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## Petty theft

*Kenny G gives A's for unoriginality*

By ANNE HENOCHOWICZ

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Kenneth Goldsmith is uniquely unoriginal. Among his published works are *Fidget*, an account of every movement his body made for 13 hours on Bloomsday, 1997, and *Soliloquy*, a record of everything he said during one week. He is teaching Uncreative Writing to thieving Penn students this fall; he will teach again next year.

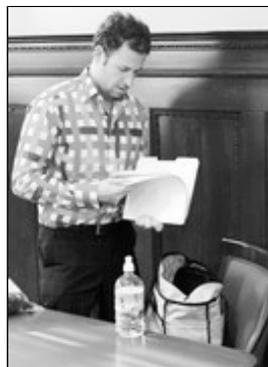
### What are you training your students to do?

I'm training them to forget everything they've ever learned about writing: their ego, their sense of narrative, their urge toward the Romantic, the smallness of their own minds and instead tap into something that's much larger than themselves: the world of available language. Our class tools are appropriation, theft, stealing, plundering and sampling -- cheating, fraud and identity theft are all encouraged. We rewrote the Penn Code of Ethics to become The English 111 Code of Unethics. If the kids are too original, they get penalized.

### Where and how does this theft take place?

We try to do things that don't happen elsewhere in academia. For example, for one three-hour class, I just had the students continuously write while watching TV shows and films: an episode of *The Osbournes*, Andy Warhol's *Blow Job* (a silent film of a man getting a blow job, but all you see is his face for 35 minutes), an episode of *Good Times* and a half-hour of *Ali G*. The language -- or lack thereof -- was incredibly different in each, as was the students' response to each.

For another assignment, I gave them the simple instructions to retype five pages of their choice and [they] came in the next week, dreading their response to the most dry, dull assignment I could give them. But much to my surprise, they were charged. Their responses were varied and full of revelations: some found it enlightening to become a



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Shout Out of the day

**To Wiggles** - Why don't I still call you Wiggles? From now on you will only be known as Wiggles. Love, Wiggles.



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machine. Others said that it was the most intense reading experience they ever had, with many actually embodying the characters they were retyping. Out of the class of 18, there was only one girl who didn't have some sort of a transcendental experience with the mundane act of typing. She was a waitress who took it upon herself to retype her restaurant's menu in order to learn it better for work. She ended up hating the task and even hating her job more.

### **Have you ever had a job you really hated?**

No. I've loved them all. I've found the tedium to be seductive. Some of the jobs I've held have been: garbage man, chicken delivery man, ski shop attendant, floor sweeper, cocaine dealer, short order cook, bartender, dishwasher, waiter, carpenter, cabinet maker, plaster caster, artists assistant, autoCAD operator, layout editor, web designer, creative director, consultant, lecturer, music critic, radio personality, writer, artist and now university professor. For many years I was a creative director in advertising. If that's creativity, then I don't want to be creative.

### **Are you trying to undo your students' sense of ethics and intellectual property?**

Art, and by extension the classroom, is a free space into which ethical queries can be conducted in a safe environment. By a consensual agreement, we've entered into a practice that questions conventional notions of ethics.

Copyright law only becomes pressing when that which is being transferred has economic value. In our practice -- the practice of experimental writing -- there is no commercial value to any of it. Hence it supplements perfectly our idea of the classroom as a safe space for ethical transgressions.

### **Wouldn't a copyright lawyer argue that one with you?**

There's a whole century's worth of aesthetic arguments as to why this is art, ranging from Marcel Duchamp to popular music. Nobody expects Britney Spears to be singing in front of a great live band -- or, for that matter, to even be singing at all. Our entire culture is based on mechanical reproduction and sampling. Literature needs to catch up here.



### **What about your own work?**

I retyped an entire copy of a day's *New York Times*, from



cover to cover. It was published as a 900-page book. I sent a copy of it to *The New York Times*. They ignored it. You see, my gesture was economically

non-threatening to them, hence it was easy for them to ignore.

