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The Color of Avant-Garde: Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Body of Michael Brown"

Abstract. In the following paper, I put forth a claim that literary works created according to the rules of conceptualism, seemingly devoid of expression, often reveal that values are inseparable from any textual operations. This is visible in Kenneth Goldsmith's recent project, "The Body of Michael Brown," which follows the format of Goldsmith's previous book—*Seven American Deaths and Disasters*—a transcription of news reports of American national disasters, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the attacks of 9/11. The text rewrites the autopsy report issued by the St. Louis County Coroner's Office on the shooting of Michael Brown, an African-American teenager shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri. The problem with the new conceptual art practice is that it disregards the ethical dimension of creation. For Goldsmith, ethical issues in art are limited to the question of "faithful" copying/rewriting, regardless of the fact that an appropriated text always reflects editorial manipulation and politics behind it. Goldsmith thinks of himself as a daring disciple of Duchamp, but he fails to understand that his text propagates racist violence, performing anew the autopsy's latent, institutional racism. In terms of methodology, I rely in my analyses on Marjorie Perloff's understanding of the concept of avant-garde and refer to the theories about literature and ethics emerging from recent writings by Cathy Park Hong and Jacques Rancière.

Keywords: Kenneth Goldsmith, conceptual literature, avant-garde, racism, the question of ethics in literature

Kenneth Goldsmith is one of rare contemporary American writers whose works—as Marjorie Perloff has it—"hit a real nerve," dividing his audience into hostile critics and most devoted fans (*Poetics in a New Key* 39). For his critics, he is frustrating because the inwardness of the lyrical "I" gets erased from his poems. His favorite technique is appropriation, which he used when he transcribed the entire edition of *The New York Times* of September 1, 2000, and published it as an 800-page book *Day*. Additionally, he often resorts to various elaborate constraints, as when he recorded chronologically all words spoken by him during one week in 2000, creating *Soliloquy*. For his fans, Goldsmith is more accessible than the great modernists, such as Pound or Eliot. Moreover, he is a writer who—quite contrary to the title of his collection of essays *Uncreative Writing*—gives the reader a feeling that originality of utterance is as easy as in the first decades of the twentieth century.

The notion of "rewriting" or "copying" is crucial not only for Goldsmith, but for all writers associated with the so called "conceptual literature." The label was

coined by Goldsmith and his friend, poet and critic, Craig Dworkin. Both authors edited an influential anthology of "conceptual writing" *Against Expression*, which features 111 authors—American, British, Danish, French, German, Italian, Mexican and Norwegian—from the last three centuries. In the volume's introduction, whose title sounds like an activist's manifesto—"Why Conceptual Writing? Why Now"—Goldsmith claims that "[f]aced with an unprecedented amount of available digital text, writing needs to redefine itself to adapt to the new environment of textual abundance" (xvii). Chronologically speaking, the earliest writer in the anthology is Denis Diderot, whose *Jacques le fataliste et son maître* [*Jacques the Fatalist and His Master*] consists of hundreds of digressions, interruptions, and metatextual diversions, and it openly copies the second paragraph from Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy.* One of the most recent contributors is Norwegian experimenter Paal Bjelke Andersen, whose "The Grefsen Address" is based on nationally televised speeches by the presidents or prime ministers of the Nordic countries (Denmark, Sweden, Iceland, Norway, and Finland). From the raw text of those speeches, Andersen retains certain elements, such as all sentences mentioning the Nordic community, every sentence containing the word *language* (e.g., *språk* in Norwegian), all the names of places, and all sentences with the word *border* (e.g., *grense* in Norwegian).

