



Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing

Craig Dworkin (Editor), Kenneth Goldsmith (Editor)

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In much the same way that photography forced painting to move in new directions, the advent of the World Wide Web, with its proliferation of easily transferable and manipulated text, forces us to think about writing, creativity, and the materiality of language in new ways. In Against Expression, editors Craig Dworkin and Kenneth Goldsmith present the most innovative works responding to the challenges posed by these developments.

Charles Bernstein has described conceptual poetry as "poetry pregnant with thought." Against Expression, the premier anthology of conceptual writing, presents work that is by turns thoughtful, funny, provocative, and disturbing. Dworkin and Goldsmith, two of the leading spokespersons and practitioners of conceptual writing, chart the trajectory of the conceptual aesthetic from early precursors including Samuel Beckett and Marcel Duchamp to the most prominent of today's writers. Nearly all of the major avant-garde groups of the past century are represented here, including Dada, OuLiPo, L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, and Flarf to name just a few, but all the writers are united in their imaginative appropriation of found and generated texts and their exploration of nonexpressive language. Against Expression is a timely collection and an invaluable resource for readers and writers alike.

Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing Details

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mwpm says

Against Expression

- from "Soldatmarkedet", Monica Aasprong, pg. 4

* * *

- from "Removal, Move (Line of Evidence)", Vito Acconci, pg. 22-23

* * *

The Language of Love

Love letters
Carried away
Pretty Polly

The language of love
Betrayed
Hearts desire

*

First Kiss

First kiss
Flowers in the rain
The fifth kiss
Petals in the storm

*

Home at Last

Rooms of the heart
Beyond the picket fence

This is the house
Where love dwells

- from "Unforeseen Alliances", Sally Alatalo, pg. 32-33

* * *

abcdef
ghijkl
mnopqr
stuvwxyz

- "Suicide", Louis Aragon, pg. 51

* * *

- from "Flatland: A Romance of Many Dimensions", Derek Beaulieu, pg. 65

* * *

- from "Nets", Jen Bervin, pg. 113

* * *

Brie

You may already be an anarchist. It's true. Nothing is finer, more sublime or creamy. In its long history, when you come up with your own ideas and initiatives and solutions, it should bulge slightly. Not all brie is created equal. Poetry is made by all, not one, and at our cheese counter lies a cheese monger's tip.

- from "Whole Foods", Marie Buck, pg. 121

* * *

- from "Between Words", Elisabeth S. Clark, pg. 143

* * *

I know God can provide us

with more than one cover story
on the subject of black holes

It's how life was originally created
in the hospital those weeks
after I was electrocuted some 35 years ago
when my mom and I emoted as we'd never had

mustering energy for the "unconscious"
pain and frustration that we were feeling

I never discussed this with the doctor, but
the seas don't part and mountains
made it really difficult for the whole province
to see pictures of the inside of my uterus

I do know that rule number one
is never to point your camera at the sun.

Just stay home and be a mom!!!
my last boyfriend punched me out
in front of my 5-year-old
and I have never been happier

a woman who learned to bend spoons from Uri Gellar
said the my uterus performed
the function of a small blanket placed over a cat
before giving the cat away or putting her to sleep

Baby dust to all, Sherry

- "The Only Miracles I Know of Are Simply Tricks That People Play on One Another", Katie
Degentesh, pg. 175-176

* * *

One

all about oil
how *I* did go

some were
down with their them

made that was
which word would write you

as by with make could day come

but many more said

part into each who will
use what from other

find first a one to my call

be is if has

can is if up

time of get see

and so on, no?

in there

like hi look been for long
her she

(the him this your had)

so

if he at its way?

