

# Requoting the arcades. Walter Benjamin's idle robbers

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By contrasting Walter Benjamin's fragmentary theory of quotation to the different ways his work has itself undergone quotation thus far, a new insight can be gained into the perception of the materiality and visuality of texts. The so-called *Passagen-Werk*, the project on the Parisian Arcades which Benjamin pursued for more than ten years until the end of his life, is the overflowing, yet voided space where this crossing takes place.

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## Prologue

For a long time, Benjamin's renown as a major influential figure in 20<sup>th</sup> century art theory revolved around the essay *The work of art in the Age of its technical reproducibility*, which remains the object of a continued interest from fields such as culture studies or media studies. Apart from the atypical popularity of the notion of aura, shared by a multitude of contrasting readers in rank and scope<sup>1</sup>, Benjamin's reflections on art and artists have generally been contained within the limits imposed by the inner conceptual structure of his thought, or otherwise restricted to a chronological frame that rarely exceeds his own life and times<sup>2</sup>. With a few exceptions<sup>3</sup>, studies on the appropriation of Benjamin have broadly followed the same course<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See A. Benjamin, "The decline of art: Benjamin's aura", *Oxford Art Journal*, 9.2, 1986, pp. 30-35; S. Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's artwork essay reconsidered", *October*, 62 1992, pp. 3-41; L. Patt (ed. by), *Benjamin's Blind Spot: Walter Benjamin and the Premature Death of Aura: with the Manual of Lost Ideas*, Institute for Cultural Inquiry, Topanga 2001; J.D. Bolter, "New media and the permanent crisis of aura", *Convergence*, 12.1 2006, pp. 21-39.

<sup>2</sup> See A. Benjamin, *Walter Benjamin and art*, Continuum, London-New York 2005; R. Rochlitz, *Le désenchantement de l'art. La philosophie de Walter Benjamin*, Gallimard, Paris 1992.

<sup>3</sup> H. Gumbrecht, and M. Marrinan (ed. by), *Mapping Benjamin: The work of art in the digital age*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2003; D. Schöttker (ed. by), *Schrift, Bilder, Denken: Walter Benjamin und die Künste*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 2004; D. Schöttker, "Konstruktiver Fragmentarismus". *Form und Rezeption der Schriften Walter Benjamins*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1999.

<sup>4</sup> See L. Marcus, L. Nead (ed. by), *Actuality of Walter Benjamin*. Lawrence & Wishart, London 1998; P. Osborne, *Walter Benjamin: Critical Evaluations in Cultural Theory, Vol. III: Appropriations*, Routledge, London-New York 2005.

In a general sense, traditional scholarship deliberately or unconsciously tends to emulate Benjamin's passion of detail by isolating and then reconnecting specific concepts with the aim of demonstrating the inherent cohesion of his body of work. Conversely, outside the realm of philosophy and literary criticism, artists and writers who feel drawn to or inspired by Benjamin's ideas are often concerned not so much with theoretical accuracy or philological rigor, but rather interested in incorporating such ideas into processes or experiments of their own. Strangely enough, and despite all the peculiarities that characterize academic discourse in its relation to the art world, both highly skilled commentators and random wanderers keep rummaging for the same thing: quotations. Whether knowledgeable or casual, quotations abound. Hence, the reception and appropriation of Benjamin's work through quoting is a case in point that deserves to be reexamined outside of a strictly institutional framework. It moves from within, but needs to be read from the outside.

## **Robbing**

Walter Benjamin's theory of quotation consists of a mass of scattered pieces, occurring at irregular intervals and differing significantly among themselves in density and shape. It begins as a narrative of theory and ends as an unfulfilled methodological wish.

