

## Anonymous Poet interview

KG: You used to be active in the social world of poetry, but you've kind of dropped out of it more recently. As a result you don't know about the latest crises, etc. And I was surprised the other day when we got together and you didn't know anything about the recent explosion of anger towards Kenny Goldsmith for reading Michael Brown's autopsy report at a conference at Brown University, and you hadn't even heard of the Mongrel Coalition Against Conceptualism. So I tried to explain it to you, but now it seems you've gone off and caught up on the whole affair, and have some things to say about it based on your own background in critical theory and Marxism in particular. So one thing you mentioned that I found interesting concerns the widespread claim that conceptualism as a practice, or set of practices, is inherently "colonizing."

Anon.: The words "colonize" and "colonial" as they're being used in this context are remarkably vague. I think I understand what people are reaching for, when they use these words -- and I'll get to that in a minute, because what they're reaching for is a big concept with long history -- but the word "colonizing" itself is unfortunate. And it's particularly unfortunate because it brings a racializing element into the discussion that, in general, actually has no place there. After all, when we talk about colonialism in the west, what we're talking about is the history of white imperial powers taking the land and the resources and labor, and even the lives and bodies of black and brown people. So if we refer to conceptualism as "colonial," right away what we're implying is that it's a practice of domination by force, and that it's specifically a practice of white domination over people of color. We can discuss either of these points, but I'd say right at the outset that I find it very difficult to connect that second point to conceptualism, to the actual body of work called "conceptual writing." I just don't, for example, see a great deal of appropriation of black and brown voices in Goldsmith's work -- and if anything, I'd say quite the opposite. When he has dealt with voices other than his own, he's typically focused on the blandest, most contrived forms of official discourse. So it might make us feel good, and feel righteous, to use the word "colonialism" -- who's not gonna feel good denouncing racist violence? -- but you have to be careful to describe the objects of your criticism accurately, if really you want to figure out what's going on.

KG: So what do you think about the Goldsmith performance, how would you characterize the problem there?

Anon.: I do think there are serious problems there, but I think we have to start by backing up and considering the trajectory of Goldsmith's work. I understand that there's a lot of indignation about that performance, and people have a right to their feelings -- but it would be easy to take those feelings of indignation, and take Goldsmith's reading of the Michael Brown autopsy as the sum total of his work, and paint it out with a broad brush over conceptual writers and conceptual writing, and end up with a pretty flimsy denunciation that's really, in the end, just a flash of anger. That seems to be the route many people are taking right now. And the problem isn't the anger, not at all -- the problem is the flimsiness.

KG: So how do you make it less flimsy?

Anon.: Well, you have to read the work. So here's Goldsmith in a nutshell. He finds his practice in this gesture taken from Andy Warhol, which is Warhol drawing images from the media, and other parts of the culture industry too, and putting them through what was at the time a very marginal art practice -- silk screening, which he borrowed directly from commercial art -- and transposing them into the gallery that way. Actually, David Antin wrote a very interesting review of a Warhol show back in the mid-sixties ["The Silver Tenement," 1966] that describes this process perfectly, and Antin points out a number of things which I think have a direct bearing on Goldsmith's work too. But the big one's probably this: that Warhol isn't just stealing an image from somewhere and running off to the bank with it, he's actually producing a series of images of images. And Antin sort of gives this lineage of one image -- what we'd call one image -- using the Jackie O silkscreens: first there's the light reflected off her face, which somebody captures on film as a negative; then the negative is printed on photographic paper, so it's a positive -- that's two images already; and the photograph is engraved on a printing plate -- it's the sixties -- and that's three images, and so on and so forth. Antin does a much better job of enumerating them than I can. And of course there's a whole series of other images that go into the production of the Warhol silkscreen: making a transparency, making screen and so forth. And at every stage, the picture of Jackie O degrades and gets distorted and there's wear and mess, and many hands are laid on it, and Warhol's a sloppy printer and his crew is totally stoned, and that's what you see when you look at a Warhol...

KG: So it's emphasizing the transfer between media over the image itself.

Anon.: Exactly. You see Jackie O, but you don't see Jacqueline Kennedy Onassis. What you see is just a sliver of the process of constructing a media icon, which is totally invisible if you're reading the newspaper because you're just looking for the news -- but now it's been picked up and carried way too far by the artist, he's gotten carried away with it -- and that puts it into the gallery where it's absolutely visible, and someone like David Antin will see it and encounter it and think about it and say something about it. And that's the core of Warhol's practice for Antin. And Antin's attention is scrupulous, so he'll talk about labor and talk about media and celebrity, instead of focusing just on Warhol, and that's where the process gets interesting -- what happens when you're confronted with this image, this image palimpsest, what you can see and what you're able to do with it, what it allows you to think and do and say. But only Warhol can put you there, that's his work. And Goldsmith's work is rooted there too. Starting with No. 111, over and over you see this process of moving between media, of making this palimpsest of different sources fed thru different processes of translation and transposition, sloppy or precise or weird, in order to get to the book itself and even get past it. So No. 111 is sourced from the early web using search engines, but the searches are governed by a syllabic constraint, so what they produce is this sort of granular, scraped out bit-language that slowly gets more coherent as the book goes on. And you have Soliloquy, where Goldsmith records all his conversations for a week -- using a portable cassette player, I think -- it's the mid-nineties -- and then transcribes only his side of the conversations, and it's this kind of novel that's also kind of a boorish monolith. Down the road you get The Weather, where he records these minute-long weather bulletins from 1010 WINS every day for a year, and then makes an audio collage of out the recordings, and that