As the above examples demonstrate, it seems that rewritten or copied texts do not necessarily contradict the traditionally understood notion of the author, perceived as an expression of *inventio*. "Unoriginal genius"—Marjorie Perloff's brief definition of conceptualism and the title of her collection of essays devoted to different conceptual artists—is not less creative, but its creativity operates on a different level: it is not the text that matters, but the way the text is processed, since copying itself is a performance, involving elements of transformation. Obviously, Goldsmith and Dworkin were inspired largely by visual arts, where—in the course of the twentieth century—artistic revolutions tended to occur a decade or two earlier than in literature. American painter Sol LeWitt, whose wall drawings augured conceptualism in the 1960s, pointed out that in creating his works he completed all of the planning and decision-making beforehand, so the process of execution was a perfunctory affair, because the idea itself became a "machine that made the art" (qtd. in Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing* loc. 160). As Goldsmith elucidates, in the realm of language-generating formal constraints, the writer resembles a "programmer" who conceptualizes, constructs, executes, and maintains a "writing machine" (*Uncreative Writing* loc. 104).

The environment of the broadband Internet, where huge text files can be copied and pasted within microseconds, is a natural habitat for conceptual techniques, aiming at multiplication of linguistic material. Difficulty is not understood as a modernist opacity of the text, but as quantity. Yet Goldsmith's and Dworkin's anthology demonstrates that contemporary American conceptual literature is deeply rooted in the tradition of European avant-gardes from the first decades of the twentieth century, especially in what Marjorie Perloff calls the "futurist moment."

The Futurists and the Dadaists explored possibilities that the use of the typewriter offered to the literary—and visual—composition. According to Perloff, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Guillaume Apollinaire, as well as Francis Picabia and Kurt Schwitters, made use of cut-ups and fold-ins whose format was drawn "from the world of advertising posters and newspapers, which was soon to find its way into the literature of the period" (*The Futurist Moment* 92). Postmodern experimenters, such as Brion Gysin and William S. Burroughs, emulated the Futurists, but their possibilities were expanded by the new medium of the Xerox machine. Goldsmith and Dworkin view composition in a similar way, and they use PCs as their tools, creating meanings by repurposing and recontextualizing preexisting texts.

Interestingly, it seems that Goldsmith and Dworkin—but also Perloff who championed them as direct continuators of European experimenters from the first decades of the twentieth century—do not fully recognize the significance of the American modernist tradition in the formation of contemporary conceptual genres. As Eliot Weinberger observes, in the USA, the tradition of appropriated literature started in 1925 when William Carlos Williams published his collection of short narratives, exploring American history, *In the American Grain* (xii). Another important writer was John Dos Passos, the author of *Manhattan Transfer*, who collected and polished raw linguistic material of various origin, from spoken language, through popular literature, to newspapers. Both Williams and Dos Passos may have inspired Charles Reznikoff, one of the greatest American poets of the mid-twentieth century, who was seriously preoccupied with copying and remodeling of preexisting texts, particularly in his two monumental poems, *Testimony* and *Holocaust*.

Reznikoff's *Testimony* began as a book of prose in the 1930s and, initially, it was based on *Corpus Juris* and court transcripts, describing cases of criminality and negligence. *Holocaust* had a similar design, recycling the transcript of the Nuremberg Trials and producing even a more upsetting narrative. The poet admits in an interview that sometimes he had to go through a volume of a thousand pages in order to "find just one case from which to take the facts and rearrange them so as to be interesting" (qtd. in Weinberger xiii). Reznikoff seems to have appreciated the factual aspects of the courtroom testimonies: "what matter[ed] was the facts of the case, what the witness saw and heard, not the witness' feelings about, or interpretations of those facts" (qtd. in Weinberger xiii). This is an expression of his Objectivist ideal of poetry, which "presents the thing in order to convey the feeling" (Weinberger xiii). However, in *Testimony* and *Holocaust*, not only did Reznikoff carefully select and arrange the facts, but he extensively worked on the language of his texts, creating a cleverly hidden network of internal rhymes and assonances.

This is exactly what makes Reznikoff radically different from the most recent wave of conceptual writers. The author of *Testimony* was not interested in the local speech he found in the courtroom transcripts, but only in the dry facts that he artistically developed in his own way. Finally, the testimonies of nameless people

reveal a transcendental undertone and become the Jewish narrative of suffering without redemption—a contemporary version of the *Book of Job*. As far as formal aspects of the narratives are concerned, the original manuscripts of Reznikoff's works are covered with revisions, which proves that he still wrote his texts, that is creatively reconfigured their shape and content, following the aesthetic precepts of his favorite lyrics from the Greek Anthology or classical China (Weinberger xiv). The most recent conceptualists, on the other hand, do not bother with the literary quality of the works they produce. Rather, they aim at a direct presentation of language, in which the self-regard of the poet's ego is turned back onto the self-reflective language of the poem itself. As Craig Dworkin has it, "the test of poetry [is] no longer whether it could have been done better (the question of the workshop), but whether it could conceivably have been done otherwise" (qtd. in Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius* 17).

