

Zero Kerning

Goldsmith: “By self-advertising, attract the attention of the day.”¹ The *Day* being a perfect example of the degree to which Kenneth Goldsmith’s attention-attracting projects have been so well self-advertised that their paratexts — blurbs and back-cover copy, author statements, interviews, reviews — make a bid to eclipse, or even completely replace, their content. Consistently branded, his books come so neatly packaged in single-sentence summations that they seem to render any actual reading redundant, or unnecessary: 600 pages of rhyming *r* phrases, sorted by syllables and alphabetized; everything he said for a week; every move his body made for a day; a year’s worth of transcribed weather reports; one day’s *New York Times*, retyped....

Measured against the specifics of the particular texts, such tag-lines are of course to some extent inaccurate, and one should always remember Benjamin’s warning: “Never trust what writers say about their own writing.”² Indeed, part of the interest of Goldsmith’s projects lies precisely in the distance they deviate from the tidiness of their clear protective wrappers. Moreover, I suspect that the obvious topics attracted so far — strategies of appropriation and boredom; rhetorics of “uncreative writing” and “conceptual poetics”; genealogies traced to the rules of the OuLiPo or the useless reference books of ‘pataphysics — have worked as decoys, distracting readers from what may be more central concerns and entrenched networks of filiation.

One of those concerns, I want to suggest in these paragraphs, is the concept of the interval. To read Goldsmith’s *oeuvre*, at a certain remove, reveals a consistent concern with spacing — with the collapse of distances into equal measures, and the differences and repetitions subsequently legible within regimes of periodic regulation. Here the concept of *rule* begins to move beyond the obvious, pre-established methods for structuring books like *No. 111* (or the related projects *No. 105* and *No. 110*) and to extend, as a general principle, to Goldsmith’s other works as well. *Regulate*: to make regular, or even [f. late L. *regulat-*, ppl. stem of *regulare* (5th c.), f. *regula* RULE].

“If you start with rules, you’ve really got a tough road,” as Clark Coolidge says, and of course in any long work “there will be long stretches of time that will be dry.”³ But even pacing itself (“a thing quite out of taste, no variety, no composition in the world”) can be exciting; the percussive swarm of Ligeti’s *Poème*, after all, is made entirely from measure.⁴ It sounds like a hailstorm. “Interval,” not coincidentally, has always been idiomatically associated with the weather; it appears, accordingly, in *The Weather* (as does “pace”), “from time to time, in place to place”, as in the beautifully rhymed and assonant phrase “some intervals of sun.”

“Interval: [Ultimately ad. L. *intervallum*, orig. ‘space between palisades or ramparts’, later ‘interval of space or of time’, f. *inter* between + *vallum* rampart. In F. the word appears as *entreval*, *antreval* (13th c.), *entrevale*, *-valle* (14-16th c.), *intervalle* masc. from 14th c. The earliest Eng. example represents the first of these; the 14-16th c. *intervalle* was evidently also immediately from F. The appearances of the word till the beginning of the 17th c. are quite sporadic, having little or no historical connexion with each other. **1.** The period of time between two events, actions, etc., or between two parts of an action or performance; a period of cessation; a pause, break.”

No.111: “time-share, Times Square [...] Time Warner, timekiller, timepleaser [...] time traveller [...] time was whatever, times without number [...]” *The Weather* reveals similarly idiomatic and idiosyncratic uses of “times” (e.g. “times of sun and clouds”) and those intervals the weather registers “at times” or “from time to time.” Moreover, the structure of these texts foregrounds the intervals that constitute calendrics: the hours of *Fidget* within its day; the days of *Soliloquy* within its week; the days of *The Weather* within its seasons (sections) within its year (*Year*, in fact, being the original working title for the project); the dates that form the full, awkwardly unmemorable title of *No. 111: 2.7.93-10.20.96*.

