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By **ANDY BATTAGLIA**

The Museum of Modern Art makes a point of mixing media and disciplines in the name of artistic expression, but does the spoken word have a home in an art museum? This year, as part of a new program called "Artists Experiment," Kenneth Goldsmith's words do.

As MoMA's first "poet laureate," Mr. Goldsmith, an author, poet and literary theorist, has programmed a series of readings and events at the museum, including a lecture on Wednesday evening titled "My Career in Poetry, or How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love the Institution."



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Andrew Hinderaker for The Wall Street Journal

Kenneth Goldsmith, the first poet laureate at MoMA, performs a poetry reading there on March 15.

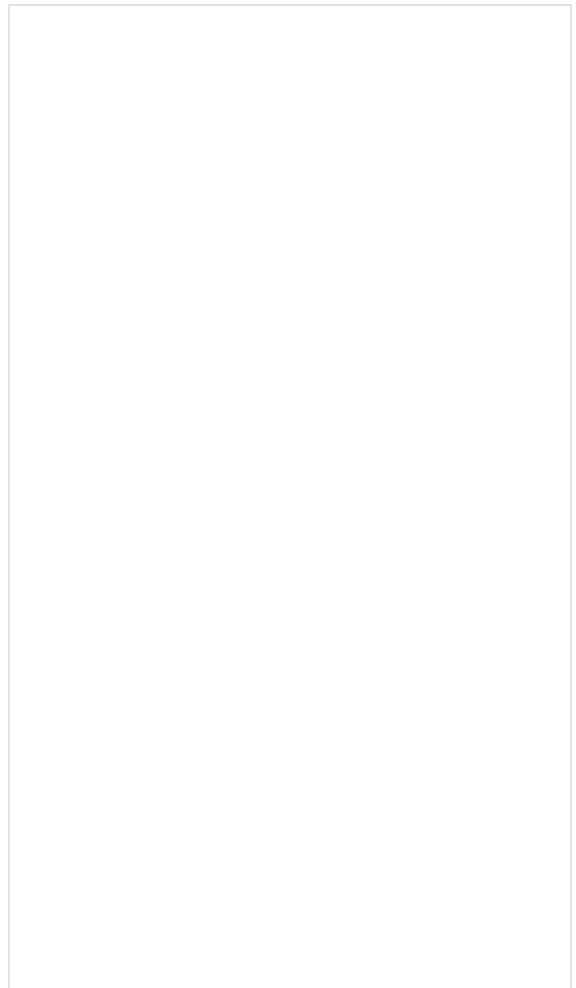
"Artists Experiment," a new initiative in the museum's Department of Education that assembles contemporary artists in dialogue with MoMA educators, arrives along with the release of Mr. Goldsmith's new book, "Seven American Deaths and Disasters" (powerHouse Books). True to one of his preferred forms, it is devoted to uncannily poetic transcriptions of media reports on the assassinations of the Kennedys and John Lennon, as well as tragedies

including the Space Shuttle Challenger, Columbine and the death of Michael Jackson. It mingles the language of television and radio commercials with sometimes bumbling, sometimes heroic reports from journalists filing their first drafts of history.

"Seven American Deaths and Disasters" is of a piece with Mr. Goldsmith's provocative literary aesthetic. He has retyped, in its entirety, an unassuming day's edition of a newspaper and cobbled together experimental word-works for an anthology titled "Against Expression: An Anthology of Conceptual Writing." He also runs the website Ubuweb, a storehouse of archival avant-garde art.

From his loft in Chelsea, Mr. Goldsmith, who is 51, spoke with The Wall Street Journal about literary fashions, the power of transcription and ways that language can transform.

As poet laureate of MoMA, what is your charge?



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To spread as much poetry around the museum as possible. I invite people to choose a work to have a dialogue with, to think about how they're going to dress, and to get out there and start reading.

What is the most memorable poetic incursion so far?