becomes the New Year's Eve/New Year's Day broadcasts on his radio show on WFMU; then he has the radio show itself transcribed, and that becomes the manuscript and that becomes the book, and then he does a studio recording of himself reading the book, and somebody does a web version, and so on. Oh and the transcription includes all the uhs and ohs of the first announcer, so it's over-precise, and that gets baked into the book and into Goldsmith's recording, so there's surface distortion there.

KG: Ok but there are people for whom this argument is really important, people who are upset about what Goldsmith has done with the Michael Brown autopsy report, and who would not get past this Warholian influence. Many people hate Warhol for the exploitation of labor and accrual of social capital they see there.

Anon.: Right. So there are actually two issues there. The more serious one I still want to hold off on, which is the issue of appropriation as a form of expropriation, in effect, the capitalization of other people's property and resources. But in terms of the labor argument -- Warhol's exploitation of the people who worked in the Factory, which is also one of the criticisms leveled at Goldsmith -- that criticism comes around when people want to say there's an extraction of value from the work that other people have put into the art. "This is not yours, we made it together, but only you got paid." And this is partly an application of Marx's labor theory of value, which says in essence -- I'm using some pretty drastic shorthand here -- that profit is the difference between the value the worker brings to production, the actual worth of her labor, and the compensation the worker receives, in other words, her wages. Marx's argument is basically that because the capitalist owns the factory, and the worker only owns her labor -- that's all she has to sell -- the capitalist can use this position to cheat the worker out of the true value of the work. That's what profit is, according to Marx. Because Warhol owns The Factory, because Warhol has the connections, he profits, and you're left out in the cold even if you did pull the squeegee. Of course he should have paid you -- which he didn't -- but even if he paid you a wage, that was still a cheat for Marx. Ok. Now when I've heard people try to approach Goldsmith's work from this perspective, inevitably what happens is, they begin with an address to the supposed content of the work -- the image -- the language he's shifting from one place to another -- the image of the language -- and then quickly fall back to talking about the production of the work, which is usually about who really did the typing and transcription. The first approach -- to the expropriation of language -- doesn't really fit with the labor theory of value, there's a confusion of categories here and, again, we have to go elsewhere in Marx to get a handle on this problem, which I want to do later. So now the critique is stymied and the critic falls back and says something like "But he didn't really type that, you know." And I'm sure that's absolutely true. You do your own transcription, so you know -- you transcribed the recordings in your first book, you're gonna transcribe this interview and so on -- so you know how hard that is. And I'm sure Goldsmith's critics are right: he pays somebody else to do it. I mean, I haven't asked him, but I'm willing to take this step with his critics: either he pays someone to do the transcriptions or he uses an intern, who's getting paid in some ineffable currency like course credit. Well, that's terrible. But the question is, does this put Goldsmith in a unique position -- as an exploiter, as a capitalist, as a factory owner. Can we run him out of town yet? And immediately what comes to mind, for me, is how much the production of literature involves labor exploitation. I mean, let

me ask a serious question: If we value the twentieth-century novel, do we have to pretend that all of the novelists of the twentieth century did their own typing? Should we refuse to read Henry James because he dictated his manuscripts? If the answer is yes, then we can definitely nail Goldsmith for hiring a transcription service...

KG: Well, some people would like to tear down all of Western Literature because they see it as largely securing itself on exploitative capitalist practices...

Anon.: But I think "destroy Western Literature" is usually an argument about the whiteness of literature, not about labor. At least, I haven't really heard anyone suggest that. Who knows, maybe that's what I'm suggesting right now. All I can say is that, with regard to Goldsmith, if we're going to argue about the exploitation of the worker in the production of his work, and we can't find a way to say he's extraordinary, he's willfully bad, he's worse -- then we need to talk about all the means of production engaged in literature. Period. Because the production of literature -- writing, editing, publishing -- is going to involve the exploitation of labor. And that's because we live in a world dominated by capital, by the circulation of capital for the benefit of the few. Literary writing is not just going to magically split itself off from the economy and revolutionize. We live and work in these constraints. And I can tell you with total certainty that your books are not being printed by minimum wage workers. I know something about the printing industry. Your books are not being printed by a liberated worker in a printing co-op, your books are being printed in Southeast Asia or in the Global South, where labor costs are being held to a minimum, sometimes at gunpoint, or they're being jobbed out to other places where OSHA doesn't exist and labor is cheaper than FEDEX. So let's not pretend poetry is innocent because you typed it yourself. If it's printed in a book, there's some kind of wage slavery involved already. If you gave a reading, somebody probably didn't get paid to set up the mic. If you copied a zine, somebody was there at the counter standing all day. The reading series or the press or the gallery or the library or the studio has an intern.