Such intervals *punctuate* [“to break into or interrupt in intervals”] the flow of time, just as the “periods of rain” repeated throughout *The Weather* interrupt otherwise indistinct atmospheric systems of continuously varying degrees of humidity, pressure, and saturation. But the etymological chance of that idiomatic phrase — “periods of rain” — further emphasizes the underlying concept of spacing that relates *The Weather* to Goldsmith’s earlier series of works on punctuation, beginning with a suite of large-format drawings from the 1990s and culminating in the chapbook *Gertrude Stein On Punctuation*, in which all of the punctuation marks the eponymous section of Stein’s lecture are extracted and distributed in constellations across a triptych of pages.

One precedent for these works, as Goldsmith has acknowledged, can be found in the redistribution of punctuation in John Cage’s *Writing For the Second Time Through Finnegans Wake*. In a haphazard scatter over the field of the page, unaligned with the orthogonal set of the rest of the text, the punctuation from Cage’s source text is spread without any particular orientation. Cage and Alison Knowles (who collaborated on the layout) may in turn have been inspired by one of the more curious moments in the *Wake* itself: a question mark, dropped askew between two lines of type and rotated so that its crook seems to do the work of a comma.⁵

The Weather also references Cage, who composed his own *Lecture on the Weather*, and who repeatedly “said that he wanted his music to be like the weather.”⁶ The more direct link,

however, is formal. Cage listened to radio news “in order to find out what the weather is going to be.” As *The Weather* records, those reports — fit to Procrustean intervals of sixty-second slots — are exact analogues of Cage’s *Indeterminacy*.⁷ Cage explained: “In oral delivery of this lecture, I tell one story a minute. If it’s a short one I have to spread it out; when I come to a long one I have to speak as rapidly as I can.”⁸

Registering the pressures of a regulating interval, the varied tempi of Cage’s vocal performance distort a natural speaking rhythm and transform vignettes into a musically interesting composition; because of those variations, as Goldsmith observes, “*Indeterminacy* is terrific listening.”⁹ Conversely, the move from speech to transcribed writing can make for terrific reading, and the tension between vocal performance and written text — yet another instance of the logic of the interval — runs throughout Goldsmith’s own work as well. The notation displayed in *Gertrude Stein On Punctuation* is exemplary: marking the intervals of grammar in writing while recalling the oral history embedded in their elocutionary origin as cues for regulating speech for rhetorical effect.

“The auditor learns[...] Note the notes of admiration! [...] Count the hemisemidemicolons! Screamer caps and invented gommas, coites puntlost, forced to farce! The pipette will say anything at all for a change,” to return to *Finnegans Wake*, which is itself “the difference between speech to make a point and speech to make no point at all” (where “point” is the sentence’s full stop).¹⁰ Or, as Cage put it in his *Lecture on Nothing*: “I have nothing to say and I am saying it.”¹¹ Like *Indeterminacy*, that “saying” is a “composed talk” pitched to the *rubato* of “everyday speech” and with its text divided into the equal measures of a rhythmic structure.¹²

In the *Lecture on Nothing* (as in the contemporaneous *Lecture on Something*), Cage’s casual, colloquial “talk” is not only punctuated into movements and units, but the lines of the scored text are each divided into four measures spaced across the page (“re-quired,” as Cage puns in the opening movement) in a striking typographic layout.¹³ “This space of time” (or *Interuall*, as John Bullokar defined it in 1616: “a distance of time or place”) is also one of the lecture’s themes. In an instance of ‘composition as explanation,’ Cage’s typically modern, intervalic text discusses his interest in “all the intervals,” especially “the modern intervals,” explaining: “I learned that the intervals have meaning.”¹⁴

Intervals not only have meaning, but they are, in some sense, what grounds meaning itself: “the *spacing* (pause, blank, punctuation, interval in general, etc.) which constitutes the origin of signification.”¹⁵ The semiotic system of language depends on its multiple articulations at different levels: those intervals between letters, words, and larger units of grammar which introduce the physical space of difference that permits us to distinguish, cognitively, different meanings. Moreover, as evinced by the move from the *scriptura continua* of western antiquity

