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**What Really Happened? Kenneth Goldsmith's "7+ Deaths and Disasters," Sophie Calle's, Take Care of Yourself**

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## **What Really Happened? Kenneth Goldsmith's "7+ Deaths and Disasters," Sophie Calle's, *Take Care of Yourself***

Marjorie Perloff

"Je voulais dire ça littéralement et dans tous les sens."  
Arthur Rimbaud, *Une Saison en enfer*

### **Abstract**

In *Seven American Deaths and Disasters* (2013), Kenneth Goldsmith recounted a set of tragic and unanticipated events in recent American history by using transcriptions of radio and TV broadcasts, usually from minor networks. Designed to be an "eighth American disaster," Goldsmith presented *The Body of Michael Brown*, a performance based on the St. Louis autopsy report at the "Interrupt 3" conference at Brown University (13 March 2015), eliciting widespread criticism and controversy. Seemingly very different from Goldsmith–Sophie Calle's projects, for the past few decades, set up particular procedural processes that raise pressing epistemological questions, especially about the nature of relationships, personal and political. One of her recent projects, *Prenez soin de vous* (*Take Care of Yourself*) that was based on her installation for the Venice Biennale in 2007, comprises comments by 107 women on an email that Calle received from her then lover. In this project, Calle uses the "real" words of others to create a montage of possible interpretations of the discourse that confronts us in our daily lives. For Calle, as for Goldsmith, the most troubling gap is that between information and knowledge, while the issue, that a conceptual poetics can take as a premise, is that the body most difficult to get inside of turns out to be one's own.

*Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, Kenneth Goldsmith's 2013 recounting of a set of tragic and unanticipated events in recent American history —the assassinations, first of John and then of Robert Kennedy, the murder of John Lennon, the space shuttle

Challenger disaster, the Columbine school shootings, the 9/11 World Trade Center bombings, and the death of Michael Jackson— uses transcriptions of radio and TV broadcasts, usually from minor networks, to defamiliarise what are by now all too well known, indeed legendary public narratives, so as to show how ‘information’ is disseminated on the media in our time. “Impartial reportage,” as Goldsmith puts it, “is revealed to be laced with subjectivity, bias, mystery, second-guessing, and, in many cases, white-knuckled fear. Part nostalgia, part myth, these words render pivotal moments in American history through the communal lens of media.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, *Seven Deaths and Disasters* confronts one of the most pressing problems of our time: the growing gap between information and knowledge.

A typical DJ, for instance, accustomed to grinding out local news and weather reports and playing pop songs on request, is shown as wholly unprepared to deal with, say, the Kennedy assassination in Dallas or the World Trade Center disaster. In transcribing the broadcasts, Goldsmith by no means merely copies them; rather, his texts are produced by “surgically extracting punchy excerpts which seemed to embody the spirit of the fuller tapes; stumbles and stutters were left intact” (173). In “World Trade Center,” for example, the day long broadcasts, taking up about twelve hours of actual time, are condensed into less than an hour’s length of reading time, so as to intensify the surreal experience of watching the attack unfold. The aim is to make the audience feel that they are *there*. Choice becomes crucial, for the account, condensed as it is, must seem seamless, authentic.

“John F. Kennedy” is another case in point. A transcription from a local Dallas station KLIF, broadcast on November 22, 1963, Goldsmith’s “John F. Kennedy” moves inexorably from daily broadcast routine to unspeakable crisis, as the KLIF reporters are showing themselves to be entirely unequal to the task. The first thing to understand—and this will be important when we come to “The Body of Michael Brown”—is that Goldsmith’s piece is not *about* John F. Kennedy; it is *about* the way the media disseminate ‘the facts’ about a wholly unanticipated and cataclysmic event like the Kennedy assassination.

As the piece opens, President Kennedy’s upcoming arrival in Dallas is barely mentioned: our DJ, one Andy Fine on the Rex Jones show, is busy telling the audience what kind of turkey to buy for the upcoming Thanksgiving holiday. A long ad for Armour Star Turkey and Falstaff beer is punctuated by pop songs with lines like this:

(Boom-sh-boom)

(Boom-sh-boom)  
Last night he told me so  
He's the boy that I adore  
And I know I'll never let him go... (11)

Never letting go; news of the first bulletin from Dallas interrupts this song but it is downplayed: "Three shots reportedly were fired at the motorcade of President Kennedy today near the downtown section. KLIF news is checking out the report" (11).