Sheila Heti—a chick-lit novelist, in a way—read not in front of but to Picasso's "Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J. Version O)." She was wearing a red dress and pump heels, and she began screaming at the painting as if she was addressing Picasso. Her book ["How Should a Person Be?"] is about sex, love, frustration with boyfriends and abuse, and she broke into tears and started weeping. It was the middle of the day, surrounded by tourists who had no clue who she was or what was going on. It was fabulous.

How do poetry and a manner of dress relate?

Poets have this idea that what they do is casual, but the minute you get up onstage anywhere, it's performative. Poets tend to want to show some degree of "authenticity," and the structural theatrics around the performative gesture are never questioned. That's something I always do. I'm a bit of a dandy as a result.

How did you select the seven American tragedies and disasters in your new book?

There are air-checks of these things unraveling in real time all over the web. I began with the JFK assassination because it was the beginning of media spectacle. Then there was incredible stuff from the RFK assassination from an eyewitness who watched him get shot and described it on the air. For John Lennon, some guy took a cassette recorder and flipped through the radio dial the night he was shot. I wanted to know how people described that which they never thought they'd have to describe. What words did they use?

Writing by way of transcription is a recurring method for you.

There have been a million books about 9/11, but to my knowledge nobody has really examined the language that was used to describe it as it was happening. Interpretation isn't necessary. I think observation is as important as interpretation.

It's striking to read plain speech on the page.

It turns it into literature. It distances it when there's no voice or sound involved. You're simply left with language, and language on the page is very different than spoken language. It turns ephemeral production into literature.

In "Against Expression," you write about the crisis that arose in painting when photography arrived, and you say that writing has now met the same crisis. What did you mean?

Photography did what painting was trying to do and did it better, so in order to survive, painting had to change. The whole history of 20th-century art was no longer tied up with representation. The Web is challenging what we think of as writing in a similar way. Writing becomes mimetic, replicative, involved with notions of distribution and movement. It becomes concretized and materialized. It opens up a new notion and sense of what writing and language could be. To me, the most contemporary writing is dealing with these new conditions.

What is your favorite conceptual-writing exercise in that book?

My very favorite is a piece by Claude Closky, "The First Thousand Numbers Classified in Alphabetical Order." [The piece begins "Eight, eight hundred, eight hundred and eight, eight hundred and eighteen" and goes on for nine pages.] That says it all to me: It upends our notions of logic, of structure, of language in one quick and easy—and stupid—move. Some of these moves are so dumb and so obvious that nobody but an artist would think to do them.

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Your website, Ubuweb, has become a vast trove of artistic documentation. What inspires it?

Archiving is the new folk art. I have more music on my hard-drive than I would be able to listen to in 10 lifetimes. I spend more time organizing, backing up, arranging and renaming things than I do listening, and all I do is acquire more. Our relationship to the cultural artifact has shifted in this age of insane abundance.

The site serves as a lightning rod for discussions of fair use and sharing online. How do you see it?

In terms of copyright, Ubuweb functions in a gray zone. It posts the most intellectually valuable artifacts in the world, and also the most economically useless. It's found a comfortable niche where it can violate copyright laws and yet most people seem to be OK with the idea. People talk about copyright as if it's one thing, but it is really nuanced and has mostly to do with economies. We happen to be playing with an economy that plays outside those rules.

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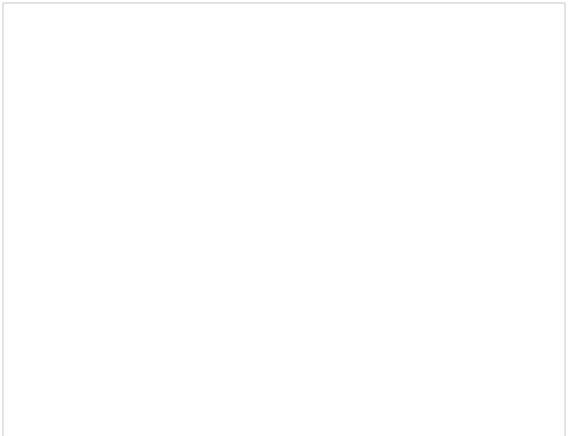
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