(in which texts were written without spacing between words), such intervals have had far-reaching conceptual effects, with changes in textual space changing the way we understand the world around us.¹⁶

Perhaps the most significant “consequence of the medieval evolutionary process through which space was introduced into text,” according to Peter Saenger, was an increase in the incidence of silent reading (in short: “space between eyebrows pushed by speech”).¹⁷ Whatever the true extent of the historical change in medieval reading practice, or the actual mechanism of that change, comparing the intervals of written and spoken language is instructive, given the counterintuitive degree that the spacing of spoken language fails to correspond to written word-boundaries. In the more regular and predictable blanks of writing, even the most accurate transcription cannot register speech’s incongruent and idiosyncratic measure of interlexical pause, slur, and transegmental drift.

(Although, as *The Spectator* reminds us, with a pun on the typographic and psychological senses of the word *character*, handset type might reveal an equally individualistic temper: “the difference between huddling and spacing out is one which depends partly on character: very few men spacing out their letters exactly alike”).¹⁸ While Goldsmith’s punctuation pieces can reveal some “interference of the lyric ego,” the stenciling of his hand-drawn word pieces (*73 Poems* and *Tizzy Boost*, for instance) seems designed to counter any idiosyncrasy with uniformity and consistent spacing. However precious, even those handmade works seem closer to the digital age of precision desktop publishing than to the classicism of antique fine-press book-art.

As *Soliloquy* attest, Goldsmith is attentive to such typographic particulars, especially on-line. “There’s no spaces in URL’s,” he explains at one point, and he later discusses the distributed setting of web text at some length, concluding: “Is that at about the spacing you want it?”¹⁹ One should recall that Goldsmith’s monumental on-line editorial project, *UbuWeb*, originally began as a far more modest and haphazard archive devoted primarily to visual poetry, like Brazilian *concretismo*, that emphasized the spacing of language on the page. Tellingly, “the physical attributes the Noigandres group found inspiring in various poetic precursors reappear in” Goldsmith’s own work, with “space (*blancs*) and typographical devices as substantive elements of composition.”²⁰

Here, despite the obvious emphasis on speech — the mouthwork of salivary swallows in *Fidget*, with its play-by-play narration in which Goldsmith “spoke every movement,” or the captured conversations netted in the filtering screens of *No. 111* (not to mention the colloquial stutters and idioms laid bare in *Soliloquy* and *The Weather*) — is the point at which Goldsmith’s work announces itself *as writing*, as *écriture*.²¹ To align those works with Cage’s spoken lectures or

David Antin's "talk poems" is tempting, but the real affiliation would be based not on the similarly blatant (and slightly aggressive) self-proclamation of "talking" in those works, but rather on the signature spacing (*les 'blancs'*) of their transcripts.

"It is necessary," in Derrida's accounting "that interval, distance, spacing occur [...] with a certain perseverance in repetition."²² A reflection of that perseverance, mirrored from one facet of the logic of the interval, can be glimpsed in the exhaustive compass aspired to by so many of Goldsmith's projects (already evident in the reference-book length of *No. 111*): *all* the punctuation from a source; *every* move his body made; *every* word spoken; *every* word in the *Times*; *every* forecast, every day. The logical conclusion seems to be the end-game of Benjamin's collector: "Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious...."²³ Intervals register only when their background has a sufficiently inclusive, expansive extension and duration.

(The interval thus opens a series of alternately discrepant and congruent spaces between construction and reception. On the one hand, it can serve to pace both the material and the reader ["I'll finish that chapter and then we'll take a break"].²⁴ On the other hand, the rigorously uniform and exhaustive structures aspired to by these works are at odds with the modes of their assumed reading: irregular, discontinuous, distracted — skimmed and sampled and dipped. "You cannot read this thing cover front to back[...] It's the kind of book that you might leave your on the back of your toilet[...] It's not meant to be read linearly... none of my work is.")²⁵

For this reason, a project such as *Broken New York*, with its *flâneur* "attempt to catalog every type of streetscape defect the city has to offer," fits assuredly into Goldsmith's *oeuvre* (although the work is in fact a collaboration with David Wondrich).²⁶ The family resemblance is equally unmistakable in a project Goldsmith referred to as "retyping my library": ostensibly every book on his shelf, in the alphabetical order of their author's last name, retyped and repackaged under the logic of a new, uniform interval. In place of the irregular sizes, colors, and bindings of the originals, and regardless of their genre or status: a vast set of identical, archival-grey document boxes.

