themselves. A more traditional approach would be to isolate an art work and to appreciate its aesthetic values, while ignoring the context in which it is being displayed and the factors that brought it there. Institutional critique claims that the structures surrounding the works are actually what gives the work much of its meaning, often times controlling the reception of a work in ways we as viewers are unaware of. While institutional critique began in the museum, the practice evolved over time to include everything from the production and distribution of art to an examination of the corporate offices or collectors' homes where the art was hung. By the 1980s, it roped in art criticism, academic lectures, and art's reception in the popular press. Around the same time, art schools began offering classes in post-studio practice, where the studying of institutional critique became an act of making art in and of itself.

So you get works like Hans Haacke's 1970 'MoMA Poll', which was literally a poll which asked viewers 'Would the fact that Governor Rockefeller has not denounced President Nixon's Indochina Policy be a reason for your not voting for him in November?' and provided two plexiglass boxes into which the YES or NO ballots were cast. While, aesthetically, the piece fit into the primary structures and information-based art of the period, Haacke meant to shed light on the fact that Nelson Rockefeller was a member of MoMA's board, thereby making visible the normally hidden play of money, power and politics behind the institution. Another tactic is to take objects from a museum's collection and rearrange them in ways that highlight the biases of the collection. For instance, in 1993 the African-American artist Fred Wilson critiqued the Maryland Historical Society's collection in relationship to Maryland's history of slavery. For this show, he regrouped specific objects from the museum in order to speak of 'a history which the museum and the community wouldn't talk about: the history of the exclusion and abuse that African-American people experienced in that area.'<sup>3</sup> Other works have focused on the physical institution itself. Andrea Fraser, acting as a docent, led false museum tours, not of the works on the walls, but of the security systems, water fountains, and cafeterias. In 2003, Fraser performed what was perhaps the ultimate work of institutional critique: a collector paid \$20,000 to sleep with her, 'not for sex,' according to Fraser, but 'to make an artwork.'<sup>4</sup>

And yet surprisingly, institutional critique has its roots in poetry, or rather a poet's disenchantment with his career trajectory. In 1964, Marcel Broodthaers, an impoverished poet associated for many years with the radical left wing of the Belgian surrealist movement, took forty-four unsold copies of a book of his last volume of poetry and embedded them in plaster and re-presented them as sculpture in a gallery. With this one gesture, he symbolically annulled his career as a writer by rendering his already economically worthless books now completely unreadable and, at the same time, by recontextualizing them as art, gave license to magically transform them into commodifiable art objects.<sup>5</sup> By prioritizing cultural context over artistic content, Broodthaers' gesture is generally considered the first work of institutional critique. The first time he showed

his plaster-embedded books, Broodthaers released a statement in which made explicit his intentions: 'I, too, wondered whether I could not sell something and succeed in life. For some time I had been no good at anything. I am forty years old .... Finally the idea of inventing something insincere crossed my mind and I set to work straightaway.'<sup>6</sup>

There's something prescient about Broodthaers' practice as to much work that's been staged in the poetry world recently. With the emergence of conceptual poetics, the possibilities for critical, self-reflexive devices have become somewhat commonplace. Broodthaers' keywords, *unreadability* and *insincerity*, are words you often hear batted around poetry today. In fact, you could say that two recent movements - Conceptual Writing's *unreadability* and Flarf's *insincerity* - are founded upon and enact these premises.

Perhaps the most relevant work of institutional critique in the poetry world to date is the now infamous *Issue 1*. Published in 2008, it was a 3,785-page unauthorized and unpermissioned anthology, 'written' by 3,164 poets, whose poems were actually authored not by the poets to whom they were attributed. Instead, the poems were generated by computer which randomly synced each author with a poem. Stylistically, it made no sense: a well-known traditional poet was paired with a radically disjunctive poem penned by a computer and vice versa.

