



Snickering for Joy

Stacey Levine

No. 111 2.7.93–10.20.96

Kenneth Goldsmith

**The Figures, 5 Castle Hill
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For writers of fiction that is grounded in the psychological, formalist texts of constraint seem strange beasts indeed. What might incite an author to work solely in abstraction; why the impulse to control structure to such a massive degree?

***The reader roaming through this
nontemporal sea of text grows dumb in its
expansive horizon.***

The answer is clearly multi-determined. The long tradition of constraint writing testifies to the fact that there is, at least for some, a satisfying pleasure in producing a text that works both as a tale and mathematical construct. Some constraints are merely exercises from which to begin, and are hidden in a narrative—as in some works by Italo Calvino or Harry Mathews. Constraint can also indicate a suspicion, disinterest, or denial in regard to introspection, reflection, or psychoanalytic thinking. Sometimes it signals, among other things, disgruntlement over the fact that some writers are successful at the publishing game and others aren't—though no one ever seems to come out and say this. The disgruntlement is couched in entirely different, more abstract terms, as when Marcel Benabou icily noted the bad reputation formalists often receive as they “call into question” the sincerity, emotion, and authenticity of more conventional literary endeavors. But Kenneth Goldsmith's *No. 111* 2.7.93–10.20.96 operates with a sense of textual celebration that falls outside the above parameters.

Formerly a sculpture student at the Rhode Island

School of Design, Goldsmith, 36, is author of *73 Poems* (a collaboration with vocalist Joan La Barbara, issued in text and cd from Permanent Press) and other works/texts based somewhere in between Oulipian formulaics and the music/art/literature experiments of the Fluxus group. *No. 111* is hefty; as such, it emphatically declares itself. An assemblage of language rooted in contemporary, everyday life, it points far afield from the actual realm of narrative. As the text builds toward its sprawling, rather boggling end, readers will become—depending on their taste for non-literary text experiments—annoyed by the book's unreadability or glee-filled at its simultaneous patient control and florid expansion.

Not that anyone will read *No. 111* front to back, or even at large stretches. It's fundamentally a project of counting and organizing that must have been outrageously tedious in the making. Corralled by two major rules and topping 600 pages, the book proceeds thusly: Every phrase of text, written between February 7, 1993 and October 20, 1996, has the same number of syllables as its chapter—therefore, each phrase in Chapter One has one syllable, each phrase in Chapter Two has two syllables, and so on. Phrases are distinguished by pairs of commas. Goldsmith's chapters don't go in numerical order, necessarily, either: the last chapter is a single “phrase” that contains a millennial 2,000 syllables (ending comically with a line from D.H. Lawrence). Every phrase of the book ends with the letter *R* or a related sound.

With a great rollicking enthusiasm, *No. 111* courses along, observing its rules and laying out long successions of discontinuous phrases that, variously, are blank and automatic-sounding, sharp and culturally observant, mock-infantile (“clean poopie: the kind where you poopie it out see it in the toilet but there is nothing on the toilet paper”), or even angry-sounding. The text also comprises threads of a complicated Jewish joke, media-driven factoids, and generally useless

cultural flotsam. A sampling from Chapter 28:

A lot girls [sic] become embarrassed by their parents and this is becoming a tradition in America, a sexual woman is like eating out. An emotional one is like home-cooked food. I'd love to have either, ah beedy-beedy beedy-beedy beedy-beedy bah/ah beedy-beedy beedy-beedy beedy-beedy dah, all these artificial layers devote lifetimes to piling up counters fiddling with obscure piling up counters, and about how well you actually know people (or how well people actually know me for that matter), and after a long and heated debate we terminate the phone call by mutually insulting each other, and we saw that our fingers were jammed in the door and we then decided that we couldn't stand it any longer, as I connect to the Internet will Email cause me to forget how to lick a stamp or address a letter?, as soon as the stewardess serves the coffee the airline encounters people who love sausage and respect the law, Ben gave me a book from David Antin. I opened it up and it was inscribed "From one poet to another."

The book's rhythms are pounding. Latter chapters incorporate typographical and pictorial symbols, and the like; and these, combined with the book's encyclopedic length, absence of rancor, and constant topical references, create a sense of free bodily motion, the movements of a winsome (and slightly anxious) dancer. Yet the tightness of the text's focus is rather unnerving.

Somewhere behind *No. III*'s gargantuan toil, you can hear Goldsmith snickering—not with brattiness or malice, but with the glee of executing a project as insane as this one. It's not clear which form-concerned literary experimentalists he's really following, if any; perhaps those who call authorship into question (we must note the line "Who gives a fuck about all these so-called American prose writers?"), or those who desire text to shed the restrictions of narrative itself, or none of the above. But *No. III* is not really weighted in the direction of critique, severity, or the rigor-above-all approach of some of the Oulipo group.

The reader roaming through this nontemporal sea of text grows dumb in its expansive horizon: all words are equal, and no phrase is really any more interesting than another. *No. III* grows larger, finally, and louder than the sets of rules it inhabits, mimicking the digital society's excesses and strewn information, and suggesting the exhaustion and absurd dangers that its citizens are exposed to.

No. III is a performative text, possessing within its established boundaries, loose and wide-ranging, a kind of aesthetic freedom and even a political freedom—the sort that sometimes goes unnoticed by those who have it. It's not clear in the case of *No. III*, but there is often an obscured privilege behind formalist experimentalism. Experiments are not popular, but at the same time, most experimentalists have the luxury of being able to disavow tradition and still get published.

Stacey Levine has published My Horse and Other Stories and Dra— with Sun and Moon Press and currently teaches at Illinois State University.

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