

“Kenneth Goldsmith’s *Sports* and Conceptual Baseball Writing”

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Bullpen Motto:

Have Lead,

Will Win

With John Franco and Armando Benítez leading the way, the Mets’ late-inning relief has been among the best in baseball.

METS’ RECORD WHEN

LEADING AFTER 6 INNINGS

56-7 METS’ RECORD WHEN

LEADING AFTER 7 INNINGS

58-3

METS’ RECORD WHEN

LEADING AFTER 8 INNINGS

69-3 Barton Silverman/The New York Times¹

What is this? A sports motto? A description of baseball pitching? A fragmented narrative from a New York Mets’ season? A baseball poem? It is of course all of the above. A copied excerpt from the sports section of the *New York Times*, it conveys information about the team’s relief pitching and the success of its players by referring to the records of games earlier in the MLB season of the year 2000. But it is also more than just information. It is a poem as well, for it is a passage from page 497 of Kenneth Goldsmith’s long poem, *Day* (2003), which is a transcribed copy of the entire edition of the *New York Times* for September 1, 2000. As the extract shows, moving these snippets of information out of the context in which they first appeared and juxtaposing three different types of discourse – pithy motto, a whole sentence and statistics rendered in capital letters – draws attention to the language used in sports writing and invites questions about the relationship between form and content in this particular type of information delivery.

Goldsmith's selection of his source material is based on an element of randomness. For September 1, 2000 was simply the day that he happened to be free to start a new project. Moreover, his poetic version of the newspaper edition indiscriminately includes every single letter printed in the original text, from ads and headlines to articles and contributors' names, just as it transcribes the words on the page in strict accordance with the rules of horizontal reading and writing that govern English language approaches to most prose and poetry. Beginning with the upper left-hand corner of the front page and ending on the lower right-hand corner of the last page, Goldsmith copies the content line by line without allowing for the vertical dimension of newspaper layout where separate items are arranged next to as well as above or beneath each other. The result is a truthful yet defamiliarizing mix which, as the above quotation illustrates, strings together various forms of discourse from the borrowed, recycled and reused page material and allows them to blend into each other. The "bullpen motto": 'Have lead, / Will win' frames the passage in the general discussion of the particular sport and provides an overview, offering irrefutable truth in a humorously hackneyed cliché. The fourth line abruptly shifts to a specific comment about two individual players: the Mets' relief pitchers John Franco and Armando Benitez, both of whom were star players in the 2000 season (with Franco having a season ERA of 3.40 and Benitez 2.61). Then, moving into the objective language of statistics and factual information, the rest of the excerpt focuses on the Mets' record throughout the season and, in this part of the poem, the image of the text changes, moving to upper case letters. This shift in typography signals a new narrative: these statistics are a series of codes that can be read as culturally expressive beyond their basic denotation, for they form a narrative by percentage that is unexplained to an audience assumed to be able to decipher them on their own.

Day is eight hundred and thirty-six pages long: it took a year to type. Rather than art about art, it would be more accurate to say that *Day* is art whose content is already a formed textual, cultural and ideological artifact that, once disseminated and consumed on 09/01/2000, would have simply been archived in the annals of *NYT* history. The only direct experience of the art arises out of the process of reading and repetition, processing the words into the poem. It is a lived concrete

experience of language which is projected outward in the media and then, instead of being lost in the reams of daily newsprint, it is consumed, ingested and regurgitated in poetic form. Lexical imprints are chewed on like a pitcher sitting in the bullpen, eating sunflower seeds and spitting out the shells. In its use of discursive shifts and ruptures, the above quotation captures the various optics of baseball, from the general and the specific to the numerical and the narratological. But this extract from *Day* is also a precursor that anticipates Goldsmith's major baseball poem, *Sports* (2008).

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Much has been written about *Sports*, but scholarship on the text has completely ignored the significance of baseball. Literary critics have read the text in relation to Goldsmith's project of conceptual poetry, his uncreative writing, banality, the poetics of erasure, poetry and information, as well as a literary meditation on consumption and production, excess and waste.² The eradication of baseball is particularly surprising because the text is a complete transcription of a radio broadcast of a nine inning MLB game between the New York Yankees and the Boston Red Sox on August 18, 2006. The critical focus on the text's form, and the subsequent elision of its content, is partly based on Goldsmith's poetic project: his development of conceptual writing that, for instance, includes the transcription of weather forecasts (*Weather*, 2005) and traffic reports (*Traffic*, 2007).³ In each of these works, Goldsmith strives to systematize the writing process by transcribing unprocessed speech into textual form and, in so doing, he underscores the obstinate logic of information abundance, embracing the overwhelming experience of massive data streams of language. However, among the plethora of sports matches broadcast each day – football, hockey, basketball, soccer, tennis, golf – Goldsmith chooses baseball for *Sports*. This is not a random choice. For baseball speaks to his project of creating a seemingly mundane repository of cultural discourse by receiving and textually re-transmitting the ambient signals that constantly bombard us, capturing moments in that bombardment and preserving them in the form of the literary work. This process

reframes the “everyday” and defamiliarizes it, allowing us to return to yesterday’s broadcast in order to reexamine it in a new light. This speaks to his self-declaration as a “Word Processor” who transcribes the accumulation and concentration of cultural data.⁴ As data is central to the playing and fan experience of baseball, the game is not just appropriate for this project. Baseball also engenders a merger of form and content to create a method of conceptual baseball writing that intervenes in both innovative poetics and baseball literature.