Yet it wasn't so much the stylistics that raised eyebrows, it was the mechanics of it - the distribution and the notification - which riled the contributors. The work was stitched into a massive PDF, which was placed on a media server late one evening. Many people found about their inclusion first thing in the morning, when finding that the Google Alert they had set for their name had notified them that they were included in a major new anthology. Clicking on the link brought them to the anthology where upon downloading it, they found their name attached to a poem they didn't write. Like wildfire, reaction spread through the community: Why was I in it? Why wasn't I in it? Why was my name matched with that poem? Who was responsible for this act? Some the 'contributors' were delighted to be included while others were wildly angered. Speaking on behalf of the disgruntled authors whose reputations of genius and authenticity

were sullied was blogger and poet Ron Silliman, who said '*Issue 1* is what I would call an act of anarcho-flarf vandalism .... Play with other people's reps at your own risk.' Silliman went on to cite a lawsuit in which he and a group of authors won a great sum of money involving copyright infringement back in the 70s, suggesting that such a gesture might be a good idea for those scammed by *Issue 1*. Striking an ominous tone, he stated, 'As I certainly did not write the text associated with my name on page 1849... I don't think you wrote your work either.'<sup>7</sup>

As there really wasn't much to discuss about the poems - in regard to everything else going on about this gesture, they seemed pretty irrelevant - we were forced to consider the conceptual apparatuses that the anonymous authors had set into motion. With one gesture, like Broodthaers, they had swapped the focus *from content to context*.

Similarly, Vanessa Place has been producing what she calls her *Factory Series*, works written by others but published under Place's name. She writes, 'Andy Warhol used his Factory to train others to produce art 'by Andy Warhol' that looked like Andy Warhol's art. Vanessa Place's *Factory Series* is a series of chapbooks 'by Vanessa Place' whose content has been dictated by other artists/writers, who, in turn, have appropriated content from other artists/writers .... No longer unique, no longer limited in edition, no longer touched by the authorial hand, bearing no necessary relationship to the writings of Vanessa Place, the *Factory* series simply preserves the place of poetry.' Place also has been for some time appropriating her own day job of writing legal briefs into gigantic contextually-based poetic works such as *Statement of Fact* and *Statement of the Case*.

In April of 2011, the critic Robert Archambeau wrote of my work:

There are points, especially lately, where Goldsmith seems to be going in a direction that (like a lot of what he does) has been taken before in the art world, but has been less common in the poetry world. It's a turn to the idea of the career itself as the most important medium of the art. There are plenty of ways to do this, but the way Goldsmith seems to be going is one that people who are critical of the apparatus of

fame, the market in cultural capital and symbolic goods, and the construction of status might find disconcerting ... Goldsmith distances himself from the idea of the text-as-art-object, and moves toward the effect, the stimulation of thought, and the generation of conversation about the object as the real medium of his art. It's not quite the artist's career as the artist's medium, but it is a step in that direction .... It's a direction I personally see as a bit — what? — I suppose 'destined to produce unhappiness for those who take it' is the phrase.<sup>8</sup>

While I'm curious as to how a perfect stranger might be able to predict my future mental state, Archambeau's skepticism is typical of the unexamined reaction that the poetry world often falls back upon when they suspect poets of engaging with institutions on any level.

A more nuanced – but equally suspicious – reaction was generated by Dale Smith, founder of the Slow Poetry movement, during a public conversation that he and I had:

Dale Smith: By bringing Conceptual Poetry to the Whitney earlier this year, don't you feel as though you betrayed the radical impulse behind the avant-garde? Or perhaps I've fallen for the performative gesture, and in my dismay over the carrying over of Conceptual Poetry to the Art World Institution, I've simply fallen for a scheme to generate discussion around Conceptual Poetry?

Kenneth Goldsmith: Honestly, Dale, if the Whitney wanted to do a night of Slow Poetry, would you really say no?

DS: In the context of Slow Poetry, I would have to refuse, though I would lose sleep over it. Or, perhaps, I'd pull a Marlon Brando, and send someone else to collect the trophy — use the opportunity — put it toward some other purpose. I might ask for the money to document some other kind of event — in a nursing home or something. It would be difficult, and I realize the pressure involved, but that's how it is.

KG: Wow! That's amazing. Tell me more! Why would you refuse? I'm fascinated!

DS: It has to do with Slow Poetry. It doesn't belong to me. And there's nothing to promote. And I don't want to

be responsible for institutionalizing anything in that sense — slipping under the Museum's covers. I would rather send Jack Collom or Sotère Torregian or Joanne Kyger. Or a homeless person dressed up as me saying whatever they wanted to say — that would be an interesting conceptual gesture, I would think. Kent Johnson has proposed that 'the poetic politics of [Flarf and Conceptual Poetry] begin where those of Language poetry ended.' I wonder if by this he means that the new poetic avant-garde is inside a 'building' that's been primed to receive 'art works' of the kind you are offering. These installations want to be provocative, but they're inside a kind of museum, that's been ready-made for them, if you'll pardon the pun.<sup>9</sup>