may not have now then

may not have now then

two than are these:

to when we do it out we

to when it we out

people they number

are water they or

- from "First Words", Laura Elrick, pg. 197-199

* * *

Length 1

A
B
C
D
E
F
G
H
I
J
K
L
M
N
O
P
Q
R
S
T
U
V
W
X
Y
Z

Length 2

AD IO SO
AF IS SP
AH IT SQ
AI JE SR
AL JO ST
AM JR TH
AN KC TI
AS KM TO
AT KU TU
AV KY UH
AW LA UM
AX LB UN
BD LE UP
BE LO US
BI LP VA
BO LT VP
BY MA VS

CA NC WE
CC ND WT
CF ME WU
CH MG YA
CM NY YD
CO ML YE
CT MM YR
CU MO YS
DA MR ZU
DE MT
DI MY
DO NE
DR NO
DU NW
ED OF
EH OH
EL OL
EM ON
EN OP
EQ OR
ET OS
EX OT
FE OX
FT OZ
FY PA
GA PI
GM FL
GO PO
HA PP
HE PT
HI RD
HR RE
IF RF
IJ RY
IL SE
IM SI
IN SL

[...]

- from "The Standard Corpus of Present Day English Language Usage Arranged by Word Length and Alphabetized Within Word Length", Gerald Ferguson, pg. 212-214

* * *

apostrophe (a foreign agent who accidentally ruptured an emergency cyanide tooth cap just before your rendez-vous with a thin man in a lumber jacket)

you are forced to remain in your house during a chemical or biological release, adequate supplies could help you live through a period of danger without hardship * you are directed to evacuate instead of sheltering-in-place, the emergency supply kit can be taken with you and used to ease the transition to a shelter * you are helping * you are the best * you are cared for and our emergency workers can focus on those most in need * you are forced to remain in your home during a natural disaster or other event, adequate supplies could help you live through a period of danger without hardship * you are directed to evacuate instead of sheltering-in-place, the emergency kit can be taken with you and used to ease the transition to a shelter * you are instructed to shelter-in-place, take your children and pets indoors immediately * you are told there is a danger of explosion, close the window shades, blinds, or curtains to avoid injury, stay away from windows stay in the room and listen to the radio until you are told all is safe or you are instructed to evacuate authorities may decide to evacuate authorities may decide to evacuate an area for your protection * you are agent zero and you are a mighty sparrow!!!!" and then he is gone * you are agent zero and you are a mighty sparrow!!!!" and then he is gone * you are vice president of the united states and something like this happens it is big news, and i think he had a responsibility to try to get the information out as quickly as possible and as fully as possible," clark said, adding, "just having [armstrong] talk to the local newspaper in texas doesn't cut it *

- from "Apostrophe", Bill Kennedy & Darren Wershler, pg. 320

* * *

- from "The Bible (alphabetized)", Rory Macbeth, pg. 359

* * *

En nZe eaRing ory Arms,
Pallor pOn laUghtered laiN oureD Ent,
aZure teR,
un-
tAwny Pping cOme d oUt r wiNg-
joints,
preaD Et aZzle.

spRing-
water,
ool A O."

cOnvict laUghter scaNy)

me,

MaD E aZure TyRo,

of wAve-

cords,

Plashing rOck-

hollows e-

rUns f-

duNe;

he tiDe-

rips Esperus,

aZure iR,

ods And

Panisks,

rOm roUgh od,

aNd clouDs E aZes tuRned ple,

As Poggio uOise,

ad Up weeN chilD E aZ,

eaRt t on A Pike bOth n oUt,

ed,

"ANd yo CiD E eZ stRo red,

And Pped,

tO erU."

CE iN moulDering Es,

aZe luRs,

e grAss,

Pale mOving.

thUd,

rf uNder n-

gold E eZ heR e swAllows P,

rOof,

chUrch of iN e gold.

Eneath aZe,

teRing,

gusA . . .

Pool . . .

[...]