A good example of this approach is Goldsmith's *The Weather*, which collects weather forecasts from the New York-based news radio station 1010 WINS, broadcasted between 2002 and 2003, and orders them from winter to fall:

> 1. *Winter*
>
> A couple of breaks of sunshine over the next couple of hours, what little sunshine there is left. Remember, this is the shortest day of the year. Looks like the clear skies hold off till later on tonight. It will be brisk and cold, low temperatures will range from twenty-nine in some suburbs to thirty-eight in midtown. Not a bad shopping day tomorrow, sunshine to start, then increasing clouds, still breezy, with a high near fifty. Couple of showers around tomorrow night, er, tomorrow evening, into early tomorrow night, otherwise partly cloudy later on, low thirty. For Monday, windy and colder with sunshine, a few clouds, high forty-two. And then for, er, Christmas Eve, mostly sunny, but with a chilly wind, high near forty degrees. For Christmas itself, cloudy with a chance for rain or snow, high thirty-six. Forty-three degrees right now and cloudy, relative humidity is fifty-five percent in midtown. Repeating the current temperature forty-three going down to thirty-eight in midtown. (par. 1)

Goldsmith's manipulation lies in the fact that weather forecasts never occur in large numbers.. The idea that they could be stitched together in a narrative is exactly Goldsmith's writing machine—a very simple and effective one—transforming what originally served as a one-time informative statement into a series of vignettes with allegorical undertone. Indeed, all of the planning and decisions were made by the writer beforehand, and the process of execution—collecting the forecasts, transcribing, and organizing them in the right order—consisted of merely following the initially designed procedure. Thus, according to Perloff, *The Weather* is an example of what Antoine Compagnon calls *récriture*: the text represents two operations, the first of removal, which is often a "re"-gesture, such as reblogging or retweeting; the second of graft (*Unoriginal Genius* 3-4). Differently than in modern and postmodern

paradigms, the grafted text does not take its motive from Adorno's concept of *resistance* to culture industries—which was the main goal of Charles Reznikoff's sophisticated poetic technique—but it gives up the author's individualistic and expressionistic cast altogether. Effectively, an opposite model appears—a model of dialogue with texts in different genres and media—which is not based on "writing against" but on "writing through."

However, the works written in conceptual poetics, seemingly devoiced and devoid of expression, occasionally reveal that values are inseparable from any textual operations. On the other hand, the concept of avant-garde itself may imply an ethical bias, invisible for most audiences, since avant-garde art has always privileged educated, middle class artists and receivers, for whom KULTUR (in Perloff's original spelling) is an occupation and vocation, and who take advantage of their material and social status. All those matters are visible in Goldsmith's recent project, "The Body of Michael Brown" written in 2014, which follows the format of Goldsmith's previous book, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* from 2013, a transcription of news reports of American national disasters, such as the assassination of John F. Kennedy or the attacks of 9/11. The text rewrites the autopsy report issued by the St. Louis County Coroner's Office of Michael Brown, an African-American teenager who was shot and killed by a white police officer in Ferguson, Missouri, on August 9, 2014, touching off months of local protests that spread to many cities nationwide. These protests did not stop police violence flooding American cities, and similar incidents occurred hundreds of times in 2014 and 2015.[1]

As for Michael Brown's death, even after a grand jury hearing, its details remain unclear. 18-year-old Brown had either battered a police officer, or was inoffensively walking down the street, accompanied by a friend. Most witnesses claim he was unarmed, with his hands in the air, when the on-duty officer shot him more than eight times. Goldsmith's initial impulse was to pay a tribute to Michael Brown and sympathize with his loved ones. Appropriating a text produced by a government officer can be perceived as an act of civil disobedience or an attempt to call to order corrupted authority. Yet under the layer of public duties that Goldsmith's poem tries to perform and the literary traditions it evokes, it is a text, in its most basic sense, written by a white man about black man's dead body—the body that was mutilated beyond recognition by the white police officer, Darren Wilson, and then stripped bare and humiliated before the investing gaze of the white coroner, Wendell Payne.