Goldsmith’s essays about his experimental writing invite us to reflect on the form of his oeuvre. In his book of essays entitled *Uncreative Writing: Managing Language in a Digital Age* (2011), for instance, Goldsmith asserts that imaginative creativity and innovative aesthetics are not, and should not be, the basis of conceptual writing. “Conceptual writing or uncreative writing is,” he asserts, “a poetics of the moment, fusing the avant-garde impulses of the last century with the technologies of the present, one that proposes an expanded field for 21st century poetry.”⁵ This merger of old and new includes “intentionally self- and ego-effacing tactics using uncreativity, unoriginality, illegibility, appropriation, plagiarism, fraud, theft, and falsification as [...] precepts; information management, word processing, databasing, and extreme process as our methodologies; and boredom, valuelessness, and nutritionlessness as [...] ethos.”⁶ It is for these reasons that Goldsmith claims that the conceptual writer tries to “emulate the workings and processes of the machine, feeling that the results will be good if the concept and execution of the poetic machine are good; there is no tolerance for improvisation or spontaneity.”⁷ The mechanical process of moving information from one place to another constitutes a significant cultural act and, in this respect, conceptual writing is about shifting content from one container to another.⁸

The mechanization of conceptual writing is mundane, it’s boring. It calls attention to the labour and work of the writer, tediously transcribing the text and repeating the modern logic of industrial labour in the post-industrial context of information technology. “With so much available language,” Goldsmith maintains, “does anyone really need to write more? Instead, let’s just process what exists. Language as matter; language as material.”⁹ The labour of the writer produces the labour of the reader: books are, in Goldsmith’s description, deliberately meant to be boring,

excruciating, laborious.¹⁰ In fact, in his witty essay “Being Boring” (2011), Goldsmith writes that he does not expect anyone to actually read his books from cover to cover: “You really don’t need to read my books to get the ideas about what they’re like; you just need to know the general concept.”¹¹ Not reading – the unreadable – calls attention to the physical weight of language in Goldsmith’s texts, which sometimes run between four hundred and nine hundred pages, and the quantity of the language that typifies and structures our daily lives through newspapers, weather reports and sports broadcasts. In this, the conceptual idea becomes tangible within the book: to read Goldsmith’s books on their own terms “necessitates not reading anything into them but simply transcribing them, repeating Goldsmith’s own (un)creative writing practice’ by dipping in and out of them, reading bits and pieces, so that ‘reading becomes little more than data re-entry.’”¹²

3

‘Being Boring’ enables us to reflect on how the conceptual project is materialized in Goldsmith’s books. But this should not divert us from the fact that baseball is at the centre of *Sports*. Reading it as a work of conceptual baseball writing offers, I argue, new insights that do not negate the body of scholarship that relates the work to Goldsmith’s innovative poetics. Rather, the focus on baseball can enhance the pleasure of the work by reflecting on the form and content in tandem. Those who seek to erase baseball in their readings often point to the title of the poem: *Sports*, writes Brian Cooney, is about the ubiquity of sports broadcasting in everyday popular culture, and he argues that baseball is not the focus of the text because, in his words, “the overwhelming portion of discourse [...] is directed away from the game.”¹³

On the one hand, Cooney has a point. Goldsmith’s text *can* be read as a work about how sports resonates throughout American life, influencing public language and often collapsing production and consumption in late capitalism (ie., the fan who produces score cards for each game). Indeed, the cover of the printed edition includes the image of a basketball player who is extending his arms to make a throw as college fans jump, wave and cheer in the background. On the

other hand, baseball best foregrounds – more than any other sport – the ubiquity of sports broadcasting and highlights the corporate power of post-industrial capitalism in major league sport.¹⁴ Baseball has been so successfully commodified that MLB entered the 2016 season with revenues approaching \$9.5 billion (with over \$1.5 billion in broadcasting revenue) (Brown). The gross league revenues increased \$500 million for 2015, marking the 13th consecutive year MLB has seen record growth. The big money involved in baseball is highlighted in the opening section of the poem: *Sports* begins with the ironic repetition of the copyright disclaimer. Goldsmith writes,

1 800 LAW CASH reminds you that this copyrighted broadcast is presented by authority of the New York Yankees and may not be reproduced or retransmitted in any form. And the account and descriptions of the game may not be disseminated without the express written consent of the New York Yankees. Have a lawsuit? Need money? 800 LAW CASH will get you money right now. Don't wait for your case to settle. You or your attorney should call 800 LAW CASH today. (1)¹⁵

