Kenneth Goldsmith, "Being Boring"

I am the most boring writer that has ever lived. If there were an Olympic sport for extreme boredom, I would get a gold medal. My books are impossible to read straight through. In fact, every time I have to proofread them before sending them off to the publisher, I fall asleep repeatedly. You really don't need to read my books to get the idea of what they're like; you just need to know the general concept.

Over the past ten years, my practice today has boiled down to simply retyping existing texts. I've thought about my practice in relation to Borges's Pierre Menard, but even Menard was more original than I am: he, independent of any knowledge of Don Quixote, reinvented Cervantes' masterpiece word for word. By contrast, I don't invent anything. I just keep rewriting the same book. I sympathize with the protagonist of a cartoon claiming to have transferred x amount of megabytes, physically exhausted after a day of downloading. The simple act of moving information from one place to another today constitutes a significant cultural act in and of itself. I think it's fair to say that most of us spend hours each day shifting content into different containers. Some of us call this writing.

In 1969, the conceptual artist Douglas Huebler wrote, "The world is full of objects, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." I've come to embrace Huebler's ideas, though it might be retooled as, "The world is full of texts, more or less interesting; I do not wish to add any more." It seems an appropriate response to a new condition in writing today: faced with an unprecedented amount of available text, the problem is not needing to write more of it; instead, we must learn to negotiate the vast quantity that exists. I've transformed from a writer into an information manager, adept at the skills of replicating, organizing, mirroring, archiving, hoarding, storing, reprinting, bootlegging, plundering, and transferring. I've needed to acquire a whole new skill set: I've become a master typist, an exacting cut-and-paster, and an OCR demon. There's nothing I love more than transcription; I find few things more satisfying than collation.

John Cage said, "If something is boring after two minutes, try it for four. If still boring, then eight. Then sixteen. Then thirty-two. Eventually one discovers that it is not boring at all." He's right: there's a certain kind of unboring boredom that's fascinating, engrossing, transcendent, and downright sexy. And then there's the other kind of boring: let's call it boring boring. Boring boring is a client meeting; boring boring is having to endure someone's self-indulgent poetry reading; boring boring is watching a toddler for an afternoon; boring boring is the seder at Aunt Fanny's. Boring boring is being somewhere we don't want to be; boring boring is doing
something we don't want to do.

Unboring boring is a voluntary state; boring boring is a forced one. Unboring boring is the sort of boredom that we surrender ourselves to when, say, we go to see a piece of minimalist music. I recall once having seen a restaging of an early Robert Wilson piece from the 1970s. It took four hours for two people to cross the stage; when they met in the middle, one of them raised their arm and stabbed the other. The actual stabbing itself took a good hour to complete. Because I volunteered to be bored, it was the most exciting thing I've ever seen.

The 20th century avant-garde liked to embrace boredom as a way of getting around what it considered to be the vapid "excitement" of popular culture. I'll never forget being at a sound poetry festival with Jackson Mac Low in Miami Beach over a decade ago. Jackson was railing against popular culture, dance music, anything with a beat, anything that reeked of entertainment. I really couldn't understand what he was talking about. For a younger generation, popular culture is very sophisticated. Everyone in advertising today has a degree in semiotics, setting up a condition whereby artists, seeing the complex ads, go into the studio and make work about the advertising, which feeds subsequent ads, and so on. But later that night, back in the hotel room, I was channel surfing and came across a 1950s Lawrence Welk rerun. It was unbearably stupid, wrapping its boredom in the guise of "entertainment" and suddenly it occurred to me that in his day, Jackson was right. A powerful way to combat such crap was to do the opposite of it, to be purposely boring.

By the 60s and 70s in art circles this type of boredom -- boring boring -- was often the norm. I'm glad I wasn't around to have to sit through all of that stuff. Boredom, it seems, became a forced condition, be it in theatre, music, art, or literature. It's no wonder people bailed out of boredom in the late 70s and early 80s to go into punk rock or expressionistic painting. After a while, boredom got boring. And then, a few decades later, things changed again: excitement became dull and boring started to look good again. So here we are, ready to be bored once more. But this time, boredom has changed. We've embraced unboring boring, modified boredom, boredom with all the boring parts cut out of it. Reality TV, for example, is a new kind of boredom. "An American Family," broadcast in the early 70s -- strutting its ennui -- was the old boredom; "The Osbournes" -- action-packed boredom -- is the new. There's no one more tedious than Ozzy Osbourne, but his television presence is the most engagingly constructed tedium that has ever existed. We can't take our eyes off the guy, stumbling through the dullness of his own life.