Kent Johnson's comment about Language poetry is correct in that it was a movement that recognized that it could not survive without the support of the institution. There is so little interest in the avant-garde in the general population that if not for the academy, this work would be nearly invisible. So you have the institution as survival strategy. In fact, for advanced poetries — meaning ones that are decidedly non- or anti-populist — if this work is not received in the academy, it's not received at all. I, for example, owe my career to academies and institutions; if my work is not being taught or written about, it doesn't exist. With this historical knowledge, over the years, as the various mainstream institutions reached out to support it — Ivy League universities, well-funded literary and academic journals, major museums, even the White House — I said yes. But with a caveat: I couldn't be censored and had to be allowed to say what I needed to say in the way that I needed to say it, however distasteful it might be to them, or I would walk away. Shockingly, they all agreed and to this day, no major institution has even attempted to tone down what I say or do. And believe me, I have made some very provocative claims. So an engagement with an institution can be like holding up a mirror to the institution, a limit test to see what it is capable — or incapable — of.

Yet old attitudes die hard. The poetry world was largely critical of my acceptance of an invitation to read at the White House last May,

most prominently articulated by poet and blogger Linh Dinh, who claimed, 'To be a minstrel for a mass murderer is nothing to be proud of... This just heightens my contempt for the state of American poetry. Did Bertolt Brecht dance for Hitler? Future generations will look back at us and retch. Very sad.'<sup>10</sup> And yet, the institution — in the form of Al Filreis of The University of Pennsylvania (my employer) — leapt to my defense with a nuanced and moderate argument. He responded to Dinh:

I don't disagree with you about war, that's certain, but obviously I do disagree about what Kenny has specifically said yes to. Michelle Obama has been doing a few good things in the arts, but this project (series) unfortunately hasn't so far been one of them; her people asked the usual suspects (e.g. Billy Collins) and someone in her office had the fairly unusual idea of trying something different, aesthetically, and so Kenny, who must have pondered the down sides of accepting, decided on balance that helping to provide some poetic range was a good thing to do. Goldsmith is no Brecht (in mode or intention) and so I don't expect him to refuse in a manner that presumably Brecht would have, even in your imagined analogy; and while Obama has been to me and many others I admire (including you, by the way) a disappointment (and, in war policies, worse than that), I don't consider him a Hitler (I've thought about totalitarianism a good deal).<sup>11</sup>

In regard to my considering the downsides of the invitation, I realized that this would provide a rare opportunity to put radical poetic theory and practice into institutional play; in fact, what it would reveal about the surprising structure of that particular institution — as I'll get to later — would prove to be more valuable than the blunt warnings against participating at all. But I did stop to consider the invitation: when I was invited to read, I wondered aloud to a colleague whether if, asked by the G.W. Bush administration to read, would I have accepted? To which my colleague responded, 'Kenny, you never would've been asked to read at the G.W. Bush White House.'

But let's look at what actually happened at the White House and see how it played out on

institutional terms. The day was split into two parts. In the afternoon there was a poetry workshop led by Michelle Obama in the State Dining Room and then in the evening there was a formal reading in the East Room. While there were eight 'poets' invited to read, most of them were entertainers who performed their lyrics as poetry, such as Jill Scott, Common, Aimee Mann, and Steve Martin, who brilliantly sang an Auden poem with his bluegrass band. The only other full-time poets, beside myself, were Rita Dove and Billy Collins. I should mention that one avant-garde visual artist, Alison Knowles, was also present. In terms of the institution, when I was invited to read, I was only given one rule: that I could not read anything political. What that exactly meant I was never told. Other than that, I had free rein to read whatever I wanted. Once I had decided upon my reading, I had to submit it for approval. Upon arriving at the White House in the morning, the poets did a sound check and ran through their short sets while handlers scurried about setting up the room for the evening's event. During this sound check, our host, Joe Reinstein, The Deputy Social Secretary to the President, was present from the Administration. After my sound check, Joe made a helpful suggestion regarding the pacing of my introduction. It was good advice and made my set flow better. From that time until the moment I went onstage, nobody commented upon what I was to read. In fact, that evening face-to-face with the President, it dawned on me that as I got up on stage, there was going to be nothing stopping me from reading something other than what I had told them I was going to do. I could've read something political or made some sort of unexpected intervention; much to my detractors' chagrin, I didn't. I stuck to the script, which for my purposes turned out to be the best thing to do. But more about that later.