KG: No one comes out unscathed.

Anon.: Not about this. Not without deeply radicalizing their life, not just their opinions. So if all we can say is Goldsmith paid somebody, we just don't have that much to go on. But I wanna get back to this idea, this observation, that Goldsmith's work is based in this practice of shifting between media. Because this is part of what really does make his presentation of the Michael Brown autopsy report a problem. And here's the problem: Goldsmith's work has mostly engaged the banal. His signature has been banality from the very beginning. The jumbled discourse of No. 111, and the little glimpses of story and forum and blog that it grows into. Soliloquy -- I mean, what could be more banal than a one-sided conversation that goes on for 300 pages? A year of old weather reports. Boring is his claim, boring is his style -- his work is totally built on emptiness, because that's what makes the work shocking, and because that's what makes the production values and the formal qualities visible, that's what makes the movement between media and setting in a sense thematic. But then at a certain point in his trajectory, Goldsmith changes that. So you can imagine him thinking: Where does it go from here? How can I use the tools I have and do something different? Maybe even: How can I use the publicity to become a public

poet? How can I comment on my publicness? I'm guessing. Anyway that's when you begin to see things like the Benjamin work ["Capital"] and Seven American Deaths and Disasters. And the banality is gone, the boring is over -- something's there that just can't possibly be nothing. So when the New York Times writes about Seven American Deaths and Disasters, the headline reads "The Words We Heard As Horrors Sank In." We are very far from banality at this point. You can say they missed the point -- but did they? Compare this work to Day, which is just a deformed transcription of the Times on a day when essentially nothing happened. The new book is like a Phantasmagoria of Huge American Significance. There's a tremendous break there.

KG: Well in his Facebook explanation of the controversy, Goldsmith said he wanted this piece to be read as an American Death and Disaster.

Anon.: Right, it's part of his attempt to operate in a mode of things that are significant, after building a body of work that made him quite well-known for banality. Personally I think that's an unfortunate shift. I don't think that shift works. Part of the charge of a book like *The Weather* is that it purports to have nothing significant in it, but then significance enters thru the side door. The invasion of Iraq interrupts, and the transcription of the actual speech in the weather reports becomes visible, stuff like that. The book becomes a pastoral poem. You begin to reflect on the difference between seasonal almanacs and the twentieth-century apparatus of weather prediction, on the radio as a voice of authority, on the continual division of experience into smaller and smaller moments. But you only find those things through exploring in the book. The book has no thesis and, ostensibly, no content. It has nothing to say. A book that's about nothing -- that's the only way to make a book about everything. The recent work is 180-degree turn from there. The content towers over the method. It can't not be significant. It's funny because, to me, that's the one you actually might not have to read. Goldsmith likes to say his work isn't meant to be read, but I've always disagreed with that. I think reading those old boring works is extremely interesting.

KG: That's one of the funny things, isn't it. Many many people who write negatively about conceptualism quote or hang onto that statement about the work not being meant to be read. But I find that many of the people who produce work, so-called conceptualist or post-conceptualist work, which has just taken on such a wide berth recently -- the people producing that work often do read those books, and do not agree with what Goldsmith says about his own work, or the kind of work it's given rise to. So-called conceptualists in my experience seem to disagree with about 98% of what Goldsmith says. What he says isn't actually a relevant tool for analyzing the work of others supposedly operating in a field he helped to clear. One of the things I find really worrisome, just as an intellectual who enjoys a solid analysis, it really freaks me out how many people spend a lot of time writing about why they hate all of conceptualism, but they do it all thru one or two Goldsmith quotes, to the exclusion of actually reading any work. I mean, if you want to invest in making a critique of something, you have to actually read the work and make a genuine effort to understand its history. A take-down cannot hold if it's just based on a couple of bad quotes and your dislike of an author's personality. We have some folks out there doing no reading, or doing very minimal and sloppy reading, picking up something

and only reading long enough to find their ideology confirmed. I'm sorry, but if you want to really make a critique you have to learn about the object of your critique. And for me, just as a poetry community participant and lover of the idea of community, I am truly embarrassed when I see how many bad readers we have out there. What's actually happening with conceptualism, there is no consensus about these practices, neither among practitioners or truly engaged critics. It's more like just an explosion of experimentation.

Anon.: I find it problematic how much emphasis gets put on the ease of production in this kind of work, and I think that's a big factor in its reception. Goldsmith makes a point of this ease when he talks about his work, and in his public performance, very deliberately, but I'm surprised at how willing people are to take him at his word. It's an illusion.