Our taste for the unboring boring won't last forever. I assume that someday soon it'll go back to boring boring once again, though for reasons and conditions I can't predict at this time. But until then,
even though I construct boring works, I wouldn't dream of forcing you to sit through an extended reading of my work: at least not without a fair warning, giving you an out, a chance for you to edit the dull parts by fast forwarding, leaving the room, or switching me off.

I do a weekly radio show that, most weeks, is extremely challenging listening, often veering into boring boring territory (I've played shows of two men snoring for three hours, to name one example), but I don't mind doing this because no one's forcing you to listen straight through. If you don't like it, you simply get up, turn it off, and put something else on.

In the same vein, as I said before, I don't expect you to even read my books cover to cover. It's for that reason I like the idea that you can know each of my books in one sentence. For instance, there's the book of every word I spoke for a week unedited. Or the book of every move my body made over the course of a day, a process so dry and tedious that I had to get drunk halfway though the day in order to make it to the end. Or my most recent book, Day, in which I retyped a day's copy of the New York Times and published it as a 900 page book. Now you know what I do without ever having to have read a word of it.

Let me go into more detail about Day. I would take a page of the newspaper, start at the upper left hand corner and work my way through, following the articles as they were laid out on the page. If an article, for example, continued on another page, I wouldn't go there. Instead, I would finish retyping the page I was on in full before proceeding to the next one. I allowed myself no creative liberties with the text. The object of the project was to be as uncreative in the process as possible. It was one of the hardest constraints a writer can muster, particularly on a project of this scale; with every keystroke came the temptation to "fudge," "cut-and-paste," and "skew" the mundane language. But to do so would be to foil my exercise.

Everywhere there was a bit of text in the paper, I grabbed it. I made no distinction between editorial and advertising, stock quotes or classified ads. If it could be considered text, I had to have it. Even if there was, say, an ad for a car, I took a magnifying glass and grabbed the text off the license plate. Between retyping and OCR'ing, I finished the book in a year.

Far from being boring, it was the most fascinating writing process I've ever experienced. It was surprisingly sensual. I was trained as a sculptor and moving the text from one place to another became as physical, and as sexy as, say, carving stone. It became this wild sort of obsession to peel the text off the page of the newspaper and force it into the fluid medium of the digital. I felt like I was taking the newspaper, giving it a good shake, and watching as the letters
tumbled off the page into a big pile, transforming the static language that was glued to the page into moveable type.

As good as the process was, that's how good I felt the end result to be. The day I chose to retype, the Friday before Labor Day weekend of 2000, was a slow news day. Just the regular stuff happened, nothing special. But in spite of that, after it was finished, it became clear that the daily newspaper -- or in this case Day -- is really a great novel, filled with stories of love, jealousy, murder, competition, sex, passion, and so forth. It's a fantastic thing: the daily newspaper, when translated, amounts to a 900 page book. Every day. And it's a book that's written in every city and in every country, only to be instantly discarded in order to write a brand new one, full of fresh stories the next day. After reading the newspaper over breakfast for 20 minutes in the morning, we say we've read the paper. Believe me, you've never really read the paper.

There was something so satisfying about this exercise that I wanted to see what would happen when I applied it to other types of print media. So I went ahead and retyped an issue of Vogue, which yielded fantastically minimal results. Imagine a fashion magazine denuded of its images. What are you left with? In the beginning of a fashion magazine there are dozens of two-page advertising spreads that are all images, containing almost no text. What emerged were exquisite little lines -- almost fashion haikus -- about products, locations, prices, etc. And in the back where there is more text, it was completely different than the New York Times; Vogue is full of juicy gossip and over-the-top language, making for a totally new book. I called that book Month.

My next idea was to do a weekly -- obviously called Week -- so I chose to retype an issue of Newsweek, which was, well, as dull as Newsweek itself is. That project definitely fell on the boring side of boring.