In the afternoon session with the First Lady, when I was interviewed about my practice by Elizabeth Alexander in front of the White House Press Corps, 70 high school students, and dozens of bureaucrats, I wasn't vetted about what I could or couldn't say. I simply said exactly what I say again and again, making my arguments against creativity and for copyleft, file-sharing, and free culture. As Marjorie Perloff described it,

Against the usual admonition to 'Look in thy heart and write' (Rita Dove has just

told the group that 'Only you can tell your story. So if you remain true to your own experience, your voice will find you!'), [Goldsmith] begins by noting, tongue in cheek, that his own students are penalized for any shred of originality or creativity they might show. As he puts it in the manifesto, 'Instead they are rewarded for plagiarism, identity theft, repurposing papers, patchwriting, sampling, plundering and stealing. Not surprisingly they thrive. Suddenly, what they've surreptitiously become expert at is brought out in the open and explored in a safe environment, reframed in terms of responsibility instead of recklessness.' Copying, cutting and pasting, downloading, recycling: these activities, Goldsmith argues, will actually teach students more about literature than the seeming 'originality' of self-expression.<sup>12</sup>

Nobody blinked an eye. When discussing my entirely-appropriated book, *Day*, which is a transcription of a day's copy of *The New York Times*, I was interrupted by an engrossed First Lady who insisted on knowing what day I chose to transcribe. The lack of resistance to what I was saying was remarkable. In fact, the White House was the most frictionless place I've ever been. Nothing ever goes wrong there. Like walking on air or being on the moon, there's a complete lack of gravity. Due to the most insane security, it feels like the freest, most relaxed place on earth. It's like everyone is on a combination of Prozac and Ecstasy. And everything I said there seemed to be met with big smiles and nods of approval, even things that advocated breaking social contracts - or even the law. Strange doesn't begin to describe it.

That evening, with the President sitting five feet away from me, I read appropriated texts. Again, nobody flinched. I put together a short set featuring an American icon, The Brooklyn Bridge, and presented three takes on it, first an excerpt from before the bridge was built from Whitman's 'Crossing Brooklyn Ferry', then the bridge as metaphysical / spiritual modernist icon with an excerpt from Hart Crane's 'To Brooklyn Bridge', finally finishing with an excerpt from my book *Traffic*, which is 24 hours' worth of transcribed traffic reports from a local New York news station. The crowd, comprised of arts administrators, Democratic party donors, and various senators

and mayors, respectfully sat through the 'real' poetry – the Whitman and Crane – but when the uncreative texts appeared, the audience was noticeably more attentive, seemingly stunned that the quotidian language and familiar metaphors from their world – congestion, infrastructure, gridlock – could be framed somehow as poetry. It was a strange meeting of the avant-garde with the everyday, resulting in a realist poetry – or should I say hyperrealist poetry – that was instantly understood by all in the room; let's call it radical populism.

Now let's take a moment to parse the famous suit I was wearing and examine how that played into institutional critique. John Stewart speculated that it was improvised at the last minute, quipping that the afternoon before I went onstage I glanced at the wall and asked, 'Hey, does that wallpaper come off?' An UPenn alumnus, writing in the Penn alumni magazine commented,

Kenneth Goldsmith is pictured standing at a podium dressed somewhat like the clown he apparently wishes to be. But alas, he is not at a circus; he is an honored guest at the White House, reading his 'work' at an 'Evening of Poetry'.

But the suit was actually made by Brooks Brothers, the same outfitters that supplied the suit that The President himself was wearing that evening. My suit was designed by the avant-garde designer Thom Browne under his Brooks Brothers' owned Black Fleece label, who does pretty much what I was doing at the White House: taking the traditional patterns that Brooks Brothers is known for – in this case paisley – and pushing them way too far. Similarly, during the day session with the First Lady, I wore a Thom Browne pastel suit, which references the insane pastels of the preppy Newport set. For the suit I wore, Brown actually created a pastiche or patchwork of traditional preppy colors and literally made a remix of them. It was clear that Brooks Brothers needed to revitalize their brand, shake up the staid traditions, hence they called in Browne to bring Brooks Brothers into the 21<sup>st</sup> century, replete with self-conscious winks and nods, engaged with remix culture, and to add a big dose of *impurity*. Clearly that meant not ditching their classic line, but spinning off another line based on what they became famous for.