With hindsight, we expect a strong reaction on the part of the DJs. But no such thing happens. Rather it's back to the music and the ads for Robert Hall clothing ("holiday dresses priced as low as \$7.97), the weather report (63 degrees in Big D"), more songs and ads. "*Everybody, everybody / Everybody's, had a broken heart now. . . . Everybody's had the blues . . . you lose somebody you love*" (13). The lyrics are oddly anticipatory, but here they are merely interrupted by a brief aside telling us that "someone has been wounded in the firing of shots in the Kennedy motorcade," (13) but soon we are back to ads for another beer, this time Hamm's rather than Falstaff.

Are these Texas DJs just callous? Stupid? Reading the broadcast, as Goldsmith transcribes its pieces, one has the sense that shootings are not uncommon in Dallas and so this report is just a blip on the radar screen. Only after about fifteen minutes, at 12.55 PM, does the shooting story come back, but its concern is not with the victim but with the shooter, "a man, a white male believed to be approximately thirty years old, reportedly armed with a thirty caliber rifle" (15). And the location is given as "Elm and Houston" (17). Again and again, in the course of the piece, between more country music, an ad for Baker's Beauty Lotion, and talk of the new movie *Take Her, She's Mine* with Sandra Dee, these two bits of information are provided, as if they are paramount:

An unidentified man fired several shots from what apparently was a high powered thirty-thirty caliber rifle at the presidential motorcade. . . .the search now centers at the area of Elm and Houston. . . .(17)

[...]

Shots fired from a high powered rifle at the presidential car in the motorcade as it was en route to the Trade Mart for a scheduled presidential speech. . . . the police are covering on and surrounding the area at Elm and Houston. . . . (19)

As the motorcade began its trip toward the triple underpass at Elm and Houston, three bullets rang out, apparently fired from a thirty-thirty caliber rifle. . . . all units report code three to the downtown area of Elm and Houston. (25)

He is approximately five feet, eight inches tall, weighs about one-hundred-sixty pounds, and is a white man. He was carrying a thirty-thirty caliber rifle. . . . We have just left the corner of Elm and Houston. (25)

And even after we finally learn the shocking fact that President Kennedy and Texas Governor John Connolly were the victims, the reporter tells us that “The man armed . . . believed armed with a thirty-thirty caliber rifle was perched from a building at Elm and Houston” (29). Incremental repetition is the mode of the transcript, but unlike incremental repetition in the folk ballad, here it provides nothing but false leads—a useless precision since the DJs evidently still don’t know (or seem to care) who has been shot.

By the time we learn that the President has in fact been shot, rushed to Parkland Hospital, and probably already dead, we have been all but buried under an avalanche of meaningless facts about gunman and gun as if to know the man’s height, weight, and approximate age and to identify the gun were somehow to know the truth. But what truth? Nowhere in the hour between the first report of gunfire downtown and the announcement that the President is dead, do we learn anything about John F. Kennedy. Why had the President come to Dallas? Who might want him dead? What was his relationship to Texan Vice-President Lyndon Johnson?

Rather, the broadcasters confine themselves to time, place, and action in the moment, much of it based on hearsay, and, once it is known that Kennedy is undergoing some kind of surgery, we learn of blood transfusions, and last rites. Further incremental repetition focuses on the homey observation that “the president’s head was cradled in the first lady’s lap,” as well as a few off-hand—and somewhat hostile—references to “Kennedy’s socialistic beliefs,” (29) as well as to the information that the “New York Stock Exchange took an expected dip” (29). Even before Kennedy is officially pronounced dead, Andy tells Joe that “Were that [the death] now true, it would be the second time in American history that a Johnson has seceded [sic] to the presidency from the death of a president, the last time having been, of course, the assassination of President Lincoln and he was, of course, seceded by Andrew Johnson” (36). This pointless bit of information, perhaps called in by a listener, is repeated two more times, as if its relevance were profound. The ignorant mispronunciation of “succeeded” as “seceded” is ironic in the context, Lincoln having had to deal with the “seceding” of the South that led to the Civil War. Do the DJs know, one wonders, that Andrew Johnson is considered one of the worst presidents of the United States, that he was impeached? Does this imply anything about Lyndon Johnson? The factoid is in any case a distraction: finally, on the last page of the piece the death of the president is