Interestingly, "The Body of Michael Brown" was never published, either online, or as a paper document. Kenneth Goldsmith read the poem at the "Interrupt

1 According to Sam Sinyangwe, researcher and activist, who started the *Mapping Police Violence* project, in 2014, 1,149 people of all ethnic groups were killed by the police in the USA, more than a hundred of them unarmed; in 2015, statistics were almost identical: 102 unarmed black people were killed by the police. Moreover, only 10 cases resulted in officers' being charged with a crime, and two of these deaths resulted in convictions of officers involved.

3," a conference on digital arts at Brown University in Providence, Rhode Island, on March 13, 2015. Goldsmith's performance was available online for several days and then was removed from the university's website at the poet's request, which was announced on his Facebook page: "I'm requesting that Brown University not make public the recording of my performance of 'The Body of Michael Brown.' There's been too much pain for many people around this and I don't wish to cause any more. My speaker's fee from the Interrupt 3 event will be donated to the family of Michael Brown" (Rettberg). However, it seems that the poet made his decision too late, because he had already become the target of attacks from the media as well as black activists, and he started to receive death threats. One of them was publicized online: "sextus gillig: i want 2 organize large benefit reading… 10000 poets strong for the death of kenneth golsmith we wld take donations of weapons not $" (Rettberg).

In a period of few weeks, Goldsmith's name became notorious in the American literary world for his unpublished poem that he had read only once—the poem that everybody talked about although it was no longer available for the audience. Preparing this paper in July 2016, I could not find "The Body of Michael Brown" online, so I emailed Kenneth Goldsmith, who works as a professor at the University of Pennsylvania, asking him to send me the text for the purpose of academic analysis. This is the poet's reply: "Hi Pawel, Thanks for your email. Sadly, I cannot release the piece as I have been under death threats and danger since its presentation. It never was available online, nor has it ever been made public in any form. With apologies, Kenneth (*pers. comm.*)." Here, the poet slightly alters the past, since—as we already know—his poem was available online for some time, long enough to leave a trace in a number of publications, which discuss and quote it.

Rewriting Michael Brown's autopsy report, Goldsmith noticeably modifies the original text, and he does so against his own precepts, which he expressed in his collection of essays *Uncreative Writing*: "Once formal decisions are made, there are ethical issues to consider. If I truly 'appropriate' this work, then I must faithfully copy/write every word of [it]. No matter how tempted I might be to alter the words of disagreeable politician or film critic, I cannot do so without undermining the strict 'wholes' that appropriation trucks in" (loc. 2129). "The Body of Michael Brown" alters the text of coroner's autopsy report for poetic effect, replacing obscure medical terms with plain vocabulary, easily understandable for the reader. Moreover, the usage of short clauses exhibits a surprising formal elegance of the text. All in all, this strategy considerably increases the emotional load of Goldsmith's text:

> 'The deceased hands were bagged with paper bags to save any trace evidence.'
>
> 'The weapon discharged during the struggle.'
>
> 'The deceased mother was on the scene.'

> 'The deceased was properly conveyed to this facility for examination by Dr. Norfleet.'
>
> 'The deceased was cool to the touch.'
>
> 'Rigor mortis was slightly felt in his extremities."
>
> ….
>
> 'The hands are covered with brown paper bags' (qtd. after Morris 109-110).