Profits must be protected. Expansion and growth must be maintained. *Sports* thus begins with an expression of power over discourse: the question of who “owns” the words that are broadcast to the public. This signals an important challenge to the commodity culture that has usurped the “national pastime.” The duplication of the copyright statement calls attention to Goldsmith’s political act of appropriating language that is quite literally a commodity. In a transgressive move similar to Abbie Hoffman’s *Steal this Book* (1970), Goldsmith “steals” the words – the protected intellectual property – of the Yankees and waves them in their faces by doing exactly what the source text prohibits.¹⁶ As such, Goldsmith’s playful take on “fair use” is a challenge to the purported owners of the text and those who claim to take legal possession of its words. Fair use is defined as the use of “some” piece of intellectual property for limited purposes and has been recognized in the US since 1841. In 1976, the copyright laws were clarified in a statute that lists one of the four definitive considerations of ‘fair use’ as the ‘amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the

copyrighted work as a whole.”¹⁷ Seeing as Goldsmith copies the whole text, *Sports* exceeds questions of “fair use” and moves on to questions of “fair play.” Who is playing fair? Do the Yankees have an unfair advantage in the market place? Is Goldsmith playing fairly by breaking the rules laid down in the 1976 statute? Or is it fair to claim possession over language that is made public in the form of a sports radio broadcast?

In shifting the focal point from fair use to fair play, Goldsmith’s conceptual baseball writing embraces consumption as production through a self-conscious act of reappropriation. Sticking to his premise that the writer should use words that are already there, he does not elaborate a linguistic form on the basis of raw material. Rather, he works with a text – the broadcast – that exists, and has already been circulated within various markets, from media and sport to advertising and the creative economy. Goldsmith thus flouts a literary culture that safeguards authorship through copyright and protects originality and ownership. He does not elevate the concept of a unique individual who creates something original in the form of a singular, distinct text. Instead, *Sports* is thus informed by other texts so that notions of originality and creation are blurred and distorted. Goldsmith is certainly aware of Marx’s assertion that consumption is simultaneously also production. But this conflation in *Sports* also calls attention to his aesthetic project and the cultures of sport, for the transcriber’s physical exertion – his reappropriation – is akin to an athletic act that we might see in a baseball game. By capturing the game’s action in numbers, statistics, trivia and advertising, his writing foregrounds his own athletic event in that it took many months to transcribe the broadcast. And just as there is an athletic dimension to his writing, the product is also as “nutritionless” as baseball. Nobody needs to consume the sport in order to survive.

4

Uncreativity notwithstanding, Goldsmith’s transcription of the copyright statement also demonstrates how the seemingly mechanized process of copying involves many decisions that affect meaning. For instance, Goldsmith’s placement of words on the page merge two discourses:

the copyright protection asserted by MLB and the advertisement for legal services. In this move, creativity is not erased so much as transferred from the composition of a text to the reframing of the language: the repositioning of the words blurs the legalistic copyright statement with the selling of legal services by 1 800 LAW CASH, a name that combines numbers and capital letters like the line of a completed baseball score card.

The choice of word placement expresses Goldsmith's desire to capture every word from the baseball broadcast in *Sports* and, as a consequence, there are slippages between selling products and baseball commentary. He transcribes, for example, the transition between the second and third innings in the following way:

AIG. For 85 years families have relied on to help insure their futures on loans, retirement, AIG. The strength to be there.

Listen to WCBS every morning for traffic and weather together every ten minutes on the eights.

— Ford Explorer has a more powerful engine and a new luxurious interior, all the style and comfort that's made Ford Explorer the best selling SUV. Ask your Tri-State quality Ford dealer for a price that's even better. Robbie Cano grounds one foul outside of first. So Lester stays in, that's a sixty-second pitch, and he should stay in now that Boston has caught up. The Yankee lead is only 5-4 as Lester and Ponson have had big problems here in the first two innings.¹⁸

Between innings, the bombardment of the ads moves fluidly from the selling of insurance and Ford SUVs to mentions of WCBS traffic and weather reports. What is striking about this passage is the way Goldsmith chooses to avoid gaps between the advertising and the commentary of the game: in the same paragraph the ad suddenly shifts to the action of the foul ball. The fluid movement between the discourses flattens them out so that the selling of products merges with the baseball game, suggesting that the broadcast is as much about selling products and services as it is about the

match-up between two big market league rivals. This complicates the question of voice so that there is no longer a distinction between the product placement and the format wherein the product is placed. As the baseball commentary fuses with the voice from the ad, the game becomes a vehicle for advertising but also a way of baseball selling itself. Baseball has not just sold out to the advertisers; the baseball broadcast is also designed to sell baseball.