announced, followed by the instant clichéd assertion, “The shock, uh, of an incident like this, particularly to those of us of the press, radio, and television corps, who had seen the president alive only a few moments ago, uh, can never be described” (40).

The KLIF staff seems curiously unmoved. Unlike such mainstream commentators as Walter Cronkite, who literally wept on TV, when he was making the announcement of JFK’s death, here in the backwater of Dallas radio, the assassination seems to prompt little emotion. Or perhaps the reaction testifies to a certain scorn: Kennedy had never been popular in Texas and there was open enmity between the President and his Vice-President Lyndon Johnson. But the identity of the assassin is of interest; he might, after all, be someone the audience knows.

Watch CNN today —say, Anderson Cooper 360— and you’ll see that a similar emphasis on specific little facts sets the parameters for “world news.” A plane crash, an Isis battle, a riot in Baltimore —these are reported in the most minute, numbing detail without any attempt at understanding what is *behind* the incident or *why* it matters. On CNN or the BBC, someone is always getting killed, there’s a genocide here, an earthquake there, a school shooting, a plane crash. But the rhythm of disclosure keeps a steady pace, making us all “well informed” about gun types without having the slightest idea of what is really happening. The response is formulaic: in recent years, the news of a shooting is invariably followed by a White House statement reiterating the need for gun control. But that doesn’t last long either, and soon it’s back to business as usual.

In *Seven Deaths and Disasters*, Goldsmith chronicles with great finesse how an historic public event is actually processed *at the time of its* occurrence by those of us, so to speak, on the ground, living, as we do, in a society where “value” is presented in standard clichés about making America great again, even as the most improbable and terrible things are seen as happening before our eyes and ears. The mode of *Seven Deaths* recalls to me Karl Kraus’s *Last Days of Mankind*, in which the horrors of war are chronicled by citation from the actual documents of the period, without authorial comment, using juxtaposition and structural devices so as to create a devastating image of war, not just on the battlefield but on the home front.

Goldsmith’s *The Body of Michael Brown*, presented at the “Interrupt 3” conference at Brown University (13 March 2015), an event billed as “A Discussion Forum and Studio for New Forms of Language Art,” was, as Goldsmith explained it to *The New Yorker*’s Alec Wilkinson, designed to be an “eighth American disaster,” a logical sequel

to the ones presented in *Seven Deaths* (30). The poet's intention, evidently, was to produce a Memento Mori, appropriate to a society where elegy is replaced by public record, in this case the St. Louis County autopsy report —available on the Internet— on Michael Brown, the unarmed seventeen-year old African-American man who was shot to death by a police officer in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9, 2014. As in the case of *Seven Deaths*, Goldsmith's focus is less on Brown himself than on the mediation of the event. As Wilkinson describes the performance:

Goldsmith wore a long black skirt over dark leggings and a black suit jacket. He looked like a Coptic priest. He stood beneath a projection of a photograph of Brown in his high-school graduation robe. He announced that he would read a poem about the quantified self, meaning one that catalogued the evidence obtained from the close examination of a body. . . .He read for thirty minutes, pacing forward and back. For dramatic effect he ended with the doctor's observation that Brown's genitals were "unremarkable," which is not the way the autopsy report ends, and when he finished he sat down in the front row. (30)<sup>2</sup>

