

allusion, to Baudelaire, Duras, and, of course, with its canny names, family doppelgangers, and tragicomic instincts, to Nabokov. The book is rich with both farcical and trenchant episodes, brilliant thumbnail character sketches, nacreous epigrams, and heady bilious torrents of workplace spleen. The narrative's persistent doubling—Flore's hatred for Life and preservation of it; her resistance to and infection by the contact with other humans—meets Mavrikakis and Nathanaël's doubled prose style to configure a radiantly fulgurating novel.

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Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing. Edited by Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2011. 593pp. \$45

Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith's claim that conceptual writing is our contemporary instantiation of avant-garde poetry and that *Against Expression* is its official debut assumes that the manipulation of literary institutions from *within* their centers of power is a vanguardist enterprise. This anthology is therefore an experiment in the mobilization of academic institutions not as patron of innovative poetry but as manager of literary history in real time. As their respective introductions attest, Dworkin and Goldsmith are highly self-aware of the sociological function of the literary anthology. Anthologists typically determine literary value by judging what constitutes good or significant writing; Dworkin and Goldsmith leverage the power of the anthology to determine simply what counts as literature. For Dworkin, the category of the literary is a function of specific publishing histories. "Context is everything," he writes repeatedly. This means that *Against Expression* includes writing previously published by definitively literary presses, as well as "non-literary" writing now constituted as literary by virtue of context. "Even in the case of the few exceptions to our [literary] focus," writes Dworkin, "all of the texts included are presented here, in the new context of this anthology, as literary." One can almost hear Dworkin echoing Robert Rauschenberg's infamous telegram to Iris Clert: "THE TEXTS PRESENTED HERE ARE LITERARY IF I SAY SO."

The editorial focus on the category of the literary is meant to be recuperative, to take upon itself the task of bringing literary history up to speed with art history and restaging the same interventions within institution literature that the historical avant-garde staged within institution art in the last century. In a 2010 interview, Lytle Shaw asked Goldsmith why conceptual writing had become increasingly synonymous with the technique of appropriation.

In response, Goldsmith told a familiar story: in 1959, Brion Gysin claimed that writing was fifty years behind painting, and fifty years later his statement still holds true. This time Goldsmith went so far as to argue that, with the emergence of Pop Art in the 60s and Consumer Art in the 80s, “the art world went through postmodernism and poetry didn’t.” In the introduction to *Against Expression*, Goldsmith’s rhetoric makes the situation seem dire: “From Napster to gaming, from karaoke to BitTorrent files, the culture appears to be embracing the digital and all the complexity it entails—with the exception of writing.”

The paradox of conceptual writing is that its radical break with supposedly retrograde literary institutions needs authorization—not antagonism—from those institutions before it can become visible as literary practice in the first place. *Against Expression* contains evidence everywhere of its roots in the academy. It is no secret that Marjorie Perloff and Charles Bernstein have played a significant role in nurturing the reception of conceptual writing within the academy. Even so, the size of their presence in and around *Against Expression* is remarkable. Perloff is one of the volume’s dedicatees, and one of the general editors of the series in which the book appears, Northwestern University’s Avant-Garde and Modernism Collection. Meanwhile, Bernstein is one of only three core Language poets who appear in the anthology (Steve McCaffery and Ron Silliman are the other two); at twenty-five pages, his work ties Goldsmith’s for the largest portfolio in the volume. Bernstein’s name also opens the book jacket copy. Conceptual writing has come to name an insider’s game among writers officially sanctioned by—and marketed by—prominent poetry critics.

A different kind of academicism characterizes Dworkin’s earlier *UbuWeb Anthology of Conceptual Writing* (a collection housed in Goldsmith’s online avant-garde art database, UbuWeb). That anthology’s great strength lies in its scholarly ambition to define the parameters of a new, cross-disciplinary literary and art history. Dworkin takes conceptualist trends in contemporary experimental poetry as points of access to a moment in the 60s and 70s when a multimedia aesthetic flourished around text-based practices in Fluxus, performance art, concrete poetry, and other fields spread across the gallery, the art space, and the printed page. The UbuWeb anthology devises “conceptual writing” as a heuristic that brings into focus previously obscured constellations and genealogies of literary and art historical movements. Its provocations for further redrawing the map are considerable: connections emerge, for instance, between a first generation of conceptual writers (Vito Acconci, Bernadette Mayer, and others) and early figures in Language poetry.