### **What's wrong with creativity?**

Creativity as we've come to know it is bankrupt. What passes for creativity in our culture is actually vastly uncreative. Think of the flood of worn-out narratives, passing for originality, be it novels, films or music, and you'll find that what we term creative is nothing more than repetitious formulas, spun over and over. Should something appear that's truly "creative" it doesn't stand a chance of selling and as such, is rendered culturally insignificant and marginalized to the point of invisibility. By opposing creativity as commonly accepted -- in a sense by constructing a negative notion of creativity -- perhaps we can breathe new life into this practice. Hence, my concept of the uncreative.

It's hard for a person to rid themselves of heart, creativity, individuality. No matter what we do, we fully express ourselves with every gesture. I want to propose that students do less to imbue a work with their own personality, because it's always going to be there regardless of how hard we try. Every choice is stamped with individuality; we needn't try so hard.

### **Do your students ever find themselves accidentally slipping into a creative mode? How hard is it to let go of conventional notions of artistic individuality?**

The whole class ridicules a student who has fallen into a creative mode. We make sure they don't do that again! It's very easy for the kids to let go of conventional notions of artistic individuality as typically configured by our culture, once they permit themselves to do so. It took a few weeks, but now I feel that the students are finding themselves writing in ways they never knew they would. Each has produced an enormous body of high quality work. And best of all, with uncreative writing, you never have writer's block!

### **Was there a time in your life when you were "creative"? What brought you to pursue uncreativity?**

I was trained as a visual artist, and in the visual arts, standard notions of creativity were challenged 100 years ago. In most good art schools today, the training doesn't center around technical

achievement, but rather on conceptual strengths. I went to school in the wake of punk rock, which said that you don't need talent to be an artist, you need passion; skills -- and by extension, rote ideas of creativity were anathema.

### **How did you come to writing?**

For many years I lived in the art world as a conceptual artist, a text-based artist and a sculptor. Slowly and organically, over the course of 20 years, my practice morphed into writing. Today, I only write.

I've just published a book of the first collection of interviews with Andy Warhol called *I'll Be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, which was fascinating in that he was really the master of uncreativity. Of course I find him and his attitudes very inspiring. As for my own writing, I've published seven volumes of poetry and have two forthcoming, one called *Spring*, which is a collaboration with the painter James Siena, and the other is called *The Weather*, which is simply a transcription of a year's worth of one-minute weather reports from the local New York all-news station.

I do a weekly radio show on WFMU in New York City called "Anal Magic," which is a freeform experimental show where basically anything goes. I've also been engaged for the past ten years editing UbuWeb (ubu.com), the Internet's largest resource for avant-garde materials. This dovetails with my activities at PennSound here on campus, where I'm a senior editor. PennSound is an initiative of CPCW, Kelly Writer's House and the Penn Library that aims to archive an enormous amount of poetry readings, sound art, sound poetry, experimental music, radio plays, etc.

### **Do you ever get mistaken for the smooth jazz saxophonist Kenny G?**

On WFMU, my "stage" name is Kenny G. I often receive e-mail intended for him. I have hundreds of these letters. Many of them are hysterically funny. I'm going to publish them one day.

### **Ever lie awake at night with guilt?**

I do. Every night. I haven't slept in months.

### **What makes writing particularly amenable to "theft"?**

Well, not all writing is worth the same. Poetry -- which is more or less economically worthless -- is

easier to "liberate." Nobody seems to mind. After all, we're not taking money out of anybody's pocket

...

**Why did it make sense to leave the visual arts?**

My radical writing ideas are old hat in the art world. They've been appropriating for a century. But writing's another story.

**Any visions of uncreativity in the performing arts, music, etc.?**

Sure. Music is all sampled. I've already mentioned Britney Spears, and rap music is nothing but sampled. Every other area of our culture is sampled, from biotechnology to architecture. If you look closely, you'll find that just about everything is appropriated, sampled, swiped, borrowed, stolen and liberated. Maybe the real avant-garde is originality!

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