Such a performance was bound to elicit a hostile response. The costume, the stagy presence of the large graduation photograph, as if to say, here is the myth, now let me give you the reality, the rewording and rearrangement of the material in the autopsy, culminating in the reference to the dead man's genitalia, and, especially the lack of reference to alternate voices and perspectives so as to take into account other responses to Brown's death —these choices were obviously provocative and, more important in the long run, not commensurate with the event. As Aaron Kunin argues on the related issue of Vanessa Place's *Gone with the Wind* tweets (2011), whereby she re-tweeted racist quotes from the novel, a successful "poem" would have to engage the material with greater complexity and aesthetic distance. What may be wanting in such work, Kunin argues, is a better set of "strategies of depiction." Then, too, the piece was no doubt performed much too soon after the Ferguson debacle. Had Goldsmith's piece on John F. Kennedy been read so soon after the President's assassination, there might have been a similar outcry. We have here, then, as frequently happened to Goldsmith's pataphysical precursor Alfred Jarry or to the members of the Cabaret Voltaire, an experiment that didn't quite work —a performance piece that crossed the line, exhibiting "bad taste." Goldsmith himself obviously realised that this was the case since he would not permit the video of the piece to be part of the Brown University archive and would not make the written text publicly available.

My own view, on *reading about* the performance, was that “The Body of Michael Brown” began with an interesting notion about the fate of elegy in our time, but the actual piece was perhaps too odd, too seemingly one-sided to take in. According to the artist Faith Holland, who was present at the event, “following the reading, the small audience of approximately seventy-five people offered mild criticism but repeatedly thanked Goldsmith for bringing up this discussion” (cited in Flood). It was only when the story hit the internet, that all hell broke loose. The poet Cathy Park Hong, for example, tweeted: “Kenneth Goldsmith has reached new racist lows yet elite institutions continue to pay him guest speaker fees.” The blogger P.E. Garcia wrote in the online arts magazine *Queen Mob’s Teahouse*, “For Kenneth Goldsmith to stand on stage, and not be aware that his body – his white male body, a body that is a symbol loaded with a history of oppression, of literal dominance and ownership of black bodies – is a part of the performance, then he has failed to notice something drastically important about the ‘contextualisation’ of this work.”

This stricture, it turns out, is at the heart of the angry dismissal of Goldsmith’s work, made by one after another commentator. A similar critique was made of Vanessa Place’s *Gone with the Wind* tweets. A white man or woman, it is asserted again and again, cannot “get inside” the body of a black one, much less “speak for” that body. Yet writers *have* indeed gotten inside bodies very different from their own. Indeed, the assumption of other selves and voices —men speaking as women, whites speaking for persons of color, the young speaking for the old, even humans getting inside the bodies of animals— is the very life blood of fiction. It may be objected —as it is by traditional poets today— that lyric is different, that unlike novelists or playwrights, lyric poets do *not get inside* other bodies. Still, Rimbaud’s *Je est un autre* may lend perspective. The objection, in Goldsmith’s case, however, is that his mimesis was of a real person, one who had only recently been killed and martyred, one at the center of a burning controversy about race relations in America. But in a conceptual piece of however documentary a cast, the whole point is that the “real” subject is fictionalised: think of Cindy Sherman’s various roles, think of Charles Bernstein’s presentation of Walter Benjamin in his opera libretto *Shadowtime* (2004). And there is the further irony that in the social media, the source of Goldsmith’s vilification, role playing is inherent. Who are the “Mongrel Poets” of the website by that name? We don’t know since “they” don’t identify themselves as the Internet allows those who post to be entirely anonymous: faceless and voiceless. Indeed, an Internet address itself won’t tell us whether a given



writer is male or female, black or white, Latino or Asian-American. We don't know whether the tweeter is male or female, rich or poor, an adolescent or an old lady.

We have then the anomaly of a medium as designedly impersonal as Facebook or Twitter becoming, in art and academic circles, the site for scathing critique of "whiteness" —specifically, of white people not being *allowed* to speak for, say, black people. In the case of *The Body of Michael Brown*, so it has repeatedly been said, a purportedly elite white male is cannibalising the body of a poor black seventeen-year old. But there has to be a further consideration since the narrator is by no means assuming Brown's voice or appropriating his body. On the contrary, the voice he assumes is that of the impersonal forensic community, an official Autopsy Report, as reproduced on the Internet and available for all to read. Nothing could be less personal than its discourse. And yet —and here was Goldsmith's point— even such "impersonal" reports may be curiously skewed. *Autopsy*, after all —the word derives from the Greek, *auto* + *optos* (seen)— means *eyewitness* report. However "official" it may claim to be, such a report is easily subject to personal bias. Indeed, those who have actually read the text —and there is a very acute analysis by Daniel Morris in his book *Not Born Digital: Poetics, Print Literacy, New Media*<sup>3</sup>— have noted the ambiguities, and errors in this particular autopsy report: Brown's mother, for example, is referred to as the "deceased mother"— the possessive apostrophe *s* is missing—the appellation endowing her with a ghostly quality. And the repetition of "normal" throughout is disconcerting, as if the coroner were surprised to find the victim so normal, his genitalia "normal," and so on. What, the poet asks, is the status of "official" language in this context?