- from "Words nd Ends from Ez", Jackson Mac Low, pg. 370-371

* * *

- from "Le livre", Stéphane Mallarmé, pg. 399

* * *

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III I I III II II III I II I I II III III II III I II III I

- from "Pure Poems", Shigeru Matsui, pg. 339

* * *

[Scene 5]

abused. ago Amend, a ward ble youth,
But know, Come, you dear Queen, he did, His son
How's that? fool drink for give Last thing Mark An
my bat not dry; Rankly spirits the dry
then is they fool thou no tlements. tony?
/ two years Under With my brave was but (4)

*

[Scene 6]

each one, Here, through I count Parti so pre
tion make this gate tacle with pec (4)

*

[Scene 7]

And what Even hound in ing grey it did
I were like a fawn lisbury! ly? From O would
so free this time to die the leash, with Sa

*

[Scene 8]

*

[Scene 9]

*

[Scene 10]

A bribe I do my sword refuse to pay

- from "38: The New Shakespeare", Tomoko Minami, pg. 435-436

* * *

1.

wolves drive deer
of into the woods

leaves tremble
at water's edge

quietly return

all subjects
all happenings
are imaginary

deer simply have
moved into a home
sweet home status

pheasant hunt
flying squirrel

wood duckling

falling from the sky
like a blur
in some hurry to be gone

[...]

- from "Consider How Spooky Deer Are", K. Silem Mohammad, pg.

* * *

- from "Kyoto Protocol", Yedda Morrison, pg. 451

* * *

----- (-----)

MADAMDE SWANN -- -----

-----, ----- M. de Norpois -----, -----
Professor Cottard
-----, ----- Swann, -----
[...]

- from "All the Names of *In Search of Lost Time*", Michael Maranda, pg. 472

* * *

- from "Zong!", M. NourbeSe Philip, pg. 485

* * *

First Group of Axioms

(axioms of connection)

I, 1 - *A sentence exists containing two given words.*

COMMENT: Obvious. Example: given the two words "a" and "a", there exists a sentence containing these two words - "A violinist gives the vocalist her a."

I, 2 - *No more than one sentence exists containing two given words.*

COMMENT: This, on the other hand, may occasion surprise. Nevertheless, if one considers the words "years" and "early", once the following sentence containing them has been written, namely "For years I went to bed early," clearly all other sentences such as "For years I went to bed right after supper" or "For years I did not go to bed late" are merely pseudo-sentences that should be rejected by virtue of the above axiom.

[...]

- from "", Raymond Queneau, pg.

* * *

Had West followed up her fine opening lead by dropping the club king or queen on the second round of clubs, she would have been able to play the ten when Stayman tried to throw her in, Then East could have overtaken and returned a heart, wrecking the contract.

- "Untitled Poem", Aram Saroyan, pg. 522

* * *

|'s the song of th|story of the |
which H.c.E. |'s
|n allways be-|n'-coming
through the h|men of the-m-others.
With|n th|story Anna Livia Plurabelle
represents the plurable flood
of warm wordy worders
that flow |n 2 the |
when th|s love(ly) h|men bursts forth
|n 2 songs, th|song's of the-m-any-'s
flow-er-ing vo|dSe.

and just as the |'nwraptures |t'Self
in th|s h|men
so H.c.E. |'mmerses h'Self
in the Worders of (the) L|ffe,
the river |t'Self;
that |'s the fonte of th|s outpouring of worders,
that |'s the sauce

of the|'s HCE's-Coming
+|'me--Coming
h|'men-COm|ng-Epic

Ou|, Ou|, Ou|, Ou|
all the way home
Ou| = O+ |
O+ | = O
O + | =

e|es

- "Finnegans Wanke", Christine Wertheim, pg. 567

* * *

the most common words with *a*

alms
the angel
the archbishop
the archduke
the arc
at least
until

the most common words with *c*

piece of paper
the cymbal
tin
whole
the price
a hundred-weight
the number
the way
the brick
gypsy
the target
czar
czarin
the imperial clock

[...]