KG: It's flippant and seems designed to go directly after core assumptions about poetry. But we need to get back to the Michael Brown autopsy report question.

Anon.: Ok. So if we want to give it the most sympathetic reading, we can say that the performance comes as part of the recent shift in Goldsmith's work. In that case, I'd argue that Goldsmith actually set up the problem himself and then walked into it -- he's miscalculated, but there's no malice. It's messy, it's unfortunate. It's a mistake. Certainly not the first or the worst mistake anybody's ever made. Certainly not a mistake that deserves the harassment he's been subjected to. But if we want to give it the least sympathetic reading, we can say it's an attempt at gaining political significance for the author -- it's an illegitimate bid for political relevance.

KG: Using the dead black male body as its material.

Anon.: Yes. And that's grave. That's stark. That's serious. That's the reading I think, let's say the most vocal people are giving it. And it's just not an informed reading. But I think you mentioned another take the other day when we were talking about this...

KG: It came up in Facebook conversations. About the fact that Goldsmith is Jewish, whether that should complicate how we imagine him authoring this performance. Lawrence Giffin referred to it in passing as part of a long, smart post, and Michelle Taransky-Kleinman asked about it directly, trying to get some engagement on the question. And there were people taking part in Michelle's conversation who seemed to have already been thinking this, but I don't know them. Essentially, some people were asking if Goldsmith's Jewishness might open up a way of imagining that he, the author, would certainly look at such a document with feelings, empathy, and awareness of otherness -- that in fact, because of his Jewish identity, he could recognize such a document as comparable to documentation in the death camps of the Holocaust, where murder was bureaucratized -- how the state apparatus keeps death and murder at arm's length, how it sanitizes what is actually cruel and unthinkable. It was hard to even get that discussion to happen because, for certain characters, anything that might bring understanding to the situation of the perpetrator was not allowed, it was inadmissible. But I thought it was an interesting question. I think the moment we begin to speculate about the author's motivations -- like the consensus among Goldsmith's detractors saying he did it for his career -- if we are

going to allow that, then we have to entertain all the other questions about possible motivations, not just the ones we find obvious to ourselves. I find the speculation on motives ridiculous, truth be told. I'd rather talk about the work, and that can include the performance, the identity of the reader, the Ivy League context, sure. But we need to stop pretending we can know an artists real motivations.

Anon.: That hadn't occurred to me, the thing about bureaucratization in the camps, but it does help us to think about the work differently.

KG: Sure. And likewise, I don't want to shut down the people who are upset, and give them space to express that, even if imperfectly. If that many people are that beside themselves, then something is wrong, and it's worth looking at it. But I guess I want us to try and answer each other's questions more, or admit when we haven't read enough of one kind of thing to really say anything helpful about it.

Anon.: Part of the problem being revealed here, then, is that people aren't reading what they criticize. They're lobbing bombs based on distant, received ideas of other people's practice. And this often happens, especially where people feel themselves to be exercising a politics through poetry -- they get to feel anger, or feel right, or feel wronged, or otherwise find confirmation of their own views -- and that has been a continual problem in every poetry war, from the Raw and the Cooked to the Language-Lyric divide. People argue right past each other. And as a result, there's an actual lack of analysis. They're not being good materialists. They're having political feelings and expressing them in the terms of analysis, without using the tools of analysis. They're not looking at things in detail.

KG: It may be another thread, too large to enter into here, but I feel like people's trouble reading is a big part of why they hate conceptualism. I find people keep reading everything at face value, some otherwise really smart people seem to read anything you put in your poem as suddenly you, the author, making or supporting it as a claim. People thought Josef Kaplan's Kill List was a sincere call for violence against certain poets and a true deeply researched attempt to out who has money and who doesn't, and once I heard someone criticize Chris Alexander's Panda because it contains phrases referring to the panda as fat and lazy -- like once you reproduce something, then you are SAYING it. Anyone who reads that way, that's just shitty reading skills. At this point in history, as poets, our relationship to text has to be more complicated than that. How are poets in this supposedly super-smart, post-postmodern, experimental whatever poetry community mostly still taking what they read in a poem at face value? We haven't learned that art transforms it's materials? And now I'm seeing many poets reading books and situations mostly to find confirmation of their already-held beliefs? That's not reading, that's not thinking. That's a pretty sad level of engagement. And that's what "against expression" has come to mean for me--it's not saying no one shld express themselves, it's saying stop reading everything as if it can only be purely expressive.