The response to Goldsmith's thirty-minute performance —it was discussed everywhere from *The Wall St. Journal* and *The Guardian* to *The New Republic* and *The Atlantic* to the blogosphere— almost entirely ignored these considerations. On the Harriet Blog of the Poetry Foundation of America, the poet C. A. Conrad launched a vicious attack on Goldsmith, jumping from the Brown performance itself to Goldsmith's invitation, in 2011, to participate in a reading at the White House. Using the second person, Conrad asks histrionically why Goldsmith didn't use his opportunity with Obama to "object to his ordering the 30,000 additional troops sent to Afghanistan in 2009? By the time of your 2011 White House poetry reading the bloodshed and chaos inflicted on Afghanistan was so severe that researches from the Reuters Foundation revealed the country to be the most dangerous nation on our planet for women. But of course you won't dare question true authority." Does Conrad

really believe any poet thus present could have snatched an opportunity to complain about our Afghan policy? And that such complaint to Obama would have made a difference?

The assumption of moral virtue is one of the main characteristics of the current poetry scene. It is not a question of action but of witnessing. Another case in point is Francesca Capone, one of the organizers of the “Interrupt 3” conference, who writes this on the Harriet blog:

Goldsmith’s performance referenced the Hottentot Venus, a very well known atrocity that exploited South African Saartjie Baartman’s body. It is often referred to in postcolonial art scholarship. The Hottentot Venus atrocity is widely agreed to have been sexist, racist, and colonialistic. KG must not have realized this was the canon he was writing/performing into, which seems aloof. One of the principle problems with KG’s performance is that though he attempted to use conceptualism to address racism (which we should all be working to address and heal through our practices and in our daily lives), his performance lacked empathy and instead it polarized his audience around racial problems, doing nothing to help heal them. Healing is really the work that needs addressing.

Capone’s assertion is false as nowhere does Goldsmith mention or allude to the Hottentot Venus or even give evidence that he knows of her existence. Such thinking, in any case, has resulted in the current truism, pronounced all over Facebook and the blogosphere, that Goldsmith’s misguided performance —again, like Vanessa Place’s various controversial performances —shows that conceptualism is *itself* racist. Perhaps the argument is that the reliance on other people’s words is ipso facto a kind of bad faith. Thus Joey de Jesus, writing in the online magazine *Apogee*, remarks:

In his interview with *The Believer*, Goldsmith establishes the standard that “Conceptual art is only good if the idea is good.” Ironically nothing about appropriation and erasure is conceptually new or good; it is not an innovative mode of cultural production, but rather, the result of centuries of unfettered capitalism and the impulse it instills in people to commodify and consume everything, including your fellow human being.

Joey de Jesus doesn’t seem to know or acknowledge that the statement “Conceptual art is only good if the idea is good” is that of the artist Sol Le Witt, one of the first theorists of conceptualism, back in the early 1960s. Le Witt meant, of course, that the conceptual artwork was governed by an overriding idea or concept so that the actual execution of the work took second place to the concept that governed its making. Duchamp’s *Fountain* for instance now exists in various replicas, none of them quite like the original one bought from Mott’s Plumbing Fixtures, but each one expressing

Duchamp's central concept. Why is a Duchamp readymade any more a symptom of commodification and consumption than an oil painting? "Centuries of unfettered capitalism" control an abstract painting by Mark Rothko as much as any conceptual work. Indeed, from Duchamp to Andy Warhol to Eva Hesse and Cindy Sherman, conceptual art, and now poetry, is born of opposition to the status quo.