Such a project obviously points in many directions. With its witty evocation of the geometric units of 1960s Minimalism it veers back toward the sculptural tradition in which Goldsmith was trained at RISD (and hence is directly related to the volumetric heft of *Day*). At the same time, it re-imagines Benjamin's "Unpacking My Library," recalls Perec's catalogue of ways to rearrange a library, and restages Borge's quixotic Menard. But what I want to emphasize is how effortlessly it merges with Goldsmith's other works, and what a solid (perhaps, necessary)

place it holds in that series, *even though it went unrealized*. The oeuvre, in short, seems to have established its own interval.

A certain spacing, that is, has emerged between the books themselves (I am always a little surprised to see the books together, side-by-side, and remember that they were not all published in an identical format, or with a uniform design). The *oeuvre* has come to constitute something like a collection of collections, a second-order collection in Benjamin's thinking, a sort of *catalogue déraisonné*. "What is decisive in collecting is that the object is detached from all its original functions in order to enter into the closest conceivable relation to things of the same kind. The relation is the diametric opposite of any utility, and falls into the peculiar category of completeness."²⁷

Accordingly, the converse also holds true. The logic of the interval has come to feel like such a forcefully established principle of Goldsmith's signature that some of his works — *Head Citations*; "Punk"; 6799; an unpublished Manichean epic of variously weighted fonts; an immense unfinished drama of chat-room dialogues — have in turn come to seem like more minor and insubstantial works than one abandoned and recycled before being finished or ever seen by more than a few studio visitors. And this is true irrespective of those texts' interest or importance, and regardless of the time or effort they required. They almost seem to lack a certain authenticating signature, to be fully *his*.

So 6799, for instance — simply a list of Goldsmith's record collection — is the work that at first glance seems to most nakedly evince his identity as a collector, but it appears, in light of Benjamin's argument, to actually be the book furthest removed from the logic of the collector. It does reflect (though "brittle, too, are mirrors") the collection's peculiar category of completeness, but like a library card-catalogue 6799 is still too utile, still too close to what might have been its original function.²⁸ All of which brings us back again to sculpture. Relating collector and sculptor through the figure of the plinth, Benjamin concludes: "Collectors are beings with tactile instincts."²⁹

Ultimately, Goldsmith's spacing creates a kind of non-rhythmical metrics. While all intervals permit measurement (phone-poles in the desert, equally spaced and pulsing as you pass, allow distance to be judged), Goldsmith's spacing is a special instance. Where some spacing overlays a regular interval onto an unchanged ground (like the superimposed grid of an unprojected map), or establishes a form into which information is fit in distributions that could be accounted for otherwise (the measures of a musical score, the frames of cinema), Goldsmith's intervals tend to regulate one regime in a way that distorts others. With one variable held — perversely, 'pataphysically — constant, others are allowed to be set radically, reeling, free.

Much of the interest of *Soliloquy*, for instance, comes from its defamiliarization of otherwise quotidian speech, and the way in which diegetic space and time are collapsed into the equal intervals of the textual period: one statement follows another with the same spacing regardless of whether the two utterances took place as part of the same conversation or an hour later, across town, with a different interlocutor. Similarly, the syllabic intervals of *No. 111* reveal unexpected rhythmic patterns; the spacing of its phrases yield a data-set of discoveries for questions linguists never thought to ask (e.g.: do five-syllable colloquial American English phrases ending in a schwa have a typical metrical base?)