I figured that The Obamas – preps to the core – would in some way recognize the paisley and the pastels, but be befuddled by the size of the paisley or the way that the pastels were unconventionally stitched together. And that, in fact, was the case. Upon meeting the President, the first thing he said to me was, 'That's a great suit! You know? I'd wear a suit like that. But my staff would never let me.' To which I replied, 'Mr. President, this is one instance where it's better being an artist than being the President of the United States: artists can wear anything they want.' And then he glanced down at my saddle shoes and exclaimed, 'You're wearing golf shoes!' Which in part was true, that being the genius of Thom Browne, to take something familiar and recontextualize it to the point of it being 'wrong', which is exactly what I aimed to do with my performance, straddling tradition and radicality, being both and, at the same time, being neither; embracing contradiction, keeping them guessing.

Now where this intersects with theory is interesting. Jacques Derrida stated that

What [the] institution cannot bear, is for anyone to tamper with language...It can bear more readily the most apparently revolutionary ideological sorts of 'content,' if only that content does not touch the borders of language and all the juridico-political contracts that it guarantees.<sup>13</sup>

As evidenced by the recent Occupy Wall Street protests, institutions were – at least in the beginning – remarkably adaptive and flexible, often sympathetic, to protesters. The modes of discourse, although radical in their political sentiments, were expressed in a common language (Derrida's 'contract'), one that was well-understood and mutually agreed upon by both parties. Ideological differences – agree-to-disagree – are a given, but formal challenges to language prove to be a harder pill to swallow. An example of this happened when an artist showed up at Zuccotti Park with a sign that read, 'Gucci. Do The Dishes.' He was nearly run out of the occupation by protesters who attacked his language for lack of clarity. They didn't know what to do with poetic sentiment. Clearly, ambiguity broke the linguistic contracts. Yet Occupy Wall Street's overarching genius has been to exploit these exact precepts by developing what Brian Eno calls an 'oblique strategy', jamming norms by

refusing to make a list of demands – adapting an attitude of ambiguity – breaking the contract, leaving the institutions unsure of exactly how to respond. Brilliant, really. Derrida's ideas were formulated in the wake of May 68, where Situationist-inspired slogans – "Sous les pavés, la plage," "Ne travaillez jamais," or the sorts of linguistic *détournement* that occurred during the Prague Spring, where street signs were painted over so as to confuse the arriving tanks – similarly were able to jam normative discourse by breaking the contract due to their oblique, poetic qualities. The lesson: by taking a rigid position – either / or – one makes oneself an easy target. Occupy Wall Street is a product of the digital age: distributed, non-specific, nowhere and everywhere at the same time. Such strategies are nuanced and complex, causing befuddlement in a binary-based black-and-white culture.

What happened in the White House was that radicality was clothed in the nearly identical linguistic garments of normative discourse familiar to the institution. And because it was fed to it on its own terms, the juridico-political contracts were held in tact, thereby going unnoticed. In fact, one could say that most of those in the room were talking heads, daily spouting words written by others. It's no wonder they felt akin to appropriative and uncreative writing. So what we're seeing with much new conceptual work is the inability of institutions to muzzle those who tamper with language because – unlike disjunctive modernisms – it is unaware that it is being tampered with.

And this cloak of invisibility has affected and opened up certain institutions in ways that even a few years ago, was unheard of. Recently, I was interviewed by a European academic journal and was asked a question I've been asked many times before:

Interviewer: The programme of Language writing seems quite congenial to what you do. They as well felt the need to react against poetry as it was/is taught at universities. Many language writers, however, are currently working at a university (and so are you). Isn't there a contradiction in this?

Goldsmith: It's a fact that in the United States, the primary reception of innovative literature happens in the university; there really is very little

readership outside the academy. This is a condition that preceded my arrival onto the writing scene, fostered by numerous cultural conditions in the States, as well as the warm reception of Language Poetry by the academy. As such, I simply take it as a given that this is where the readership and study of my work occurs. But it's not all bad news. At the University of Pennsylvania, where I teach, we are given free rein to teach in unconventional ways. For example, I teach classes in uncreative writing where we encourage the students to plagiarize, appropriate, plunder and sample. They are demerited when they show signs of originality or of conventional thinking. The university supports this agenda, so you see that perhaps the academy is not what it used to be.<sup>14</sup>