We may now consider the work of a conceptualist seemingly very different from Goldsmith —the French artist Sophie Calle. For the past few decades, Calle has been making installations and artist books that set up a particular procedural process so as to raise pressing epistemological questions, especially about the nature of relationships, personal and political. To what extent, she has asked in works like *The Address Book* (1983) and *Suite Vénitienne* (1979-1980), can we ever really *know* another person? How do we interpret behaviour? Instead of producing straightforward narratives on these issues or of writing lyric expressing her own feelings, Calle uses the "real" words of others to create a montage of possible interpretations of the discourse that confronts us in our daily lives.

Calle's recent book *Prenez soin de vous (Take Care of Yourself)*, based on her installation for the Venice Biennale in 2007, is an assemblage encompassing text, image, CDs, musical scores, and minibooks. Its starting point is a letter, or rather email, Calle tells us, she received from her then lover G:<sup>4</sup>

I received an email telling me it was over.  
I didn't know how to respond.  
It was almost as if it hadn't been meant for me.  
It ended with the words, "Take care of yourself."  
And so I did.  
I asked 107 women (including two made from wood  
and one with feathers), chosen for their profession or skills,  
to interpret this letter.  
To analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it.  
Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for me.  
Answer for me.  
It was a way of taking the time to break up  
A way of taking care of myself. (n.pag)

And there follows a list of the 107 women, whose comments on the email, in one form or another, constitute Calle's tour de force. Here, just to give an example, are the first ten, in order of their appearance:

FAMILY MEDIATOR, Maïté Lassime

RESEARCHER IN LEXICOMETRY, Micheline Renard  
CARTOONIST, Soledad Bravi  
PRESS AGENCY JOURNALIST, Bénédicte Manier  
JUDGE, X.  
GRADUATE OF THE ECOLE NORMALE SUPERIEURE, Mazarine Pinget  
SEXOLOGIST, Catherine Solano  
PSYCHOANALYST, Marie-Magdeleine Lessana  
ADVERTISING EXECUTIVE, Mercedes Erra  
LAWYER, Caroline Mécary (n.pag)

And so it goes, including a criminologist, a nursery school teacher, a clairvoyant, a chess player, a radio host, a diplomat, and scores of actresses and singers, including Laurie Anderson, Jeanne Moreau, and the rap provocateur singer Peaches. The list also includes three fictional characters: a clown, a Bunraku puppet, and, the very last of the 107, Sophie's parrot Brenda.

The e-mail itself that follows, is at once highly individual and yet an almost classic example of its genre: the letter of rejection, couched in euphemisms,

Sophie:

I have been meaning to write and reply to our last email for a while.

At the same time, I thought it would be better to talk to you and tell  
you what I have to say out loud.

Still, at least it will be written.

...

I thought that would be enough, I thought that loving you and your love would be enough so that this anxiety—which constantly drives me to look further afield and which means that I will never feel quiet and at rest or probably even just happy or “generous”—would be calmed when I was with you, with the certainty that the love you have for me was the best for me, the best I have ever had, you know that. I thought that my writing would be a remedy, that my “disquiet” would dissolve into it so that I could find you. But no. In fact it even became worse. I cannot even tell you the sort of state I feel I am in. So I started calling the “others” again this week.

.....

Whatever happens, remember that I will always love you in the same way, my own way, that I have ever since I first met you; that it will carry on within me and, I am sure, will never die.

But it would be the worst kind of masquerade to prolong a situation now when, you know as well as I do, it has become irreparable by the standards of the very love I have for you and you have for me, a love which is now forcing me to be so frank with you, as final proof of what happened between us and will always be unique.

I would have liked things to turn out differently.

Take care of yourself. (n.pag)

This letter is submitted to a set of fascinating analyses by Sophie's female respondents, making the piece at one level, a collaborative feminist project. We begin with textual study on the part of the Researcher in Lexicometry, Micheline Renard.