Anon.: I hear that. So let me connect this back to the main question. As someone who's done a fair amount of of work studying critical theory and Marx, it's not just that people aren't reading carefully -- it's also that they don't understand the tools or traditions they've been exposed to -- for reading or for writing. People who think of

themselves as engaging in a vaguely left-leaning, vaguely Marxian-socialist politics in their poetry, sometimes they really just don't know the tradition they're supposed to be drawing from. They don't know the tools. I mean, I don't mean to be harsh, but feelings and opinions all by themselves just don't make you political, they don't make you a leftist. Feeling wronged, feeling cheated -- that's a start. You are wronged, you are, you have totally been cheated. The earth is in ruins and your life has been taken away -- it is being stolen, every day, right out from under you, you're forced to hand it over, and you should be pissed. Totally pissed. That's a start. But how? By who? By what mechanisms? That's really getting somewhere. And for that you need some tools, and you really, really need to know how to use them. And if you have time to write left-leaning poetry, you have the time and the education and the luxury to acquire the tools.

So if we go back to this word "colonial," for example. I think here what people are trying to point to is a practice that's associated with colonialism, something Marx calls "primitive accumulation." Now, this is an important concept. Marx comes up with this concept because he needs to describe how pre-capitalist forms of production are forced into capitalism. And the reason Marx needs to do this is because there are these liberal economists, like Adam Smith, who keep describing the magical peaceful emergence of capitalism as kind of an inevitable concord between people freely choosing their own paths in the world. It's like the gradual opening up of a flower, just naturally, easily coming into being: some people choose to specialize in certain things, maybe selling things, and gradually, eventually they do only that, they specialize, and that's how the merchant class appears, and they start to own things and so on and so forth. One day you wake up and feudalism is over and it's all good, it's bliss. So Marx has to step up and say, no, this process involved significant acts of violence. And that violence mostly took the form of "primitive accumulation." So the classic example, the one Marx gives, is the Enclosure Acts -- acts of the English parliament that happened from the 16th century on. Before then, much of the English countryside was held in common -- there was pasturage that was commonly owned, it was sometimes called "waste land," and so if you didn't own any land but you were raising cattle, you could let your cattle graze on the common land, the waste land, because it didn't belong to anyone. And I mean that: it just wasn't private property. No one owned it. It wasn't part of the system of deeds and estates. Imagine that. But then, there was this tremendous act of parliamentary violence -- organized violence, legal violence -- that allowed this common land to be claimed by anyone who could afford to do it. Obviously that was gonna be the people who already owned a lot of land. So walls and fences started going up, and they continued going up for about three hundred years while the common slice got thinner and thinner and finally disappeared. And this is part of what forced people off the land and into the industrial system, and into the employ of the land-owners who'd seized the commons too. It's how we get from peasant farmers to modern agriculture and the industrial revolution.

So for Marx, this concept describes something that's in the past -- it's over, that's how feudalism ended. But Rosa Luxemburg comes along, and she says, no, that's not a thing of the past, it's inherent to capitalism. It's not just transitional. And where you find it most obviously is in the colonies -- it's one of the mechanisms of colonialism. Organized powers go into other parts of world with military force, and they take the resources and the labor and the bodies of the people who live there, they seize them

and forcibly integrate them into the capitalist system. They impose a system of property relations -- but whoops it's their property now. They force people into wage labor -- they force them to sell their labor on the market, in order to survive. They enslave them, and make commodities of the people themselves, and ship them around the world for sale. And it's the deepest, most horrifying kind of theft -- the theft of lives, and of whole ways of life. So in a sense colonialism was for global capital what the enclosure acts were for domestic capital in England: the end of alternatives, the closing of the circle, the disappearance of the outside. And of course racism has an enormous part to play in it -- not just because the imperial powers are white and their victims are usually people of color, but because the imperial powers cultivate racism as a tool, they invent it and they invent all kinds of ways to use it. So that's where I see the word "colonial" appear in the criticism of conceptualism, by the way -- not because anyone's reading Rosa Luxemburg out there, but because there's a kind of fuzzy received knowledge about colonialism.

David Harvey comes along. He's a geographer and a Marxist, he thinks a lot about the distribution of land and resources, and he's trying to describe the form of capitalism we live under right now, neoliberal capitalism or what we usually just call neoliberalism. And Harvey says, ok "primitive accumulation" is still with us, and in fact it has expanded greatly, it's taken all sorts of wild, terrifying new forms that dominate our world. It's like fucking Biollante now. And it's expanded so much that now it's one of the two major sources of value in the system -- it rivals the exploitation of labor, which was Marx's biggest concern. And Harvey gives it a new name, to match its new stature: "accumulation by dispossession." There are four means of accumulation by dispossession, he says -- but let's just take up one, here, the most familiar one, privatization. Now this is very similar to the Enclosure Acts and to primitive accumulation in the colonies, but it happens everywhere now, and at all different scales. Privatization: You take a resource that once was common or public property, and you make it into private property. The most famous case of this is the privatization of water rights in Bolivia in around 1998, when the World Bank forced the Bolivian government to turn the country's water over to Bechtel and others. The whole water supply. One day the water was just the water, managed by the government as a public resource for the good of everyone, but the next day, it was a commodity, it was for sale on a profit basis. Obviously prices rose. The poverty rate also went up by about 2%, which is a lot. People couldn't afford to buy water. There was trouble in the streets -- the Bolivian people organized and fought, and the World Bank had to step off. They went back to a public water utility, and I think eventually even to smaller regional authorities. But most acts of privatization are way less spectacular than that, and in the US they're not even usually resisted. Just for example, little parts of the island of Manhattan have been being quietly privatized as "privately owned public space" for decades now. It's all over the city: little business plazas that are supposed to let the public in and they do, sometimes, but they have their own hours and their own rules and their own private security. Most people don't even know that's happening.