- from "11 abecedaries", Wiener Gruppe, pg. 571-572

Dennis says

This is the best resource for conceptual writing by two of the leaders in the field! I'm going to use it for my class on contemporary forms.

Alex Lee says

What writing isn't conceptual? All writing starts from a seed, or even a series of seeds, the synthesis of which is at its root, an idea...and the demand of writing be that it be coherent, consistent and end by wrapping up the displacement that started it, resolving aesthetically as pure balance. All the accounts equalled, and that's the bonus of being complete. The simplest of such balances, of course, is morality.

Nonetheless, this writing is conceptual in the sense that other, more traditional forms of writing, are not. Kenneth Goldsmith offers an interesting essay at the start, comparing photography and painting with the internet and writing. The internet, with its textual basis (but also mixed media) releases writing from its traditional prison of realism -- of trying to be a representation of the world just as photography released painting from its post-renaissance vanishing point perspective prison...and since the internet is laid over the real world, writing as a whole, with its books and non-specific ties to the planet becomes dated.

So in this sense, the title could have been called as much "against expression" just as the Abstract Expressionist painters were expressing much. The difference, of course, is that in this impressive volume, the writing is centered on writing as a concept, rather than writing as an invisible craft to create coherency, realism and so on as a deferral to another dimension.

In this sense, while much of the writing in this volume seems unanchored from the real world, at its root is always an angular concept that ties it back to how this writing is generated, as the writing itself is the item of interest.

What's interesting is that even without the intention of creating immersive worlds, automatic writing, writing that highlights only "foot prints" of other forces in the real world, such as word choice, events like 9/11, or various other assorted, curated arrangements, we the reader still persist in creating worlds in which we meander. Traditional immersive writing ecologies, such as narrative-time-space are eschewed for the inner voices of language, the collective roar of a non-singular plurality that does not intend as much as it unconsciously desires...and in that desire creates great social distortion -- of facts, relationships, defiguring much of what we do as humans on a daily basis. Much of the writing here, while unreadable, acts as a record of our own distortion... sometimes playful, sometimes sad, sometimes anything you want, this text, devoid of much intent of narrative or morality allows us a partial 3rd point of view on ourselves, so that we can see in our shadow most of all, what we are obsessed in seeing.

It's funny that often the introduction to the piece grounds the conceptual writing as being meaningful only because it is linked in reference to an hereto unseen axis outside writing. Nonetheless, I still find problematic the title; is this expression or is it against expression? What is expressed; writing always has with it, a pre-linguistic figural meaning that is included in the act of registering language.

All in all, an inspiring collection.

Diego Mora says

En su prólogo, Kenneth Goldsmith compara la escritura conceptual contemporánea a la revolución impresionista en la pintura como respuesta a la popularización de la fotografía. En este caso, el disparador vendría a ser Internet. El autor propone que el plagiarismo es parte de esta tendencia, lo llama copy-paste, y ve antecedentes directos en el cut-up. Menciona los recursos de la web para transformar el texto en muchas cosas, usando editores de texto, de imágenes, de audio y distribuyéndolos en masa por email o a través de blogs. Craig Dworkin por su parte, dice que la escritura conceptual debe rastrearse a partir de Duchamp, a partir del cual utiliza ejemplos de éste y de otros artistas plásticos que poco a poco aplicaron sus conceptos en la escritura. Tanto Goldsmith como él se sustentan en el Wittgenstein que decía que no es el texto sino cómo se usa. Y dice Dworkin: "The textual proposition of conceptual art undercut the presumption of a unique art object; a significant move in the restricted economy of art's commodity system, the force of that negation is obviously lost in a modern literary context, where editions are the status quo" (xxxvi). Robert

Smithson lo describió así: "Language to be looked at and/or things to be read" (xxxvi).

"The opacity of language is a conclusion of conceptual art but already a premise for conceptual writing" (Dworkin, xxxvi).