The fact that I am not only permitted but encouraged to explore this in a university classroom – in plain sight – is a fact that I still find remarkable. And yet I continue on, as I have done for nearly a decade. But it's not just the University of Pennsylvania who has permitted this: a host of other institutions have also signed on. In 2010 I was awarded the Anschutz Distinguished Professorship in American Studies at Princeton University, where I also taught uncreative writing. In fact, in my application for the award I had to propose a class and syllabus, so there were no surprises: they knew exactly what they were getting. Furthermore, a once-staid university press, Columbia, just published a book of my essays called – you guessed it – *Uncreative Writing. The Chronicle of Higher Education* – that standard bearer of academic institutions in the United States – recently published my entire introduction to the *Uncreative Writing* – all 8,000 words – in both print and on the web. And in 2009, I edited a 40-page portfolio of Flarf and Conceptual Writing for *Poetry*, which is consistently derided in certain circles for its inability to recognize and publish 'innovative' work. Think again. This litany is not about bragging: what I find remarkable is these institutions' embrace and acceptance of what they're most often accused of dismissing and ignoring. This is not to say that there hasn't been pushback and anger from the public; particularly in the journals, there have been dozens of harsh responses, shocked that such 'proper' institutions would even entertain such ideas, much less unapologetically publish

them. But in Derridean terms, this is all part of the juridico-political contract of commonly agreed-upon language.

Yet as recently as December 2011, *The New York Times* published this astonishing sentence: 'Publishers are extremely sensitive to charges of plagiarism, considered among the gravest sins in the literary world, and in some cases are quick to respond.'<sup>15</sup> Conceptual writing began with legitimizing plagiarism as a literary practice but, having thoroughly exhausted that terrain – need we appropriate the entire internet? – has moved on to explore non- or anti- writing. Plagiarism is still concerned with traditional literary notions (the play between the original writer and the re-writer, and of course, is deeply engaged with a readership, either duped or complicit) and is still codependent upon the role of the author. We're far beyond the death of the author; now we're talking about the death of literature.

While there are pockets of resistance – some very large ones – it appears that by and large the battle has been won. So what happens when the institutional critique is so easily absorbed by the institution, that it moves from a 'critique of institutions to an institution of critique?'<sup>16</sup> We've seen this already in the art world where performative acts of institutional critique are regularly commissioned by the institutions themselves. Andrea Fraser, perhaps addressing her own practice, writes,

How can artists who have become art-historical institutions themselves claim to critique the institution of art? .... Today, the argument goes, there no longer is an outside. How, then, can we imagine, much less accomplish, a critique of art institutions when museum and market have grown into an all-encompassing apparatus of cultural reification? Now, when we need it most, institutional critique is dead, a victim of its success or failure, swallowed up by the institution it stood against.<sup>17</sup>

One way out of this impasse might come from Marcel Broodthaers. After his initial act of institutional critique – embedding his poetry books in plaster – he entirely sidestepped the need to discourse with official institutions by inventing a series of false museums, ones which ran parallel to the world of official culture, thus calling into question what cultural

legitimacy means (or more specifically, to perform a critique of what Adorno terms the 'culture industry'.) Once again, invoking insincerity and superficiality, in 1965 the artist blatantly spoke of desiring status and power:

In art exhibitions I often mused ....  
Finally I would try to change into an art lover. I would revel in my bad faith ....  
Since I couldn't build a collection of my own, for lack of even the minimum of financial means, I had to find another way of dealing with the bad faith that allowed me to indulge in so many strong emotions. So, said I to myself, I'll be a creator.<sup>18</sup>

By creator, he meant founder, curator, and director for a newly created institution he called *The Museum of Modern Art, Department of Eagles, 19<sup>th</sup> Century Wing*, which opened in his street-level apartment in Brussels in 1969. Contained in the 'museum' were postcard reproductions of paintings adorning the walls and sealed shipping crates strewn about the room. For a man who couldn't afford the real things that museums showed, his museums would have all the trappings of the museum – the scaffolding and structures of the museum – minus the objects. Over the years, his museums reappeared in various cities in Europe, spontaneously re-opening with newly installed works. And they got more complex: by the time he was done, his project was resolutely and self-reflexively museological, with a complex, invented system of arcane and functionless collecting and naming, resulting in a 'pataphysical institution, one that proposed imaginary curatorial solutions to imaginary curatorial problems.