Ok just -- I know this is a lot -- I'll just mention the other forms of "accumulation by dispossession," these are the other horsemen: financialization, managed crises, and state redistribution. Think of corporations pilfering from their pension funds, think of the housing bubble as a way of separating homeowners from their property by

malfeasance, think of your taxes going to Halliburton as partners in the War on Terror -- that's it. Now what all of these things have in common -- from Marx and Luxemburg to Harvey's enormous, horrid "accumulation by dispossession" -- is that they all involve the expropriation of actual resources. Something that was autonomous to the circulation of capital is forced into the circulation of capital -- and you can no longer have access to it except through capital. Somebody's taking something you own, or that nobody owned, and liquidating it -- basically turning it into money. It's gone now. It's lost. You have to buy it back. That's why it's called "accumulation by dispossession": someone takes something away from you, and you no longer have it. It has been dispossessed. It is no longer in your possession. If you have cash, maybe we can work something out.

KG: Alright so how do you bring this around to conceptualism?

Anon.: Well I can see why people sense, instinctively, that conceptualism works this way too. Isn't this just appropriation? Isn't appropriation just like that? And really most people, when they're talking about conceptualism, they're only talking about appropriation -- even though conceptualism includes lots and lots of other work. That's why "conceptualism is colonial." Somebody is just going out there and scooping up a bunch of text and saying, look this is my work. How is that not accumulation by dispossession? And I agree, there's a resemblance there. I'd even say this resemblance is part of what makes conceptualism seem disturbing and also part of what makes it seem contemporary. It's one of the things, there are lots of them, that make conceptualism sort of creepy and awful too -- which, I guess it's obvious, I like and find interesting, because they do bear thinking about. But then they really do bear thinking about. Which is harder than making polemics.

I think this resemblance between appropriation and privatization, or accumulation by dispossession, or "colonialism" if you must -- but please don't -- I think it's a resemblance. They look alike, but they're not the same. You may not like conceptualism, it may creep you the fuck out, it may be a symbol of all that's bad in the world for you today -- but you can't really accurately call it "colonial." And here's why: It just becomes extremely difficult, when people want to be critical of these works in these terms, to say precisely what's been taken away from who. What was expropriated? What exactly has been liquidated? What do you no longer have, that you once owned? What must you now buy back, if you want it back? The Bolivians had to buy back their own water. The homeowners lost their homes. The workers lost their pensions. We lost our tax dollars to Blackwater and Halliburton. Things were lost to us. They were turned into capital, they were liquidated, and they disappeared from our hands. Who lost what to Seven American Deaths and Disasters? Who lost what to The Weather? If someone can show me the answer to these questions, in the actual terms of political economy and not just in the voice of outrage, I'd actually be very grateful, and that's not a joke. But as far as I can tell, and I've thought about this, appropriation is just not a form of expropriation at all.

KG: Well how do people make the connection then? And what about cultural capital, how does that fit in?

Anon.: So people hear about privatization, and they see Kenny Goldsmith's work,

and they think Aha! But how do they get from duplicated text to value? Where is capital in all of this? The answer is, they go to "cultural capital." Now cultural capital is also a specific concept. It was invented by Pierre Bourdieu, and popularized in his book *The Field of Cultural Production*, and also by John Guillory back during the canon debate in the early nineties -- I can say these things because secretly I'm quite ancient. So people hear about privatization, and they hear about appropriation, and they hear cultural capital -- and they intuit this means something like prestige -- and they put them all together and say Aha! Kenny Goldsmith is generating cultural capital for himself by stealing from other people. Ok. Now the problem is that cultural capital is not the same thing as capital per se. It does not obey the laws of the movement of capital. It is not a concept from political economy. It's a sociological metaphor. As a concept in Bourdieu's sociology, it has its own laws -- I mean, having outlined the concept, Bourdieu spends a lot of time trying to define the laws that govern cultural capital. That's what his sociology is. If it operated according to the laws of capital, he could just defer to Marx and save himself a ton of work, right? Now, if you read Bourdieu, and you know Marx, right away you'll see that the more concrete Bourdieu gets in his sociology, the farther he gets from Marx. For example, the concept of the "field of cultural production" -- that's important enough to be the title of the book. But there's no concept like that in Marx. That isn't a part of Marx. Interestingly, it might have some explanatory power when we think about appropriation, it might allow us to say that part of what's happening is that text is being drawn from one field of cultural production -- advertising, say -- and poured into another -- art -- and that part of the shock of appropriation is this sense of dislocation, this where-am-I-and-what-am-I-looking-at, how-do-I-read-it feeling. Maybe you could say that -- I'm not much inspired by Bourdieu, myself. But even within Bourdieu's very Marx-inspired account, that wouldn't be a bad thing, it wouldn't register as exploitation or expropriation. It might seem -- maybe bourgeois, or something, but so would most of American poetry, I'm sure.