"The guiding concept behind conceptual poetry may be the idea of language as quantifiable data" (Dworkin, xxxvi).

"My sense of language is that it is matter and not ideas-i.e., 'printed matter'" (Dwan Gallery advertising, 1972).

Monica Aasprong: "Soldatmarkedet", libro hecho solamente con la letra t.

Walter Abish: "Skin Deep", compuesto de citas anónimas.

"Conceptual art is good only when the idea is good." —Goldsmith (xxii).

Yigru Zeltil says

Even I must say this: "Against Expression" is not "the" perfect anthology.

First things first: it is obviously rather partisan, in a trojan horse kind of way. It is not just of, but (especially) "for" conceptual writing (and in quite a polemic way, as if expression is necessarily excluded by the use of conceptual techniques). There are quite a few "avant la lettre" examples of what they consider conceptual writing (Diderot, Mallarmé, Tzara, Duchamp, Warhol are all here, but concrete poetry, for instance, just gets a mention), but the focus is on the recent or very recent people, some of them, of course, directly connected to the two editors, who also mean to promote in this way their cause...

The analogies used to explain why conceptual writing is bound to become a major thing of the present/future, in fact, are rather flawed: it doesn't look that certain that literature will change itself under the pressure of the Internet as much as painting was reinvented with the coming of photography. Then "literature" is not really that many decades behind visual arts. Besides Kosuth and Warhol, there are quite a few other contemporary artists who delved into writing, at least within the medium of the artist book. In fact, Kenneth Goldsmith himself actually comes from the same art world-slanted air. French artist Bernar Venet did in the '60s-'70s some of the same things as Goldsmith (<http://hyperallergic.com/228238/the-l...>). Otherwise, there is some truth: it is much easier to practice conceptual writing now and make a reasonable aesthetic out of it - indeed, it shouldn't even be seen as so groundbreaking, but I don't see it as a rehash of Duchamp or Art & Language either.

Then there are so many authors, especially not English-speaking authors, that were left out (most of those in the book are from Canada, the USA and the UK - much less France and the surprisingly prolific Scandinavian countries. (For authors from some more parts of the world, please consult my "Bibliography of Conceptual Writing". And now sorry for the shameless plug!)

Of course, the female-to-male ratio also makes this index questionable, but now we also have the anthology "I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing By Women", which improves things quite a bit and comes with arguments that ought to be taken now in consideration.

All of these being said, "Against Expression" is, alongside "I'll Drown My Book: Conceptual Writing By Women", "Notes on Conceptualisms" by Fitterman and Place, Perloff's "Unoriginal Genius" and a few other books, a still great resource for the time being. For me, at least, it was a re-introduction to experimental writing that met my writerly needs in a time when I was looking for something like this. It really made me

re-evaluate my commitment to literature, my priorities... No, I didn't give up entirely on "lyrical poetry", but conceptual means give me now the access to do approaches I wanted to do ever since I started writing, but was not bold enough to go this far.

Anthony says

Meh.

Mills College Library says

808.8011 A259 2011

Matthew Bankuti says

I'm giving this book four stars, but I'm honestly sort of unsure if that is appropriate. I HATED a lot of the content, but I found that I enjoyed learning about conceptual writing regardless and that this anthology was a good introduction to the realm of conceptual writing despite my feelings towards much of it. A lot of the stuff in here is pretty silly on a conceptual level, and it is bizarre to have some of it presented as anything other than silly with such conviction, but there were a few works that I legitimately enjoyed both conceptually and as written works (however rare they may have been).

John says

While conceptual poetry may not be for everyone, those who work and read in this area will find this book one of the only guidebooks to the body of work that has been produced. The book covers a wide period of literature. The book covers Mallarme to Oulipo to Warhol to contemporary works.

Some of the entries could have used more context, but there is a dense collection within the cover.

Ellen says

I can't say that conceptual writing will ever be my thing, but this seemed to be an interesting collection of it.