For Brian Cooney, “the advertisements and the game are, themselves, rather sophisticated forms of erasure, in that they reduce complex narratives to alphanumeric codes.”¹⁹ But in his indifference to the baseball content of *Sports*, he ignores how this process is intimately tied to the game itself. For baseball can reduce *all* narratives to alphanumeric codes through a statistical imagination that converts the complex drama on the field into the letters and numbers entered onto a scorecard and then, over time, accumulated in a numerical series that determines, among many other things, batting averages, runs batted in, slugging percentages and earned run averages. There is no play in baseball that is not codified into a number or a letter or some combination of the two. In this, Goldsmith’s form – his choice of word placement – reflects the content of baseball: he does to the broadcast what the statistical recorders and official scorekeepers (transcribers) do to the narrative of the play-by-play.

5

Sports conflates aesthetic expression and advertising in a way that is reminiscent of Andy Warhol’s Brillo Boxes and Campbell Soup Cans. Goldsmith’s poetic project is, like Warhol’s visual art, a form of faux-naïf literalness that takes an existing text and aestheticizes it in a different context.²⁰ And there is, in Goldsmith’s transcription, an attempt to seize the text he is replicating, not in its material, but in its dated historical reality, as a certain moment of language that has circulated in the past. The repeated text is a way of making us stare at a signal linguistic product, in the hope that our vision of all those around us will be transformed, that our new stare will infuse those also with depth and solidity, with the meaning of the archived text that has been taken off the shelf and re-

presented for us.

This returns us to the question of why Goldsmith chooses baseball. One reason is straightforward: the archive of baseball is by far the largest of any in major league sports and, as a consequence, there are lots of games on the shelf and lots of packed shelves. The first officially recorded baseball game in U.S. history took place on June 19, 1846 in Hoboken, New Jersey: the 'New York Nine' defeated the Knickerbockers, 23-1, in four innings. Soon thereafter, the practice of recording the achievements of teams and players was developed by Henry Chadwick and included the basis of modern-day statistics such as team percentages, batting averages and earned runs. Since that time, records have been kept for major league games that cover a range of statistics, from the win-loss records of teams to the number of home runs and RBIs per player. The accumulation of new statistics has increased over the years and includes, but is not limited to, batting statistics, base running statistics, pitching statistics and fielding statistics. Within these general categories, there are the very basic statistics that record, for instance, the number of team errors and the number of games behind the leader to the much more complex statistics such as Win shares (a metric that gauges a player's overall contribution to his team's win) and the Pythagorean expectation (which estimates a team's expected winning percentage based on runs scored and runs allowed).²¹

The sheer volume of informational noise found in the data is deafening. This is compounded by the fact that baseball is unique in major league sports, for baseball teams play a massive number of games every season, all of which are recorded in exhaustive statistical detail. From the beginning of April to the end of September, each MLB team plays 162 games. This does not include the spring training games or the postseason games (if a team advances to the playoffs). When we consider that a team might play 30 pre-season games and up to 20 postseason games (from the league wildcard to the end of the World Series) then one team could play as many as 212 games in a single season. This is a lot of baseball, particularly when we note that there are 30 teams in MLB each playing at least 162 games a year. Then of course there are the Triple-A and Double-A teams of the minor

leagues, which have schedules that, for the most part, follow that of the major leagues. The same statistics are kept for these teams.

In the context of Goldsmith's conceptual project, baseball is a symbol for the overabundance of information, data, perpetual noise, and the everyday language that is consumed, archived and shelved. In this sense, to listen to a baseball broadcast is to be bombarded by information in the forms of letters, numbers, words, percentages and verbal images. For fans of the game, this is important information in the moment of the game; for non-fans, it is an overabundance of pointless information, useless verbiage, wasteful textuality. But for everyone, *Sports* asks us to confront the information we consume daily and rarely absorb. The re-presentation of this verbal language of data on the textual page prompts us to attend to our practices of consumption and to reflect on what we might do with it. Baseball, then, becomes a way for Goldsmith to conceptualize and practice poetry as information management and compose clear and compelling questions: To what extent does new technology generate new information? How does being bombarded with data impact our relationship to language and how we write? What happens to the literary text in a culture of information? For the critic Scott Pound, we must take these questions seriously because "Goldsmith's project exploits the misalignment of and tension between information culture and literary culture' and foregrounds how access to networked mass information engenders a 'new understanding of language, a new view of the literary and new take on authorship.'"²² Following this line of thought, I would add that the text of *Sports* infuses the literary field with massive quantities of speech captured through the broadcast – first heard live, then listened to in recordings – so that Goldsmith makes a spectacle of the abundance of language as information and, at the same time, presents it to the reader as a monumentalized form of literature. The conceptual project of his innovative poetics thus converges with over a century of baseball literature.