KG: I would add two things. Does appropriating something mean it's no longer there for anyone else, and also what is being gained by the person who's doing the appropriating? Ok so Goldsmith gets to go to the White House and be on the Colbert Report. But if that's all, that's actually not much. I mean people like to say it gets him a job, but he is actually a part-time, contingent professor with no health insurance. Almost nobody I know doing conceptual work has a tenure track job, and the couple that do are not in that position because of their creative work. We have a lot of part time contingent laborers out there. In terms of rewards, maybe Vanessa Place got her airfare paid when she went to Paris, and for the record I have never been to Paris, so I can admit some jealousy there, but I don't feel like she stole my ability to eat. There is no enclosure. Furthermore, anything she has appropriated is still there to be appropriated and used differently, it hasn't been closed off to anyone else. And even if someone was straight up getting famous off someone else's entire real poems, that would be easily traceable because the source would still be on the internet.

Anon.: Exactly. Let's even go this far: someone could use appropriation for personal gain. It's possible, though probably not in poetry. People behave as if Goldsmith has done this, but obviously that's not true. It has been done in the art world, I guess, where there's plenty of money -- but even in the case of Richard Prince, for example,

you have to ask yourself, no matter what any court decides, is something really being taken away when he picks up and alters somebody else's photograph? What is being taken away? And if something is gained by Prince, does that automatically mean that something has been taken away from someone else? Appropriation, expropriation -- they're not the same. If anything -- I'm almost embarrassed to say this, you know how much I hate sports -- but I think if you wanted to look for a model that shows how Goldsmith's work relates to the neoliberal economy, you should forget dispossession and colonialism and look at rotisserie baseball. Think about it.

KG: I don't know what that is.

Anon.: Ok so in rotisserie baseball -- fantasy baseball -- people form leagues and run drafts to assemble ideal super-duper teams at the beginning of the baseball season. That's the fantasy part: you build the team you want, drafting your favorite players from anywhere in baseball; and of course your friends are trying to build their teams too, so there are drafts -- there's competition and constraint. Then, as the season progresses, your team competes against the other teams in your fantasy league -- against your friends' teams or whatever -- using the real-life statistics of the players on each fantasy team to score points. In other words, you use the statistics generated by Major League Baseball games in the current season to construct your own, entirely different set of imaginary baseball games -- purely statistical games. You take this publicly-available flow of information -- baseball statistics -- and you divert it to your own uses, into a sort of super-fandom that's a fantasy construction of the sports world as you understand it and would like it to be. What does Major League Baseball lose? They're some pretty litigious fuckers, so you can bet they'd be on it if they were losing anything. In fact, though -- like many acts of piracy -- the official side of the business ends up gaining attention, gaining fandom, making more money. People watch more games than they usually would. They watch games they wouldn't usually watch. They spend more time following baseball, and they follow it more intensely. But let's take it further: say you were to start a business organizing rotisserie baseball leagues. If you make money, does that mean that Major League Baseball is losing money? You're appropriating their statistics, don't you owe them some kind of compensation? Not even Major League Baseball makes that argument. Nobody makes that argument. Nobody criticizes rotisserie baseball as "colonizing." Nobody declares "they didn't even play those games themselves!"

KG: So why do these accusations come up with conceptual poetry?

Anon.: It's funny, I was talking with Rob Fitterman about this probably two or three years ago, and he suggested Aristotle, and I think that really does turn out to be the right answer. So look, the default position in this little corner of poetry is a vague Marxian-socialist liberal-lefty social justice thing -- and I can understand that, because you know I certainly have a dark, undying hatred for this slave-world we've created -- but it's also true, as I've said, that a lot of people holding this position are well-meaning but just not all that well-informed. So a lot of the time, people think they're engaging in a critique on these principles -- they want to think that -- but in reality, they're just expressing personal feelings of anger and suspicion, and using some of the language of political economy and critical theory to do that. Well if you're using vaguely economic-sounding terms, but the model isn't really political economy,