Under the heading “Enunciation,” this analysis notes that there are forty occurrences of the first person singular, which well outweigh “the 30-odd instances of the second person. Under “Focalization,” the Researcher remarks, that the scriptor writes “as if he did not know himself well enough to express anything but suppositions and doubts.” (n.pag) Without judging “G” overtly, this writer demonstrates that the letter is dishonest and self-serving, its meandering designed to protect the author rather than to express any concern for the addressee. As a chart of “Subjects” shows, almost all the actions are taken by the “I”: “I am prepared,” “I am sure,” “I can never” “I have seen,” “I have to say,” and so on. (n. pag) And further tongue-in-cheek charts diagramming sentence length, verb tense, and a phonetic transcription, underscore how much one can learn about a text from sheer arithmetical operations. In contrast, consider the interpretations offered by such respondents as the psychoanalyst (Marie-Magdalene Leissana), who exposes G’s subterfuges and self-justification, marking with a red pen the phrases she finds especially objectionable:

He quotes his lover’s wishes—“the day we stopped being lovers”—the better to intimate that they have stopped, that the erotic pang of desire has gone. As if it had never existed! No more body in the affair, only the empty toing and froing of the rhetorical singsong. No tension: phrase-making. (n. pag)

From the psychoanalyst’s perspective, there is something problematic about Sophie’s own willingness to have given herself to such an unfeeling, uncaring man. Later, the clinical psychologist Michèle Agrapart concurs but imagines a rather different scenario:

He is an intelligent, cultivated man, from a good sociocultural background, elegant, charming and seductive, with a fine, fairly subtle, rather abstract intelligence. He is proud, narcissistic and egotistical (he says “I” more than thirty times in a letter with 23 sentences. It is possible that he studied literature. (n. pag)

The individual commentaries say more about the metalanguage of different professions than about Sophie or the feckless “G.” The photographs themselves, ranging from art portraits to snapshots reveal little. It is not even always clear which picture goes with which text, many of the women being seen from behind or in profile. Some have their faces covered by the letter. And their interpretations reflect profession rather than individual sensibility. A journalist friend finds it all very unimportant; a lawyer finds the break-up letter quite typical of normal documents that dissolve contracts. The specialist in French contemporary literature wonders if G’s is “perhaps spleen, à la Baudelaire, an existential disquiet that traces a cursed circle around him and imprisons him?” (n. pag) The United Nations Expert in Women’s Rights, one Françoise Gaspard,

believes the letter must be a fiction, because she has come across a similar story in an earlier book by Christiane Rochefort called *Stances a Sophie* (same name!). Both, Gaspard concludes, are testaments to “the good old mechanisms of male domination.” (n. pag)

After a while, as the infamous letter becomes the source for other women’s fictions, children’s books, a sequence of poems by Anne Portugal, a full-length play, a crossword puzzle, and material for an Origami designer, we begin to see that the letter’s actual content is not nearly as interesting as the demonstration of the imagination’s power to transform ordinary material into something rich and strange. And perhaps the highlight of this very imaginative conceptual piece is the filmed presentation of the female clown and the parrot. The clown gives a wonderfully idiosyncratic reading, scoffing and cursing at each phrase but then changing her whole mood when she comes upon the word **Amour**. The gist of her rapidly spoken French is that at least the word “love” appears in the letter: there it is, *amour*, he is still using that word, so it can’t all be bad, can it? As for the parrot, we watch Brenda attempting to eat the letter up, but, having discovered that it isn’t edible, crumpling it up and discarding it with a measure of disdain while uttering guttural sounds we can’t understand.

How are we supposed to react to *Take Care of Yourself*? In a prize-winning essay for *Frieze* magazine, Jessica Lott wrote:

It’s no surprise that the sheer volume, diversity, creativity and pleasure of these women’s achievements and talents steal the show in a remarkably uplifting way. Yet despite all this fun and professional exhibitionism, the nature of the undertaking is destabilizing to female power. The only man in the room, invisible and unnamed, is still a domineering figure, multiply replicated, chased, tossed about in the interpretive tide, but overwhelmingly necessary. Without him, the entire exhibition would collapse on itself—the reason, the women’s participatory purpose, would vanish.

