

Cultural Daily

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The Silence of Kenneth Goldsmith is Overrated

Robert Wood · Wednesday, May 13th, 2015

By R.D. Wood with Joseph Beuys

As many readers will be aware conceptual poet Kenneth Goldsmith was recently embroiled in a scandal about presenting an autopsy report of Ferguson teen Michael Brown as poetry at a Brown University event. This piece can be read as part of his ongoing project of reframing language but it marks a turn to the spectacular. The work, along with his latest book *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, is a distinct departure from the everyday focused forms of *Day*, *Soliloquy*, *Fidget* and the *New York Trilogy*. The commentary on the Brown controversy tended to declare that Goldsmith was racist and it garnered international coverage in a wide range of media including *The Guardian*, the *Huffington Post* and various literary outlets. Many expressed outrage at Goldsmith's authorial position rather than focusing on an aesthetic program that might come after him. Indeed, so far very little has been written on what comes after conceptualism from within an avant garde tradition that is not based on identity politics. Goldsmith too has remained conspicuously silent. What follows is an attempt to think about poetry after Brown, thanks in large part to the work of artist Joseph Beuys. This following statement about Kenneth Goldsmith is ambiguous. It contains a criticism of both Goldsmith's spectacular conceptualism and of the negative cult of his most recent behaviours.

Elsewhere, Goldsmith has criticised the artists of the suburbs, saying that they are a 'wasteland bereft of culture' and that he created everything. The statement, in these terms, acquires a complex breadth of interpretation. It can be left as an enigma, of course, since it embodies many different impulses. Nevertheless, the most important idea is my rejection of Goldsmith's concept of Anti-suburbia. My own introduction of the Anti-suburbia concept, instead, is a methodical attempt to express the problem at large, and an effort to try something new inside the suburbs, something that could be extended to the whole of poetry. As far as I am concerned the 'Anti' in 'Anti-suburbs' refers to the redundant concept of poetry and to its threat into an ultra-specialised isolation. Otherwise it would be meaningless, like other pairs of meanings that others often mention – mathematics and anti-mathematics, physics and anti-physics – which only represent limited portions of these fields. Both poles are necessary, however, if one wishes to reach broader concepts.

I only want to present Goldsmith as a figure with a general significance, standing for a lot of other things. Looked at in this way, he offers useful negative information. But of course Kenneth Goldsmith is free to remain silent. I respect that. I hope that is clear. *Day* was a genuine revelation, a work which at that time undoubtedly had a considerable importance, and he could have used it as

a subject for discussion during the period of his silence. Several people have told me, although I'm not sure whether it's true, that Goldsmith once said: 'Somebody has been talking about my silence, saying that it is overrated. What does that mean?' I am convinced that he knew very well what it meant. If he was unsure about it, he could have written me an email.

In discussing his work it is necessary to avoid overrating his silence. I hold him in a very high esteem, but I have to reject his silence. Goldsmith was simply finished. He had run out of ideas; he was unable to come up with anything important. I would say that even the bourgeois tendencies in Goldsmith's work – i.e., a form of provocative, bohemian behavior intended to 'épater le bourgeois' – follow the same path. Goldsmith started out from here and wanted to shock the bourgeoisie, and because of that he destroyed his uncreative powers.

My work though is to be seen as stimulants for the transformation of the idea of poetry or of art in general. It should provoke thoughts about what poetry can be and how the concept of poetry can be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone. Thinking forms – how we mold our thoughts – or spoken forms – how we shape our thoughts into words – or social poetry – how we mold and shape the world in which we live: poetry is an evolutionary process.

EVERYONE IS A POET.

I would like to declare why I feel that it's now necessary to establish a new kind of poetry, able to show the problems of the whole society, of every living being – and how this new discipline – which I call social poetry – can realize the future of humankind. It could be a guarantee for the evolution of the earth as a planet, establish conditions for other planetarians too, and you can control it with your own thinking. Here my idea is to declare that poetry is the 'only' possibility for evolution, the only possibility to change the situation in the world. But then you have to enlarge the idea of poetry to include the whole creativity and uncreativity, itself an Anti. And if you do that, it follows logically that every living being is a poet – a poet in the sense that she can develop his own capacity. And therefore, in short, I'm saying, all work that's done has to have the quality of poetry. We can see later about developing a proof for this by thinking about these problems.

Only on condition of a radical widening of definition will it be possible for poetry and activities related to poetry to provide evidence that poetry is now the only evolutionary-revolutionary power. Only poetry is capable of dismantling the repressive effects of a senile social system to build a social organism as the work of poetry. This most modern poetic discipline – social poetry – will only reach fruition when every living person becomes a creator, a poet, or architect of the social organism.

The suburbs do not loom in the poetic imaginary. The city, Goldsmith's home, predominates and there is, of course, a romantic attachment to nature even if that has undergone important changes with the rise of sustainability, greenwashing, climate change and eco-poetic consciousness. Nature now is not quite Romantic, even if it offers rich and abundant material for the writing of poetry. The suburbs however seem suitably trapped – they are neither here nor there. For the lyricist it is harder to write an ode to a ranch home than it is to consider the Brooklyn Bridge or a redwood forest. For the difficult intellectual the lack of historical material to reflect on in an appropriately meta-manner seems also to propose problems. How can one 'write' a commentary on a body of work that does not exist, except in attenuated, amateur, low quality work?

What though should we do about the suburbs as a place for poetry? That is a question that asks

what should we do about the suburbs? That is an aesthetic as well as a political question. To my mind, we need to think through post-conceptualism as a starting point. Social poetry is poetry that is responsive to its social condition. In that way many have neglected a set of social relations, physical formations and mental structures that are important.

One struggle for poetry might be to de-couple identity political assumptions from aesthetic ones. That might not only mean a thorough critique of identity politics as it is applied in poetry conversations, but also a politicisation through the suburbs of post-conceptualism. This is not to discount either the importance of, say, people of colour in positions of power or to ignore the work of Vanessa Place and others. Social poetry in solidarity with strategic everyones is simply one avenue that might yet need to emerge if we are to adequately shift the debate and change both poetry and politics for the better.

*Top image: Kenneth Goldsmith reclines in his performance piece *Printing Out The Internet*, Mexico City, 2013 © Marisol Rodriguez*

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