I got to wondering if I'm simply masochistic, doing these sorts of projects so I decided to do a reality check and try an boring exercise with my generally-bored students. I gave them the simple instructions to retype five pages of their choice and came in the next week, dreading their response to the most dry, dull, assignment I could give them. But much to my surprise, they were charged -- as charged as I was during my retyping of the Times. Their responses were varied and full of revelations: some found it enlightening to become a machine (without ever having known Warhol's famous dictum "I want to be a machine"). Others said that it was the most intense reading experience they ever had, with many actually embodying the characters they were retyping. Several students became aware that the act of typing or writing is actually an act of performance, involving their whole body in a physically durational act (even down to noticing the cramps in their hands). Some of the students became intensely aware of the text's formal properties and
for the first time in their lives began to think of texts not only as transparent, but opaque objects to be moved around a white space. Others found the task zen-like and amnesia-inducing (without ever having known Satie's "Memoirs of an Amnesiac" or Duchamp's desire to live without memory), alternately having the text lose then regain meaning. Out of the class of 18, there was only one girl who didn't have some sort of a transcendental experience with the mundane act of typing. She was a waitress who took it upon herself to retype her restaurant's menu in order to learn it better for work. She ended up hating the task and even hating her job more. It was an object lesson in the difference between voluntary and involuntary boredom. It's hard to turn the dreary world of work into unboring boredom.

The class learned that it's hard to be bored when creating a work of art. But what about an audience's reception to such work? I think that there were a handful of artists in the 20th century who intentionally made boring work, but didn't expect their audiences to fully engage with it in a durational sense. It's these artists, I feel, who predicted the sort of unboring boredom that we're so fond of today.

Andy Warhol, for instance, said of his films that the real action wasn't on the screen. He's right. Nothing happened in the early Warhol films: a static image of the Empire State Building for eight hours, a man sleeping for six. It is nearly impossible to watch them straight through. Warhol often claimed that his films were better thought about than seen. He also said that the films were catalysts for other types of actions: conversation that took place in the theatre during the screening, the audience walking in and out, and thoughts that happened in the heads of the moviegoers. Warhol conceived of his films as a staging for a performance, in which the audience were the Superstars, not the actors or objects on the screen.

Gertrude Stein, too, often set up a situation of skimming, knowing that few were going to be reading her epic works straight through. (How many people have linearly read every word of The Making of Americans? Not too many, I suppose.) The scholar Ulla Dydo, in her magnificent compilation of the writings of Gertrude Stein, remarked that much of Stein's work was never meant to be read closely at all, rather she was deploying visual means of reading. What appeared to be densely unreadable and repetitive was, in fact, designed to be skimmed, and to delight the eye (in a visual sense) while holding the book. Stein, as usual, was prescient in predicting our reading habits. John Cage, too, proved to be the avant-garde's Evelyn Wood, boiling down dense modernist works into deconstructed, remixed Cliff Notes; in his "Writing Through Finnegans Wake" he reduced a 628-page tome to a slim 39 pages, and Ezra Pound's 824-page Cantos to a mere handful of words.
I'm getting out of the boredom business, friends. I recently embarked upon my latest project, a piece that would completely turn my entire practice on its ear. I wanted to work with extraordinary language, dramatic language; language drenched with emotion. Excitement is what I'm after now. After thinking about what I could do for some months, I hit upon the perfect project. I would redo my New York Times piece, only instead of retyping a "normal" news day, I would retype the issue of the New York Times published on the morning of September 11th, using the exact same method I did for Day.

I've now just finished the first section of the paper and I can tell you that it's doing everything that I want it to. I've embarked on an epic unboring boring work. It's been a highly emotional experience retyping this paper, full of events that never happened: sales that were cancelled, listings for events that were indefinitely postponed, stories deemed to be big news one day were swept off the pages of the paper of record forever, stock prices that took a huge dive the next day, and so forth. I think you get the idea. I love the idea of doing something so exciting in the most boring way possible or vice versa.

At a reading I gave recently -- and I do do short readings occasionally -- the other reader came up to me after my reading and said incredulously, "You didn't write a word of what you read." I thought for a moment and, sure, in one sense -- the traditional sense -- he was right; but in the expanded field of appropriation, uncreativity, sampling, and language management in which we all habit today, he couldn't have been more wrong. Each and every word was "written" by me: sometimes mediated by a machine, sometimes transcribed, and sometimes copied; but without my intervention, slight as it may be, these works would never have found their way into the world. When retyping a book, I often stop and ask myself if what I am doing is really writing. As I sit there, in front of the computer screen, punching keys, the answer is invariably yes.