Similarly, the spacing in *Fidget* establishes a certain interval by registering only one movement per sentence, creating a strange sense of bodily rhythm in which any action is equally narrated regardless of its scale or significance: a swing of the arm condenses into the same textual space that the blink of an eyelid expands to fill. Moreover, because the spacing of *Fidget* depends on the time it takes to narrate (rather than perform) actions, they appear hastened or slowed to match the beat of this new textual pulse, just as any comprehensive corporeal view is distorted by recording only selected movements at the expense of the thousands of other simultaneous ones.

The spacing of *Fame* is equally distorting. Goldsmith asked Birmingham residents for five names off the top of their heads and then published the responses in public venues: the newspaper, billboards, and finally a bronze civic monument. The pentameter intervals of those texts bring together certain names that other categorizations (family, lovers, heroes, friends) would separate while omitting names that other schema would put in natural proximity. Again, I do not mean to suggest that *Fame* is unrelated to Goldsmith's several other projects exploring the interesting and timely intersection of surveillance and exhibitionism — only that they are also connected, and perhaps at a deeper level, by the logic of the interval.

Day also depends on the distorting effects of the interval, at both a molecular and molar level, and as in *Soliloquy* and *Fidget* its acts of regulation defamiliarize the quotidian world, rendering its everyday language extraordinary and strange. At the micro-level, its distinctive facture arises from a peculiar textual democratization, reducing the newspaper's patchwork carnival of fonts and typefaces to the book page's uniform print-block of equal-weight twelve-point Times. Each word in *Day* is given equal weight, just as setting the kerning to zero gives each typeset character an equal spacing. "Spacing consists in putting a proper distance between words."³⁰ "My entire production," as Goldsmith has observed, "is predicated upon distance."³¹

At the molar level, the newspaper source of *Day* is twice removed from its original spacing. First, the paper is pulled from the dependable interval of the daily (a single date, September 1st, 2000, snatched from a series that stretches back before any reader's memory to 1856 and

projects forward to any imaginable horizon). Secondly, the book removes the paper from the multiple printings of that single day's circulation run, as its text is translated into the new format of a second codex edition. With this double withdrawal, *Day* fixes and monumentalizes the transient in the frozen moment of sculpture (like the implicit gossip and fleeting associations of the Birmingham monument).

(The *punctum* in this snapshot of a day, it seems to me, are the obituaries. "Literature," as Pound famously put it, "is news that STAYS news," and in this strenuous attempt to avoid literariness the obituaries maintain their status — *stay news* — in a way that other items do not.³² The other stories, in hindsight, now appear obsolete or irrelevant; they have been superseded by more recent developments or rendered mere trivia [the US Open semifinalists, say]. Or, more interestingly, they have acquired a certain ironic frisson from subsequent events. Obituaries, in contrast, capture their news at a point of singularity: each individual always just as dead, their facts without a future.)

Moreover, these removes bring Goldsmith's project under the sign of Marcel Duchamp. Although Duchamp's *readymade* is often taken as a synonym for *objet trouvé*, part of its essence is the same logic of the interval we have already seen, including the temporal spacing that structures so many of Goldsmith's books: "Naturally inscribe that date, hour, minute, on the readymade as information. Also the serial characteristic of the readymade."³³ That "serial characteristic" is the removal of one particular item from the spacing of otherwise identical, mechanically reproduced commodities: one singular snow shovel from the undifferentiated stock on the hardware store hooks; *this* urinal from the equidistant set on the men's room wall....

My argument here has not been that reading the spacing inherent in Goldsmith's work has led us anyplace unexpected (one can see the allegiance to Cage or Duchamp with half-a-glance at any one of the works), but rather that attention to the interval brings us to those familiar places by more secure and assured routes, that we have met topics half-way, on the common ground of structure. It is the logic of the lap, which requires two equal intervals (the up *and* the back, even to imagine something like "half a lap"). The lapse of a catalogue, equal and opposite, alogical, pure. "Suppose a collapse," as Stein wrote, "in rubbed purr."³⁴