Against Expression, on the other hand, provides much flimsier historical frames for conceptual writing. The anthology’s archive exceeds Dworkin’s

earlier effort in its historical depth and breadth (stretching from Diderot to Duchamp and Mallarmé to Mac Low), but the selection of appropriation-based texts from multifaceted oeuvres reduces the richness of the archive to what the anthology's narrowed definition of the conceptual can accommodate. The editors highlight appropriation-based works to underscore a paradox described in both of their introductions: texts rooted in found and sourced material demonstrate that literature has finally overcome its taboo on the unoriginal, the uncreative, and the nonexpressive. Digital culture has supposedly changed our very concepts of textual production, while at the same time the self-conscious plagiarism of a Diderot or a Yeats shows that the situation in literature has never been otherwise. In other words, the anthology's presentation of its own archive verges on the ahistorical and the transhistorical simultaneously. The book's organization seems in fact to hinder the historicizing work that might be done with its materials: an alphabetized table of contents dispenses with the chronological, geographical, sociological, or even formal categories that might reveal features common to the literary history of appropriation.

Putting the editorial rhetoric to one side, a simpler way of judging the anthology is to consider whether it draws attention to any deserving but neglected poets. Consider the case of Christopher Knowles, whose writing appears in print for the first time since 1979 in *Against Expression*. Along with Acconci, Mayer, and Mac Low, Knowles should stand at the head of any historical account of protoconceptual and conceptual writing, and his work deserves the renewed attention that these other authors have enjoyed in recent years. On that last account, Dworkin and Goldsmith have done valuable work as anthologists and literary historians, providing two ample selections from Knowles's out-of-print and nearly forgotten book of procedural and visual texts, *Typings* (Vehicle Editions, 1979). The editors' introductory note highlights the literary-musical-dramatic collaboration among Knowles, Robert Wilson, and Philip Glass that generated many of the texts collected in *Typings*. But this note and the anthology's paratexts in general fail to capture Knowles's work in the right historical frame or formal categories. We get Christopher Knowles the appropriationist, who by surfing his radio dial and grafting song lyrics into his writing algorithms became "a pop-infused update to Steinian concerns"—but not Knowles the emergent figure in a late-60s and early-70s New York art and performance scene with definite ties to the legacy of Minimalism. We also get Knowles the rigid proceduralist, whose computational approach to the "processing and parsing of language" anticipates web-generated works of conceptual writing—but not Knowles the autistic poet whose work John Ashbery called "pure conceptualism" in a review because the rigidity of its structures came

from the rigor of Knowles's own thinking and from the idiosyncratic and ephemeral character of his procedures. And perhaps more than any other author included in *Against Expression*, Knowles's work is undoubtedly marred by the poetics of unoriginality and nonexpressivity imputed to it. Knowles's conceptual procedures put the thought of a particular mind—his own—into form, and perhaps the humanist presumptions of the term “expression” are worth retaining if they help distinguish a mind like his from the kind of automated algorithmic processes that he bested with a radio and a typewriter.

To pit contemporary conceptual writing categorically *against expression* is to take aim at the confessional lyric, which means reviving the felled enemy of Language poetry only to knock it down once again. This tactic entirely misses the opportunity to emphasize what might really distinguish a conceptual poetics and our current “conceptual moment,” as Goldsmith routinely calls the present time. Dworkin gets closest to the heart of conceptual writing when he suggests, too offhandedly, that its own “guiding concept... may be the idea of language as quantifiable data.” Framed in this way, conceptual writing could be understood as the extracurricular enterprise of two professional archivists, who daily enhance the scope of material out of which anthologies like *Against Expression* get produced. Writing, in other words, as compiling and organizing. But conceptual writing has been from the beginning a curriculum of its own. As a foundational text in this curriculum, *Against Expression* sets out to document a transnational contemporary poetry movement, archive its historical antecedents, and accelerate its reception within the academy. The anthology comes up short in framing and historicizing the conceptual because its editors have relied too heavily on avant-garde tropes borrowed from the visual arts in order to make an academic intervention. If Dworkin and Goldsmith were to resituate the emergence of conceptual writing more firmly within the twentieth-century history of new media practices across the disciplines rather than post-Duchampian art history, the enterprise could generate an effective alternative *literary* history. The project could also make real metacritical interventions in areas relevant to its true preoccupation with the archive, such as the politics of information access, file sharing, digitization, and preservation practices. But perhaps Dworkin and Goldsmith have simply failed in their branding of contemporary poetry, having chosen the wrong postmodernism to graft onto it. For a title that would have gestured toward the watershed moment not only for American conceptual art but also for its intermedial crosscurrents, while foregrounding the importance of contemporary media practices to their authors' work, the editors could have given us an *Anthology of Information Writing*. Instead we have *Against Expression*.

Andrew Peart