Broodthaers' trajectory makes us aware that in any extended artistic practice, there is an inevitable pull toward institutionalization. At age 40, after having transitioned from poet to artist, and now finding himself with the title of Museum Director, Broodthaers wrote,

Of course I now have a job, and I'd have a hard time getting out of it. In my naïvete, I actually believed that I could put off choosing a profession until my demise. How have I been trapped? . . . Yes, now, like all artists, I'm an integral part of society.<sup>19</sup>

Broodthaers confesses that his fate is his own doing, understanding that it is the price one pays to play.

The other alternative is not to play at all, as advocated by Dorothea Lasky, in her widely discussed 2009 essay, 'Poetry is Not a Project'. In it, she claims,

The term 'project' comes from the visual art world. And other worlds too, like science, business, and education. But especially from the visual art world. And if there is one thing that poets would like to be today, it's visual artists. Why? Because visual artists have all the money .... A poet with a project (who can name his project and talk about it) shows that everything was all set before he even started. A poet with a nameable project seems wise, and better than other poets with an unnameable one. But this kind of thinking strikes me as BS, because I don't believe that's how poetry works .... I would argue that a poet who has a project that he can lucidly discuss is a pretty boring poet, at best. I would argue that a poet with a project might not be a poet at all .... I think the term 'project' has nothing to do with poetry .... The notion of a poetic 'project' may actually be very toxic to poetry .... Let's be special for once. In the context of bankers, lawyers, scientists, painters, musicians, we're poets. Let's have a little pride. And let's be gentle when describing our skills to the outside world, so that they can understand us better and we can give each other what we need.<sup>20</sup>

Lasky's pose strikes me as contributing to the stereotypical notions of poetry's powerlessness. At a time when poetry is going out of its way to be confrontational and aggressive, Lasky tiptoes about, asking poets to 'be gentle when describing our skills to the outside world, so that they can understand us better.' She begs poets to 'have a little pride', but as far as I can see, poets today are filled with pride, filled with rage and don't feel the need to be gentle about anything. I find her use of the term 'outside world' to be equally problematic, when so many have been working so hard to break down such long-standing divisions, to the point where poetry has become a regular part of *occupational* discourse.

Similarly, poets involved with institutional critique are directly inserting poetics and

poetic practice into Lasky's dreaded arenas of business, law, science, medicine, and art:

Kim Rosenfield has been taking ideas from conceptual poetics focusing on fraudulent notions of authenticity & meaning and mapping them onto psychoanalytic theories that, in turn, are being published in professional psychoanalytic journals.

Christian Bök's *Xenotext* project -- a poem constructed entirely in a laboratory -- is being received by the scientific world, with lengthy articles about his endeavors featured in that field's prominent journals such as *New Scientist*.

Darren Wershler and Lisa Gitelman have been injecting technology-based poetic ideas into the worlds of media & communication studies which are juicing that field with poetry in ways that haven't happened since Marshall McLuhan.

Vanessa Place use the forms and languages of law to question the morals and ethics of its professional practices.

Robert Fitterman's consumerist landscapes boldly employ the hollow rhetoric of shopping malls and catalogues, giving him the ability to critique global late capitalism by appropriating the brutal language of business on its own terms.

My own theorizing of conceptual poetics have been published by and included in the forthcoming Documenta 13 have forced the art world to take notice of what's going on in poetry instead of the typically inverse situation.

Inspired by the complex projects and sophisticated attitudes of Broodthaers, there's nothing 'gentle' about these gestures and certainly nothing that condescends in order to make the 'outside world understand [them] better.' Instead it's the opposite. Darren Wershler claims that 'poetry has left the building.' And he's right. 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. I would say that the path to "a little bit of pride" is aggressive activist engagement, to delve head on into the conceptual, political, and institutional complexities of parapoetic practice, not to shy away from them. And until we can permit ourselves to do that, poetry will remain firmly seated on the sidelines.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>[http://www.guernicamag.com/blog/3307/travis\\_hollo\\_way\\_performing\\_art/](http://www.guernicamag.com/blog/3307/travis_hollo_way_performing_art/)

<sup>2</sup> John Kinsella, "Keeping poetry outside the comfort zone," *New Statesman*, 13 December 2011 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/blogs/cultural-capital/2011/12/poem-poetry-disobedience-land>>, Accessed December 15, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Judith Barry, Renée Green, Fred Wilson, Christian Philipp Müller, Andrea Fraser, "Serving Institutions", *October* 80 (Spring 1997): 120-129.