A well-known passage from *One-Way Street*, published in 1928, reads as follows:

Quotations in my work are like armed robbers who break forth and take away conviction from the idle man.<sup>5</sup>

Quoting this phrase time and again can prove to be a judicious or a perilous gesture, depending on the standpoint from which the analysis is to be conducted. On the one hand, it belongs to Benjamin's canon and is therefore destined to be perceived by specialized scholarship as holy writ, so to speak, the first or the final word on quotation left to dissect and decipher within the author's oeuvre. On the other hand, as the accomplished example of a

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<sup>5</sup> W. Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. by R. Tiedemann, H. Schweppenhäuser, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M. 1974, vol. IV.1, p. 138. Henceforth referred to as: GS, followed by volume and page number. All translations are my own, except when otherwise noted.

language construct able to exist in and by itself, it is and remains a cursory, volatile quotation, all set to be used and reused in dictionaries and anthologies of so-called memorable quotations, eventually finding its way into digital platforms and online encyclopedias. The fact that it speaks so deftly of a universal concept (“quotations”) by means of a particular notion of subjectivity (“my work”) only iterates such a division in perception. In a sense, every scholarly effort to guard these words against their misappropriation is bound to fail, for the simple reason that, in a single sentence, Benjamin has managed to summon the momentum associated with the act of quoting, while at the same time alluding to quotations not only as a pervasive, but as a decisive element in his work precisely on account of their disruptive effect.

As if made for posterity, this sentence has served many different purposes to this day, from introducing Benjamin’s understanding of quotation as the alienation of the past from its historical context<sup>6</sup>, to discussing the dynamics of stealing and sharing as manifested in the «figure of the noble robber» and its relation to the theory of the name<sup>7</sup>. Some see it as epitomizing the thought-image, a central concept in Benjamin’s writings, others approach it from the point of view of historicity<sup>8</sup>. But beyond the sphere of its scholarly readings, Benjamin’s aphorism has become a ready-made quotation in its own right, earning its place in collections of eminent proverbs and adages, much like the handbooks of quotations that proliferated in Germany – particularly during and after the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – as collections of “geflügelte Worte”, winged words, words that have literally grown wings.

Undoubtedly, Benjamin’s artful phrase on robbers as quotations, in itself a crafty, whimsical reflection on the essence of quotation, can be regarded as a winged word of sorts. Defying every assumption of ownership, quotations are intrinsically made to bear the burden of dispossession: once thrown into the world, they are led away from their author and acquire a life of their

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<sup>6</sup> G. Agamben, *L'uomo senza contenuto*, Quodlibet, Macerata 1994, pp. 157-158.

<sup>7</sup> S. Benninghoff-Lühl, *Figuren des Zitats*. *Eine Untersuchung zur Funktionsweise übertragener Rede*, Metzler, Stuttgart 1998, pp. 176-179.

<sup>8</sup> See I. Kranz, *Raumgewordene Vergangenheit: Walter Benjamins Poetologie der Geschichte*. Wilhelm Fink Verlag, Paderborn 2011, pp. 105-107.

own. The inner workings of quoting, in turn, are those of an open confrontation between a destructive element (ambushing, attacking, cutting, separating, alienating, wresting from) and a preserving element (shifting, displacing, transferring, adducing, rendering, bringing in).

In its virtuosity of composition, Benjamin's aphorism not only describes this process, but actually enacts it with intense dramatic effect, leaving behind a sharp, yet elusive formulation. The ruse lies not so much in the vividness of the compressed narrative, with its easily graspable set of images and characters – the road, the robbers, the idle man and his conviction –, but in the fact that such a theatrical dimension can be uttered in the first person and still point to an all-encompassing definition of what quotations are and how they operate.

## **Redeeming**

The apparent simplicity and immediate attraction of Benjamin's miniature story of quotations as robbers contrasts heavily with the remaining pronouncements on quotations that occur intermittently throughout his work.