One of the ways that baseball bombards us with information is through radio broadcasts. In fact, the history of baseball broadcasting is the narrative of a radio success story. As a disk jockey at the New Jersey radio station WFMU from 1995 to 2010, Goldsmith would be keenly aware of this history, which began soon after the 1919 “Black Sox” incident that had discredited baseball and alienated part of its fan base. The first baseball game was broadcast on the Pittsburgh radio station KDKA on August 5, 1921. The game, in which the Pittsburgh Pirates defeated the Philadelphia Phillies 8-5, had only one announcer, Harold W. Arlin, and its success led to the broadcast of the 1921 World Series on KDKA and WJZ in New Jersey. The popularity of the early broadcasts was undeniable, as had been the large ‘viewing parties’ wherein wires were sent to bars and movie theatres where a large board with mechanical players were moved around and lights illuminated to display the balls and strikes. The high demand for baseball broadcasts grew in the 1920s and 1930s so that, in 1935, Kenesaw Landis, the MLB Commissioner, made broadcasting deals with various stations for radio rights worth \$400 000. By 1939, all MLB teams were able to broadcast their games on radio.²³

The advent of baseball broadcasts on television had an undeniable impact on the radio audience. Still, radio broadcasts continued to thrive, and broadcasters such as, among others, Mel Allen, Red Barber, Harry Caray and Vin Scully gained celebrity status with the majority of fans preferring the detailed play-by-play of the radio broadcasts to the TV commentary. Even after the golden age of radio wound down, the Mutual Broadcasting System’s national broadcast *Game of the Day* captured large audiences throughout the 1950s. The World Series was broadcast nationally on NBC Radio from 1960 to 1974 and on CBS Radio from 1976-1997. In 1998, national radio broadcasts moved to ESPN Radio, broadcasting games on most weekends. Local radio stations have always broadcast the games in a city or region – and continue to do so – but now fan access to these broadcasts has grown beyond local markets through online streaming: MLB.com, for instance, streams all major league games live, and all minor league games are streamed on TuneIn Radio.²⁴

What would happen if a person listened to all of these broadcasts back-to-back? He would experience a wide-open, always on radio, a streaming torrent of language and information as one

baseball game blurred into another for his entire life. In this, baseball suits Goldsmith's project precisely because of the many hours of baseball games broadcast each year. The sheer volume of baseball speaks to the cacophony of language, information and data in our daily lives, a glut of unprocessed language to be textually ordered on the page. Once ordered into lines, the literary dimensions of the text do not arise out of a treatment of language as qualitative allure; rather, language is data and information that is prized for its quantity, its massive availability instead of its unique aesthetic value. Goldsmith, then, outsources literary language to the everyday speech of the baseball broadcast and it is transformed in its memorialization through textuality. In this, *Sports* reflects a hybridization of information culture and literary culture by redefining authorship and engaging with networked media: there is a "a merging of old and new media procedures, a convergence poetics as opposed to a revolutionary poetics, one that shows us what happens when one cultural apparatus collides with another, when the book slams into electronic media."²⁵

7

It is difficult to anticipate how many hours of baseball broadcasting will be archived each season. This is because in baseball there is no clock. A game is not limited by time or divided into halves or quarters with interruptions such as a half time break or time outs. Each game is played for nine innings (weather permitting) regardless of how long an inning takes and, in MLB, if the score is tied at the end of nine innings then the teams continue to play. The team with more runs at the bottom of an extra inning wins the game and it is concluded. This calls attention to the distinction between time and temporality in sport: temporality is the subjective progression through movements, while time attempts to objectively measure and mark that progression. Time is necessarily temporal, but temporality can exist plainly without time (a slow clock measures temporality, but it does so in an untimely way). With this in mind, the sport of football is, for instance, both timed and temporal: it is broken into segments with quarters, halftime and timeouts, and each section is also timed by a

clock. Football teams can run out the clock, ticking the seconds down to zero so that the segment is over, regardless of what happens on the field. Time passes, irrespective of the events of the game.

Baseball is temporal. The movement of the game is completely dependent on the events on the field: if certain things do not occur, then the game does not move forward, regardless of how much time passes. One inning could last 5 minutes and the next inning could last an hour. What moves the game forward is the action on the diamond: the number of hits, walks, errors and outs. There is no running out the clock. Each stage exists as a potential infinity. An at bat can last forever, an inning can keep going, and even in the bottom of the ninth inning when a team is down by five runs, with two outs and two strikes, the batter still has as much time as he needs to keep the game alive or be called out. This is significant for *Sports* because the game between the Yankees and Red Sox that Goldsmith chooses to transcribe is the longest nine inning game in MLB history, lasting 4 hours and 45 minutes (and it was the second game of a doubleheader). If, for Goldsmith, the quantity of language is more important than its quality, then the longest nine inning game speaks to his interest in the cultural accumulation and preservation of information through language. Length matters.