These brief statements are designed to create a dramatic effect: the brief appearance of the "deceased mother" and the mentioning of the fact that his corpse was "cool to the touch" provoke the reader to visualize the scene in the mode of romantic tradition of Goya's and Delacroix's paintings. The original autopsy report, which was written by medical investigator Wendell Payne, employs a first-person perspective, and it contains many longer and rather clumsy statements. The text, which initially leaked to the *St. Louis Post Dispatch*, is available online:

> At 1330 hours I was contacted by Sergeant STEVENER DSN-2968, of the St. Louis County Police Department as he requested that I respond to 2949 Canfield for the Officer Involved shooting of Mr. MICHAEL BROWN, black male age of 18 years. The deceased mother was on the scene. The deceased was properly conveyed to this facility for examination by Dr. NORFLEET.
>
> The deceased was properly conveyed in a white body bag which was secured with U-line lock # 0867377.
>
> I arrived on the scene approximately 1430 hours which was located in the Canfield Apartments. There I was met by numerous officers of the St. Louis Police Department and they directed my attention to the deceased who was located in the middle of the roadway with his head pointed west and his feet east. The deceased had been covered with several white sheets.
>
> The deceased was lying in the prone position. His right arm was slightly extended away from his side. His left arm was next to his side his lower arm was beneath his abdomen and his hand was near the waist band of his shorts. He was clothed in a pair of yellow socks, tan shorts blue underwear and a gray t-shirt. The deceased shoes (flip flops) were west of the deceased lying in the roadway. A red baseball cap was near the police vehicle.
>
> The deceased was cool to the touch. Rigor mortis was slightly felt in his extremities.
>
> The deceased body sustained multiple gunshot wounds: three (3) wound WOUNDS? to his head, one wound was to the top of his head, right eye and right central forehead area. There were two (2) wounds to

> his chest, one wound to his upper right chest near his neck and the other was just right of his breast. Three (3) wounds to his right arm, one wound in his upper right arm, middle of the arm and one to his forearm. One (1) wound to the inside of his right hand near his thumb and palm.
>
> The decease had abrasions to the right side of his face and on the back of his left hand.
>
> The deceased hands were bagged with paper bags to save any trace evidence. ("Mike Brown Complete Autopsy Report")

In comparison with the original autopsy report, Goldsmith's text gets rid of all traces of agency, using passive sentence constructions. According to Daniel Morris, this technique diverts the reader's attention from the tremendous harm done to Michael Brown by the government officials in the last moments of his life (Morris 109). The next important change is that Goldsmith's description of Michael Brown's hands forms a separate paragraph ("The deceased hands were bagged with paper bags to save any trace evidence"). Interestingly, the image of the deceased hands in brown paper bags recurs for the second time in the present tense ("The hands are covered with brown paper bags"). As Morris points out, the hands are important, because they can serve as evidence confirming—or denying—Darren Wilson's narrative that a fight took place between him and Michael Brown, who tried to pull the officer's gun from the holster (Morris 110). Additionally, the repetition produces an uncanny atmosphere typical of the B-class horror movies and—together with the omission of the appellation "deceased"—gives the reader an impression that Brown's hands are chopped off from his corpse. This corresponds to Darren Wilson's grand jury testimony, describing Brown as a "daemon" and "Hulk Hogan," whom Wilson needed to put down with eight bullets (Sanburn).[2]

Finally, Brown's hands emerging from his grave serve as a literary trope, first bringing to mind John Keats's brief poem "The Living Hand," the last piece written by the great romantic before his death:

> This living hand, now warm and capable
> Of earnest grasping, would, if it were cold
> And in the icy silence of the tomb,
> So haunt thy days and chill thy dreaming nights
> That thou would wish thine own heart dry of blood
> So in my veins red life might stream again,
> And thou be conscience-calm'd—see here it is—
> I hold it towards you. (258)

2 Wilson perceived Brown as an embodiment of evil: "He was just staring at me, almost like to intimidate me or to overpower me.... When I grabbed him, the only way I can describe it is I felt like a five-year-old holding onto Hulk Hogan.... he looked up at me and had the most intense aggressive face. The only way I can describe it, it looks like a demon, that's how angry he looked" (Sanburn).