<sup>4</sup> Saltz, Jerry. "Critiqueus interruptus". *The Village Voice*. <http://www.villagevoice.com/2007-02-13/art/critiqueus-interruptus/>, Viewed 15 November 2011

<sup>5</sup> That, in fact, turned out to be the case. The plaster-embedded books, entitled "Pense-Bête" (Reminder, 1964) rarely – if ever comes up for sale. By comparison, a minor work, "Le drapeau noir" (The Black Flag, 1968-72) recently went for nearly \$30,000 at auction.

<sup>6</sup> Quoted in *Marcel Broodthaers*, Tate Gallery, 1980 p. 13.

<sup>7</sup> Ron Silliman, blog entry dated Sunday, October 05, 2008 <<http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/2008/10/one-advantage-of-e-books-is-that-you.html>>, (October 20, 2008).

<sup>8</sup> Robert Archambeau, "Kenneth Goldsmith, or the Art of Being Talked About" <<http://samizdatblog.blogspot.com/2011/04/kenneth-goldsmith-or-art-of-being.html>>, viewed November 16, 2011

<sup>9</sup> The Tortoise And The Hare: Dale Smith and Kenneth Goldsmith Parse Slow and Fast Poetries Monday, July 6, 2009 – Saturday, July 25, 2009, *Jacket* 38, 2009. <<http://jacketmagazine.com/38/iv-smith-goldsmith.shtml>> accessed November 16, 2011. I have edited the last portion of this paragraph for the sake of clarity. The original was: "Not too long ago, on Silliman's blog, Kent Johnson left a comment which proposed that "The poetic politics of [Flarf and Conceptual Poetry] begin where those of Language poetry ended." .... I wonder, actually, if by this he partly means that in fact the new poetry-"avant-garde" is very much, and quite willingly, inside a "Building" that's quite primed and ready to receive "Art Works" of the kind you are offering. The installations proffered want to be provocative, and no doubt some in the "populist" audience .... will see them as so; but the installations are inside a kind of museum, really, ready-made for them, if you'll pardon the pun."

<sup>10</sup> Linh Dinh, "Re: Penn's Kenneth Goldsmith to perform at the White House next week" May 5 2011 <<http://www.sonneteighteen.com.blogspot.com/2011/05/re-penns-kenneth-goldsmith-to-perform.html>>, accessed November 21 2011.

<sup>11</sup> <http://www.sonneteighteen.com.blogspot.com/2011/05/al-filreis-email-to-me-regarding-kenny.html>, Accessed November 26, 2011.

<sup>12</sup> Marjorie Perloff, "Towards a conceptual lyric: From content to context" *Jacket* 2, July 28, 2011. <http://jacket2.org/article/towards-conceptual-lyric>, Accessed November 20, 2011.

<sup>13</sup> Jaques Derrida, "Living On: Border Lines", in Peggy Kamuf, *A Derrida Reader: Between the Blinds*, New York, Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1991, p263.

<sup>14</sup> Sarah Posman, "Interview with Kenneth Goldsmith," *Yang* (Ghent), 2006.4 "MAXIMALE VERVANGBAARHEID" <[http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Yang\\_Goldsmith\\_Interview.pdf](http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/Yang_Goldsmith_Interview.pdf)>, Accessed November 21, 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Julie Bosman, "Is It Plagiarism? Publisher Says No" *The New York Times*, December 8, 2011 <<http://mediadecoder.blogs.nytimes.com/2011/12/08/is-it-plagiarism-publisher-says-no/?hp>> Accessed December 8, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> This phrase is lifted from Andrea Fraser's retrospective glance and historical gloss on institutional critique, "From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique." Published in *Artforum* in September, 2005, pp. 278-283

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Marcel Broodthaers, "Comme de bierre dans un sandwich," *Phantomas*, nos. 51-61 (December, 1965), pp. 295-296; quoted in Birgit Pelzer, "Recourse to the Letter," *October*, no. 42 (Fall, 1987), p. 163.

<sup>19</sup> "A la galerie aujourd'hui: Marcel Broodthaers par Marcel Broodthaers," *Journal des Beaux-Arts*, no. 1086 (April 1, 1965), p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Dorothea Lasky, "The Poetic 'Project' (And Other Poetry-Associated Terms I Hate)" <[http://www.themillions.com/2009/04/national-poetry-month-dorothea-lasky\\_24.html](http://www.themillions.com/2009/04/national-poetry-month-dorothea-lasky_24.html)>, Accessed November 27, 2011.