Throughout *Sports*, Goldsmith calls attention to the temporality of baseball: even the back cover notes that 'It is said that in a normal two and a half hour baseball game, approximately eight minutes of action occurs'. Moreover, the textual placement of the verbal broadcast on the page foregrounds temporality, for the text covers almost five hours in 119 pages. Often criticised for being too slow, a game that needs more action and less down time, Goldsmith's transcription speeds the game up by removing the pauses between plays. In the first inning, for instance, the starting pitcher, Jon Lester, throws two pitches and a pick off with little time in between. Later in the game, we move at high speed from pitch count to base runners to a hit to a throw out. Goldsmith writes,

And the count 2 and 2. There's a left-hand hitter Eric Hinske up on deck. But right now Bruney has a lot to worry about at home plate, Manny. Loretta at second, Ortiz at first. The 2-2. Hit on the ground to short, off Jeter's glove to left field. Loretta rounds third. Melky

fires home. He's gonna be a dead duck. Another outfield assist for...they're going back to first. Manny is safe. Melky Cabrera guns down another runner.²⁶

In real time, there would be significant pauses between the pitch count and naming the batter on deck. There would be silences between the descriptions of the baserunners. There would be gaps between the pitch count and the action on the field. But Goldsmith positions the words on the page to eliminate all gaps, pauses and silences, thus impacting the temporality of the game by speeding it up and increasing its pace. For the critic Brian Cooney, this erasure of pauses goes against Goldsmith's claim to textually record the entire broadcast: *Sports* is not a work wherein "nothing is left out"; rather, something is held back, "even if that something is nothing". "Baseball is a game defined by pauses", he continues, and "by erasing those pauses Goldsmith creates a vaudevillian speeding up of the action (reminiscent of the dizzying humour of Abbott and Costello's famous 'who's on first' routine)."²⁷ However, I would add that because Goldsmith playfully describes his transcriptions as unreadable, the reading process includes its own pauses and gaps, for the text encourages readers to stop every few pages and insert their own intervals in moments of reflection or focus or fatigue. As in a baseball game, these reading intervals are not prescribed or timed impositions at specific points in the game. Instead, they occur temporally, depending on the actions of the reader. The reading process thus repeats the natural – not imposed – breaks in a baseball game and mirrors the fact that players generally perform individually during play.

8

In *Sports*, the temporality is also revealed through the language. In the seventh inning, for instance, the commentators, John Sterling and Suzyn Waldman, begin to speak about how much time has passed: "And you know what, Suzyn? This game is gonna go over four hours. You know what? We gonna have to find out the record for the longest nine inning game. It's it's it's 11:53." This is followed by repeated references to the time, announcing when the clock reads 12:17 and when they

reach the 4 hour and 12 minute mark (the longest nine inning game in Red Sox history). Then at 4 hours and 23 minutes they declare that “this is now the longest game in American League history by one minute.”²⁸ Time takes its toll on Sterling and Waldman and, as they become increasingly tired, their speech becomes more punctuated by ellipses; sentence fragments become more frequent, and they occasionally lose their train of thought. In the seventh inning, for instance, Sterling says the following: “Well Mike Myers is coming in to start the bottom of the seventh and he will face Big Papi and Myers is...I’m looking to see if Farnsworth is just starting to throw now...So that meant that Timlin...well, he isn’t done yet so we won’t give you his numbers but if he would have given up four runs...So Timlin in in essence, would be the losing pitcher.”²⁹ Here the semantic coherence of speech begins to fall away as the temporality of the game engenders exhaustion that is reflected in the incomplete use of grammatical structures – word salads – that are found in these transcriptions of speech disturbance.³⁰

Language is out of joint. A disjointed language that calls attention to the myth that Goldsmith does not alter his source material. The paratext of *Sports* asserts the transcriber’s “exact parsing of language” but the peculiarities of the transcription are revealed in the placement of ellipses on the page. As this practice increases in the later innings, the reader also becomes aware of the many choices that Goldsmith makes in the transcription and copyediting process. He chooses to write “baked lays” for “Baked Lays” and he writes “\$39.95 per month” instead of “thirty-nine dollars and ninety-five cents per month.”³¹ In the move from the oral to the textual, we are forced to question whether or not “the exact parsing of language” is possible. Such a movement therefore calls attention to the slippage that is part of every instance of signification.

Reflecting on this process is noteworthy because it relates to the transcription of vernacular language. Slang words and expressions like “gonna” and “gets ‘em out” exist alongside paragrammatic pauses in speech, interjections used to express thought or lapses in word choice, such as “um,” “uh,” “er,” “hmmm”: “We have, uh, cloudy skies, uh.” Similarly, the transcription of laughter differs from page to page, going from “hah hah” to “Heh heh heh” to “Ha ha ha ha ha.”³² Even if some of these sounds are approximations, they point to how the vocalization of the