Like the hand in Keats's love poem, Brown's hands, once "warm and capable" and now cold and motionless, symbolize transitoriness of human life. On top of that, they are a promise of a future life, and they suggest a reunion of the speaker and the poem's addressee. The main difference between Keats's and Goldsmith's perspectives is that—if hands in general, like the Shakespearian "dyer's hand"—are the metonymy of a human being, then Brown's hands "bagged in paper bags" hide a mystery connected with his life and—first and foremost—his death.

However, the most significant difference between the autopsy and "The Body of Michael Brown" occurs at the end of Goldsmith's poem. The report ends with a comment about the histology examination: "Comment: the histology examination will be issued as a supplemental report" ("Mike Brown Complete Autopsy Report"). However, Goldsmith ends his text with a description of the deceased genitalia, which appears earlier in the original autopsy: "There is foreskin present near the head of the penis. The remaining male genitalia system is unremarkable" (qtd. after Morris 111). Obviously, the shocking sexists and racist overtone of this line comes from the double meaning of the adjective "unremarkable," which is used in the medical jargon, meaning "unchanged," and its colloquial sense is "unimpressive." In the white, racist gaze the black man's penis can be anything but "unremarkable." The adjective in the first meaning recurs in the autopsy report a number of times as medical investigator Payne persistently judges the "remarkability" or "unremarkability," "normality," or "abnormality" of various aspects of Brown's dead body, such as his inner organs, for example "unfixed brain," which is "essentially normal"; or his personal hygiene, which is "good," since "no unusual odor is detected" (qtd. after Morris 111). Thus the closing gesture of Goldsmith's text seems to emulate the evaluative character of the original autopsy, manifesting the same race-based fantasies that pushed Wilson to image Brown as a science-fiction monster figure that can hardly be put down by 8 bullets.

The catalog of body parts has one more meaning that slumbers deep in the subconscious of black-white people relationships, and its connected with eugenicist practice of dismemberment performed for the sake of revealing pseudoscientific truth about the hideousness and inferiority of the black body. As Joey De Jesus observes, Michael Brown, being dismembered by Goldsmith, inevitably reminds the reader of Sarah "Saartjie" Baartman, the South African, Hottentot Venus, who was exhibited in circuses, first in London and then in Paris, as a missing link between animals and human beings (De Jesus). After her death in 1815, Baartman's body was bought by Georges Cuvier, professor of comparative anatomy at the Museum of Natural History in Paris. Cuvier dissected her body and displayed her remains. For more than a century and a half, visitors to the Museum of Man in Paris could view her brain, skeleton and genitalia as well as a plaster cast of her body. Her remains were returned to South Africa in 2002 and she was buried in the Eastern Cape on South Africa's Women's Day.

What Kenneth Goldsmith fails to achieve in "The Body of Michael Brown"—and what was the greatest asset of his previous projects—is an artistically convincing

recontextualization of his source material. According to Jonathon Sturgeon, this process relies on "metanoia" defined by William James as the changing of mind that comes with a shifting context (Sturgeon). In *The Weather*, the gargantuan accumulation of the weather forecasts produces a surprising effect of the sublime emerging from linguistic flotsam and jetsam, which enables the reader to see our planet as a Shelleyan scene for fighting elements. "The Body of Michael Brown," contrarily, does not defamiliarize the autopsy and does not shift it to a new literary context, revealing its new dimensions. As Surgeon has it, "the document doesn't escape white appropriation or find salvation under the blessed light of the literary" and instead is "plunged back into whiteness," which is Goldsmith's own whiteness and the whiteness of an elite academic institution that invited the poet (Sturgeon).

The problem with the new conceptual art practice is that it often disregards the ethical dimension of creation, which Charles Altieri defines as "not a matter of what things mean, but of who we become in our dealings with those meanings or efforts to mean" (641). For Goldsmith, ethical issues in art are limited to the question of "faithful" copying/rewriting, regardless of the fact that an appropriated text always reflects editorial manipulation and politics behind it (loc. 2129). Goldsmith thinks of himself as a daring disciple of Duchamp, but he fails to understand that his text propagates racist violence, performing anew the autopsy's latent, institutional racism. The artist Faith Holland, who attended Goldsmith's reading, wrote on Twitter: "Just saw Kenneth Goldsmith read Michael Brown's autopsy report for 30 minutes and no one knew wtf to do with that" (Flood). Author of *Bad Feminist*, essayist Roxane Gay, called Goldsmith's poem "tacky" on Twitter, highlighting "the audacity of reading an autopsy report and calling it poetry" (Flood). The writer and professor tweeted: "Kenneth Goldsmith has reached new racist lows yet elite institutions continue to pay him guest speaker fees" (Flood).