NOTES

- ¹ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Life of Richard Nash, of Bath, Esq; Extracted Principally From His Original Papers* (London: J. Newbery; Bath: W. Frederick, 1762): 13.
- ² Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 1999): 302.
- ³ Clark Coolidge, "Arrangement," *Talking Poetics from Naropa Institute*, ed. Anne Waldman and Marilyn Webb (Boulder and London: Shambhala, 1978): 159; Kenneth Goldsmith, *The Weather* (Los Angeles: Make Now, 2005).
- ⁴ Oliver Goldsmith, *The Vicar of Wakefield: A Tale. Supposed to be written by Himself* (Salisbury: Printed by B. Collins, for F. Newbery, 1766): xvi. György Ligeti. *Poème symphonique pour 100 metronomes* (1962).
- ⁵ James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (NY: Penguin, 1976): 207
- ⁶ Kenneth Goldsmith, untitled review of *John Cage: Composed In America*, RIF/T 05.01
- ⁷ Kirk Simon and Karen Goodman, interview with John Cage.
- ⁸ John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown: Wesleyan University Press, 1961): 260.
- ⁹ Kenneth Goldsmith, *Soliloquy* (New York: Granary Books, 2001): 38
- ¹⁰ Joyce, *Wake*, 374; Kenneth Goldsmith, "I Look to Theory Only When I Realize That Somebody Has Dedicated Their Entire Life to a Question I Have Only Fleetinglly Considered" (work in progress, version 01.2002).
- ¹¹ Cage, *Silence*: 109.
- ¹² *Ibidem*.
- ¹³ *Ibidem*.
- ¹⁴ John Bullock, *An English expositor* (London: John Legatt, 1616); Cage, *Silence*: 115-116 *et passim*.
- ¹⁵ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976): 68.
- ¹⁶ See, to begin with: Paul Saenger, *Space between Words: The Origins of Silent Reading* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997); and *A History of Reading In the West*, ed. Guglielmo Cavallo and Roger Chartier, trans. Lydia Cochrane (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1999).
- ¹⁷ Saenger, *Space*: 20; Goldsmith, *Fidget* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1999): 11:00.
- ¹⁸ *The Spectator* XLIV (London: 22 April, 1871): 474.
- ¹⁹ Goldsmith, *Soliloquy*: 31; 111.
- ²⁰ Kenneth Goldsmith, "From (Command) Line to (Iconic) Constellation"; Augusto de Campos, Decio Pignatari, and Haroldo de Campos: *Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry* (1958).
- ²¹ Kenneth Goldsmith, letter to Marjorie Perloff, quoted in Perloff, "Vocable Scriptsigns: Differential Poetics in Kenneth Goldsmith's *Fidget* and John Kinsella's *Kangaroo Virus*," in *Poetry, Value, and Contemporary Culture*, eds. Andrew Roberts and John Allison (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002) 21-43.

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- ²² Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena and Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B. Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1973): 135.
- ²³ Benjamin, *Arcades*: 205.
- ²⁴ Goldsmith, *Soliloquy*: 274.
- ²⁵ *Ibidem*, 14.
- ²⁶ Andy Newman, "Torn, Bent, Dinged or Unhinged" *New York Times* (April 13, 2002).
- ²⁷ Benjamin, *Arcades*: 204.
- ²⁸ *Ibidem*.
- ²⁹ *Ibidem*, 205.
- ³⁰ Philip Luckombe, *A Concise History of the Origin and Progress of Printing; with Practical Instructions to the Trade in General. Compiled from Those Who Have Wrote on This Curious Art*, 2nd edition, non-uniform title (London: Printed and Sold by W. Adlard and J. Browne, 1770): 396.
- ³¹ Goldsmith, *Language Encounters*.
- ³² Ezra Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1934): 29.
- ³³ Marcel Duchamp, *Essential Writings: Marchand du sel / Salt Seller*, ed. Michel Sanouillet and Elmer M. Peterson (London: Thames & Hudson, 1975): 32.
- ³⁴ Gertrude Stein, *Tender Buttons: objects, food, rooms* (Los Angeles: Sun & Moon Press, 1991): 27.