what is it then? Because there is a model down there somewhere, there's a set of assumptions. And I think it's something like this: I think people tend to view poetry as a handicraft and, without really thinking about it all that much, as an act of virtuous labor. Americans love virtuous labor, they always have. Poetry figures as an act of virtuous labor because value accrues to the poet through the work of his hands, and it's doubly virtuous because it seems, at least, to exist outside the circuits of capital. There's no money, it's not a big business, poetry, so there's still this idea that you can stand firm and not sell out -- the terms are that simplistic. Maybe it's even anti-capitalist, because no one cares enough to monetize it. So Goldsmith comes along under these conditions, and he denies both aspects of poetry. He says, nope, I just cut and paste stuff, and it's so easy -- so there's no craft and there's no virtue. Conceptualism generally denies the craft of poetry -- which is a good thing, I think -- but in many cases, writing gets replaced with other forms of labor, so it retains some aura of virtue, however confusing. Eunoia, for instance -- everybody knows it took Christian Bök years to assemble the lexicon for that book, years of scouring dictionaries, when it could have been done very quickly with an OCR scanner and a few lines of Perl. I actually find that appealing, mostly because I appreciate the abnormal, obsessive quality it has to it. But Goldsmith claims to do no work -- his claim of ease is intolerable. It's also largely an illusion, as I said before -- there's work that goes into these works, sometimes quite a lot of it -- but people take the claim at face value. It sounds about right.

Now, I don't think anybody's reading Aristotle -- but Aristotelian thinking about value is deeply ingrained in the west. It has a long, long, sordid history, and it's still right here with us. And the most important thing Aristotle had to say on this topic comes in *The Politics*, where he makes a distinction between natural and unnatural forms of exchange. Tilling the soil, managing the house -- these are natural. They're virtuous. Value accrues through the work of the hands, and it accumulates through watchful care and measure. Great. It sounds like poetry already. But unnatural exchange -- that's a bad business. Aristotle defines it as "forms in which men gain from each other." Hmm that's sounding bad for appropriation-based writing. And the worst of these forms -- the most hated sort, he says -- is usury. Why? Because in the practice of usury, a person "makes gain of money out of itself." See, the usurer doesn't do anything -- not like the farmer, not really. He takes what should be a sterile medium, and he just puts it together, and it breeds. No one can see what he's doing, it's probably some form of terrible blood magic, and then suddenly money is born from money, value from value -- and there's twice as much value as there should be. There's an uncanny growth of value, and he keeps the difference. And who is he? Well that's Goldsmith, isn't it? That's like a couple thousand years of Goldsmiths. And if you really get down to it, I think that's the background here.

KG: Right. People are seeing him print out the internet and then get invited to Colbert, and it's like he's reproducing the commons and getting famous for it, when here I am working hard and no one recognizes the deep hard work I'm doing.

Anon.: Right. And just to be crystal clear, I'm not saying that any one person or group out there is anti-Semitic, or that it's anti-Semitic to be critical of Goldsmith or conceptual poetry. I'm critical of conceptual poetry. I'm critical of some of Goldsmith's work. What I'm saying is -- well, I guess what I'm saying is that you can't rely on

common sense and strong feelings to make this kind of critique.

KG: So what do we do in the end, knowing all this, with the idea that Goldsmith in this case has used as material the autopsy of a black male murdered body for a performance piece?

Anon.: I'm not going to defend it. It was a tragically bad choice. I do think I understand how that choice came about, though, and I don't think that his most vocal critics have much understanding of -- well, of much. I'd also say that, if people are anxious to throw around accusations about armchair politics, or illegitimate claims to political relevance, or striking a pose, politically, for the sake of reputation -- cultural capital -- they probably need to check at home first. I haven't seen anything that I'd call genuine political work happen in poetry since -- well, I just haven't seen too much of that. Because real politics is coalitional -- it's not about having the right opinions, and it's not about having good feelings or even powerful feelings, it's about doing the hard hard work of bringing people together for a moment outside the envelope of common sense, where real resistance can grow. And that's just not likely to happen in a poem.

KG: So how can anyone do work that is poetic, political, and maybe even conceptual?

Anon.: I don't have much hope for that, and it's certainly not my goal. I don't do any political work myself, not for a long time now, and I don't really think this kind of poetry is an effective vehicle for politics. But if you do want to make some kind of statement, I guess you have to think very carefully about the ramifications of what you're doing. It may turn out that appropriation, for instance, is simply not the best tool for addressing race in America, or the systematic murder of African American people. It might be more productive for people to radically situate themselves -- a phenomenological approach, based on how you encounter things, which means taking on real vulnerability, risking a little something, getting out of the house. Maybe that. Which isn't to say that appropriation is useless or bad in itself, it just might be the wrong tool for the job. The lyric is also the wrong tool, in almost anybody's hands. It matters who speaks. But now for whatever reason I'm thinking of Marlon Brando getting an Oscar and not showing up, and sending a Native American activist [Sacheen Littlefeather] to speak instead about atrocities committed against her people. I don't want to belittle that gesture by aestheticizing it, but it's interesting to think about the strategic use of the public awards ceremony as a formal problem. I guess she was the right person. I also want to say I think it's really unhelpful and just not true to say any of this means Goldsmith is a bad person. Just not the right person, using the right method.