Literally speaking, this is certainly the case, but one might add that Calle is mischievously inventing a scenario in which the man himself is finally silenced and only the women —brilliant, inventive, amusing, highly professional— speak. Then, too, once the basic premise of the piece is understood, our interest shifts to be in the general pleasure and problematic of hermeneutics. Each reading suggests that a complex linguistic unit, poetry is the key example, can only be read differentially. Not what the text *says*, as Goldsmith’s detractors demand, but how it works —this is what matters. And for Calle, as for Goldsmith, the most troubling gap is that between information and knowledge.

Where, in all this complex assemblage, is the author located? Who is the “Sophie Calle” who speaks to us? As author, Calle sets the stage, she chooses her narrators, she has presumably taken the photographs, organised the visual images, and created their structure. But we learn little about Sophie, beyond the fact that she knows lots of smart women, many of them fellow artists or performers, and that she trusts collaboration with this female group. Then again, are we sure that these collaborators really exist, that Sophie has not invented some of them or altered their words? As for Sophie herself, there are no confessions or revelations about earlier lovers or childhood trauma, no reference to Calle’s own art apprenticeship. She prefers to remain a cipher, her “subject” being not herself but her sense of the world in which she must negotiate her very existence.

In her concern for the everyday, Calle is, whether directly or not, a precursor of Goldsmith’s as of other conceptualists in the U.S. Goldsmith is more austere: in *Seven Deaths*, the *Trilogy*, and his most recent book *Capital*, (a citational anatomy of New York, modeled on Walter Benjamin’s *Arcades*), he strenuously avoids visual image or collage material, keeping the spotlight on written text itself as conundrum. As such, Goldsmith might find Calle’s work too heterogeneous, too eclectic in its reliance on art and music, its inclusion of little CDs and story books. But the basic metapoetic assumptions of the two are similar. The lyrical (or in Calle’s case the camera eye) urge toward expression, toward self-presentation, is intentionally subordinated to mimetic versions of other people’s discourse. Only in relation to the Other, these conceptualists suggest, is “identity” established. The personal, in these instances, is inevitably subordinated to the political, the social. Although the notorious break-off letter to Sophie is personal and private, in *Take Care of Yourself* its function is seen as communal: multiplex analysis is a way for the women’s group to share thoughts and feelings. In this context, it’s important to note that the title, taken from G’s letter, is *Prenez soin de vous* —the formal, not the familiar, *you*.

The same phenomenon occurs in *Seven Deaths and Disasters*, if not quite in *The Body of Michael Brown* (where, incidentally, the large photograph of Brown is a distraction). Calle and Goldsmith would agree that, given the sea of media cliché which we negotiate, the accurate rendition of feeling is often the result of judicious citation. Had Sophie Calle shared her letter with a different constituency —for example, 107 male engineers— the result would have been quite different. It is her wit that animates

the whole composition. Similarly, in the case of “John F. Kennedy,” it is Goldsmith who has selected the station and subtly put his own stamp on the broadcast.

Indeed, the paradox is that conceptualism, carried to its logical conclusion, as it is in works like *Seven Deaths* and *Take Care of Yourself*, becomes a kind of hyperrealism. Everything is *documented*, making use of the means now available to the poet as word processor, the poet as writing (or image) machine. G’s letter to Sophie can be analysed ad infinitum, but its circumstances and meaning remain opaque, even as Michael Brown’s autopsy report tells us nothing about the young man who was killed. Yet as readers we continue to look for openings in the text that will be revelatory. The issue, as Goldsmith and Calle understand, and that a conceptual poetics can take as a premise, is that the body most difficult to get inside of turns out to be one’s own.

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<sup>1</sup> Goldsmith, *Seven American Deaths and Disasters*, front cover-flap.

<sup>2</sup> Note that Wilkinson is basing his account, written in typical *New Yorker* reportage style, on that of certain eye-witnesses. He was not present.

<sup>3</sup> Chapter 4 passim. Morris argues that the text shows the coroner to be himself biased, skewing language so as to make Brown look like a predator. I myself would not go that far, but his point that even the most official language has built in biases is very well taken.

<sup>4</sup> Calle’s friends have identified G as the writer Grégoire Bouillier, who wrote about his affair with Calle in *The Mystery Guest* (*L’Invité mystère*).

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