Very soon more severe criticism of Goldsmith's performance came from activists and radical writers. Editor of online arts magazine *Queen's Mob*, P. E. Garcia, observes:

> For Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body—his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies—is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the 'contextualization' of this work… He should accept the pain his audience felt. He should accept that we might look at him and only see another white man holding the corpse of a black child saying, 'Look at what I've made.' (Garcia)

Garcia pins down the white avant-garde artist's unwillingness—or inability—to take into account his own whiteness: any treatment of a black body by a white person—especially of an innocent black murder victim—inevitably replicates a violent history of privatized black bodies. In his poem, Goldsmith reinscribes and thus reinforces

this history. As a result, in Jonathon Sturgeon parlance, "a poem meant to illuminate racism ended up performing it" (*Flavorwire*).

In her "Delusions of Whiteness in the Avant-Garde," Cathy Park Hong aptly observes that artistic avant-garde's attitude towards race has been no different than that of mainstream institutions, which prefer their artists to create sterile, accessible works on family and origin rather than make sweeping institutional critiques (Hong). Hong defines the avant-gardes delusion of whiteness as the "luxurious opinion that anyone can be 'post-identity' and can casually slip in and out of identities like a video game avatar, when there are those who are consistently harassed, survielled, profiled, or deported for whom they are" (Hong). Renouncing subject and voice is no more anti-authoritarian than any artistic procedure, and the disenfranchised may actually still need such bourgeois ornaments like *voice* to alter conditions of their existence. Thus, as De Jesus concludes, conceptualism may be a new form of cultural dominance, because its relationship to "found text" cannot be separated from the "colonial impulse to claim" (De Jesus). The conceptual artist conflates accessibility with entitlement and his or her dependence on appropriation resembles exploitation of raw materials. More importantly, since the text as material is readily available at any moment, one is entitled to it regardless of how that text came into existence, which means that "nothing we express can be ours—not our suffering, not our power" (De Jesus).

We should have a look at the conceptual artistic procedures yet from another perspective. In his recent works, Jacques Rancière touches on the complex relationship between the ethical and aesthetical spheres of the work of art. In "The Aesthetic Dimension: Aesthetics, Politics, Knowledge," Rancière reminds us that the *ethical* is best understood in the original sense of *ethos*, which originally had meant abode before it started to mean "the way of being that suits an abode" (3). Conceptual poetry—decontextualized and dependent on technology—has no "abode" in acts of communication between selves, whose existence it negates. This type of poetry simply does not belong to a sphere of experience as a "faculty possessed in common by all those who belong to a location" (4). According to the French philosopher, such a decline in ethics is the problem with all "mechanical" arts—including photography and film—which are most often recognized as "techniques of reproduction or transmission" and perceived as "anonymous" (48).

It seems that Kenneth Goldsmith's "The Death of Michael Brown" surprisingly reveals limits of literary conceptualism. Rather than an innovative mode of culture production, conceptual poetry is the result of recent capitalism, instilling in people the need to consume the texts that surround them, especially on the Internet. Consequently, conceptual poetry excludes those of us who do not have the luxury to abandon our identity, because, as Hong has it, "even in [conceptualists'] best effort in erasure, in complete transcription, in total paratactic scrambling, there is always a subject—and beyond that, the specter of the author's visage—and that specter is never, no matter how vigorous the erasure, raceless" (Hong). Moreover, conceptualism

seems to represent the category of artistic creation that Jacques Rancière calls the arts of mechanical reproduction, rooted in the aesthetic logic of visibility and privileging landscapes of grandeur. Thus, it reflects no ethos and is prone to manipulation, which is clear in Goldsmith's poem.

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