broadcast is integrated into the typescript. Here the transition from aural language to written text includes the transcription of particular forms of American speech, shared phonological and lexical features, which gesture to a tradition of vernacular writing. This is not to suggest that *Sports* can be reduced to a vernacular text; however, the orality of the work and Goldsmith's transcription choices – particularly slang and other forms of paragrammatic expression – links his conceptual writing to the use of vernacular in a long tradition of baseball literature that can be traced from, at the very least, Ring Lardner's *You Know Me Al* (1916) to Stephen King's *Blockade Billy* (2010). In all of these cases, slang and oral expression merge with the unique language of baseball in descriptions of sac flies, bunts and suicide squeezes, as well as the terminology related to the data of a codified number system: "he's 0-1, 8.77 ERA," "he's a .341, 10 homers, 72 RBIs," "his walks 4 ½ per 9."³³ It is this vocalization that speaks to an artistic vernacular that integrates *Sports* into the history of baseball literature, for the text is part of a vernacular baseball matrix that combines the orality of textualized speech, slang, baseball terminology as well as data related to teams and individual players.

9

This is not to downplay Goldsmith's experimental poetic project, for there is much innovation on display in *Sports*. Read as a work of conceptual poetry, it is an intervention in everyday language in an era of mass data and overwhelming information that constitutes a series of discursive events without the mediating discourses of added, hidden meaning. The formal placement of words on the page merges the discursive fields of ads and commentary, but also raises significant questions about the limits of signification and the transcriber's ability to textualize oral speech exactly as it is in the aural form. Furthermore, it must be noted that Goldsmith's poetics disrupts the hierarchies of literature and authorship: he sees texts spread out horizontally, a flowing apart of the elements of the cultural structure as it appears in the words that surround us, bombard us. In this, the baseball broadcast is fleeting, for it exists in the moment and for the moment, chronicling the plays of one

particular game which will be replaced by a new game on tomorrow's broadcast. In post-industrial capitalism, there is no longer any feeling of lasting creative energy in the texts that are produced in these moments. They are there, but then shelved and archived, replaced by the latest game. *Sports* is, then, a re-framing of the transitory text in a recycling and repurposing of the ephemeral language of the broadcast.

But to ignore the significance of baseball in *Sports* is to separate form from content, to erase the ways in which this particular sport is part of Goldsmith's innovative writing, not a random choice or incidental to the work. The combination of the discourses found in the vernacular baseball matrix speaks to Goldsmith's interest in the materiality of language: *Sports* underscores baseball as a source for exploring forms of media that are used to communicate different kinds of information, not in the beats and cadence of the poetic word, but in the quantity of language and data that is found in the statistics and codes of the sport. As in the larger dynamics of baseball writing, *Sports* works through a foundational play of differences between verbal speech and written language that constitutes the driving force of a vernacular literature that includes the specificity of the game's language and its overwhelming abundance. The conceptual aspects of the text – the insistence on uncreativity and word processing – includes an obsessive desire to archive and catalogue that has always been part of baseball's numbers game. The numbers that inform the language of baseball are part of an archive which engenders statistics that are logged, recorded and scrutinized. In this, there is a convergence of ephemerality and monumentality, utterance and archive, innovative poetics and the dynamic vernacular of baseball writing that results in Goldsmith's significant literary achievement: conceptual baseball writing.

Biographical Note

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- ¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Day* (Great Barrington, MA: The Figures, 2003), 497.
- ² See Nikolai Duffy, "Reading the Unreadable: Kenneth Goldsmith, Conceptual Writing and the Art of Boredom," *Journal of American Studies* 50 (2016): 679-698; Marjorie Perloff, *Unoriginal Genius: Poetry by Other Means in the New Century* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2012); Jeffrey T. Nealon, "RealFeel: Banality, Fatality, and Meaning in Kenneth Goldsmith's *The Weather*," *Critical Inquiry* 40 (Autumn 2013): 109-132; Brian C. Cooney, "'Nothing is Left Out': Kenneth Goldsmith's *Sports* and Erasure Poetry," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.4 (summer 2014): 16-33; Scott Pound, "Kenneth Goldsmith and the Poetics of Information," *PMLA* 130.2 (2015): 315-30.
- ³ Radio also provides the material for *The Weather* (2005), which, beginning with the first day of Fall 2002 and continuing through the last day of Summer 2003, Goldsmith used a cassette tape recorder to transcribe New York City weather reports from the US's oldest all-news radio station, 1010 WINS. Beginning in the section titled 'Spring', they also include the weather reported for downtown Baghdad during Operation Desert Storm-the US invasion of Iraq. Likewise, *Traffic* (2007) consists of text transcribed from the traffic reports broadcast by the same radio station.
- ⁴ Craig Dworkin, "The Imaginary Solution," *Contemporary Literature* 48.1 (2007): 34. Goldsmith's methodology reminds us of found language poetry and, as such, the words on the page are objects.
- ⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Journal, Day One," *Harriet: A Blog from the Poetry Foundation*, Jan. 2007, at www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/01/journal-day-one, accessed 11 July 2017.
- ⁶ "Letter to the Editor," Poetry Foundation, October 2009, www.poetryfoundation.org/harriet/2007/01/journal-day-one, accessed 11 July 2017.
- ⁷ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Flarf Is Dionysus: Conceptual Writing as Apollo," *Poetry* (July-August 2009): 316.
- ⁸ Marjorie Perloff rightly points out that Goldsmith's repudiation of creativity discursively constructs him as an uncreative genius who is then seen to be more creative than creative writers.
- ⁹ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Flarf Is Dionysus: Conceptual Writing as Apollo," *Poetry* (July-August 2009): 316.
- ¹⁰ Nikolai Duffy refers to the numerous glowing reviews of Goldsmith's books and argues that "Goldsmith's texts are not boring at all but are, rather, intriguing, and intriguing not simply as conceptual practices but as particularly absorbing literary texts in their own right."
- ¹¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring," at http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/goldsmith_boring.html, accessed 11 July 2017.
- ¹² Nikolai Duffy, "Reading the Unreadable: Kenneth Goldsmith, Conceptual Writing and the Art of Boredom," *Journal of American Studies* 50 (2016): 686. According to Judith Goldman, the unreadable aspects of Goldsmith's transcriptions are significant as a compositional strategy, for they enable readers to approach the textual readymade as strategic translation. See Goldman's "'Re-thinking 'Non-retinal Literature': Citation, 'Radical Mimesis' and Phenomenologies of Reading in Conceptual Writing," *Postmodern Culture* 22.1 (September 2011), <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/481023>, accessed 12 August 2017.
- ¹³ Brian Cooney, "'Nothing is Left Out': Kenneth Goldsmith's *Sports* and Erasure Poetry," *Journal of Modern Literature* 37.4 (summer 2014), 25.
- ¹⁴ For John D. Kelly, the history of organised baseball in the United States is part of increasingly interconnected commercial institutions driven by "profit seeking corporations in a legally powerful cartel." Baseball is a metonym for economic competition that imposes certain rules in a game played to win. See John D. Kelly, *The American Game: Capitalism, Decolonization, World Domination, and Baseball*, (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2006), 59.
- ¹⁵ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Sports* (Los Angeles: Make Now, 2008), 1. In a cheeky act of playfulness, Wershler chronicles how Goldsmith "sent copies of this book to as many people as he could identify in the Yankee organization in an attempt to provoke them, but nothing happened." See Darren Wershler, "Kenneth Goldsmith's American Trilogy," *Postmodern Culture* 19.1 (September 2008) [<http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/goldsmith/>], accessed online, July 12, 2017.
- ¹⁶ In 1998, Goldsmith made a sculpture, *Steal This Book*, an eight-foot-high, three-hundred pound replica of Abbie Hoffman's book.
- ¹⁷ Martha Buskirk, "Commodification as Censor: Copyright and Fair Use," *October* 60 (Spring 1992): 90-1.
- ¹⁸ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 21.
- ¹⁹ Cooney, "Erasure," 31.
- ²⁰ The link between Goldsmith and Warhol is well-founded. In 2004, Goldsmith edited *I'll be Your Mirror: The Selected Andy Warhol Interviews*, a book that offers a collage-like image of Warhol's reflections on art and the means of production, celebrity and aesthetics, visual culture and technology.
- ²¹ Over the last two decades, the development of sabermetrics has created even more data, drawing from a greater breadth of player performance measures and playing field variables. Sabermetrics and comparative statistics attempt to provide an improved measure of a player's performance and contributions to his team from year to year, frequently against a statistical performance average. Comprehensive, historical baseball statistics were difficult for the average fan to access until 1951, when researcher Hy Turkin published *The Complete Encyclopedia of Baseball*. In 1969, Macmillan Publishing printed its first *Baseball Encyclopedia*, using a computer to compile statistics for the first time. Known as 'Big Mac', the encyclopedia became the standard baseball reference until 1988, when *Total Baseball* was released by Warner Books using more sophisticated technology.
- ²² Scott Pound, "Kenneth Goldsmith and the Poetics of Information," *PMLA* 130.2 (2015), 317.

²³ Eldon L. Ham, *Broadcasting Baseball: A History of the National Pastime on Radio and Television*. (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011), 19-23.

²⁴ This is limited to MLB and MiLB in the US and Canada. Other popular leagues in Mexico, Japan and the Caribbean also broadcast massive numbers of baseball games on radio and television.

²⁵ Pound, "Information," 318.

²⁶ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 68.

²⁷ Cooney, "Erasure," 27.

²⁸ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 97, 112.

²⁹ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 97.

³⁰ This disjointed language is also present in one of the two epigraphs that introduce the text: 'Right. That's right.

Just...now he, um, you know he didn't...he doesn't...usually...usually they have trouble with, with lefties that change speeds... (Suzyn Waldman).

³¹ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 111, 43.

³² Goldsmith, *Sports*, 111-2, 5, 113-4.

³³ Goldsmith, *Sports*, 1, 4, 5.