The essay on Karl Kraus (1931) is generally considered to be the closest Benjamin ever got to developing an actual theory of quotation. It addresses the act of quoting – or of making something quotable – by compacting several of Benjamin's most intricate concepts into a mass of opaque, flowing categories, all drawn into the same discursive swirl, defying linear exegesis: rhyme and aura, word and name, religion and law, creation and redemption, origin and destruction. Quotation appears as the place where «origin and destruction manifest themselves before language», and its movement defined by means of a staged ritual of paradox: «[quotation] calls the word by its name, wrenches it destructively out of the context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin»<sup>9</sup>. It has been argued that this text condenses Benjamin's extant «philosophy and theology of quotation *in actu*»: acting in his capacity as a “philosopher of history” and a «theologian of language», he would have redrawn Kraus' satirical critique of the decay of language – operating as polemics through and against quotation – by

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<sup>9</sup> GS II.1, p. 363.

weaving a historical-philosophical fabric in which the destruction and redemption of language are intimately connected to the intellection of truth as either inherent or extraneous to the act of quoting<sup>10</sup>. Benjamin's view of Kraus as the «greatest technician of quotation»<sup>11</sup> has equally been read as a physiognomic study modelled after a «historical-salvific overcoming of the inner-historical context of catastrophe»<sup>12</sup>, or redirected to particular aspects of his theory of language, such as «mimetic genius» and «nonsensuous similarity»<sup>13</sup>, or recollection and repetition<sup>14</sup>.

This conjuncture is further complicated by the sinuous references to quotation in the writings on the concept of History from 1940. Discussing history as «the object of a construction», Benjamin contends that a given historical period comes to its self-awareness as the recurring of a past age by quoting it, «just like fashion quotes a bygone attire». A definition of quotation that is both textually and politically unbound is thus obtained: «In this way, Ancient Rome was to Robespierre a past charged with now-time which he blasted out of the continuum of history»<sup>15</sup>.

These few examples should suffice to show how Benjamin's theory of quotation, in any event deeply entwined in the close-knit, yet ever-changing conceptual structure of his thought, is constantly nearing its breaking point. Indeed, it is fair to say that a close reading of Benjamin's reflections on quotations risks exposing his «image of history and the world» as «sustained and shaped by contradictions» whose clarification «is only an apparent one»,

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<sup>10</sup> J. Fürnkäs, "Zitat und Zerstörung. Karl Kraus und Walter Benjamin", in J. Le Rider, G. Raulet (Eds.): *Verabschiedung der (Post-) Moderne. Eine interdisziplinäre Debatte*, Narr, Tübingen 1987, pp. 215, 218.

<sup>11</sup> GS II, p. 1125.

<sup>12</sup> C. Schulte, *Ursprung ist das Ziel: Walter Benjamin über Karl Kraus*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2003, p. 138.

<sup>13</sup> See A. Kerekes, "Die zweideutige Demut des Interpretieren. Zum Begriffspaar 'mimetisch/mimisch'. Walter Benjamins Schriften über Karl Kraus", in A. Kerekes, N. Pethes, P. Plener (ed.): *Archiv – Zitat – Nachleben. Die Medien bei Walter Benjamin und das Medium Benjamin*, Lang, Frankfurt a.M. 2005, pp. 157-172.

<sup>14</sup> See B. Menke, "Das Nach-Leben im Zitat. Benjamins Gedächtnis der Texte", in A. Haverkamp, R. Lachmann (eds): *Gedächtniskunst. Raum – Bild – Schrift. Studien zur Mnemotechnik*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1991, pp. 74-110.

<sup>15</sup> GS I.2, pp. 694, 701.

leading one to conclude: «In the concept of quotation, old questions return unsolved once more. They are simply rephrased»<sup>16</sup>.

## Drilling

Benjamin's *Programme of literary criticism*, a project running roughly from 1929 to 1931, argues that «a good critique» should consist «at the utmost of two components, namely critical gloss and quotation». To this he adds: «Only by means of gloss, as well as quotation, is it possible to make good criticism. The 'summary' is to be avoided at all costs. In contrast, the simple critique [made] out of quotations is something to be developed.» In a further passage, Benjamin refers to «quotation and gloss» as the potential «formal characters» of criticism, foreseen as a «pure function of life, that is, of the survival of the work»<sup>17</sup>.

With the unveiling of the so-called *Passagen-Werk*, the work on the Parisian Arcades that occupied Benjamin from 1927 until 1940, quotation appears in a different light:

Method of this project: literary montage. I have nothing to say. Only to show. I won't steal anything of value and will appropriate no spirited formulations to myself. But the rags, the waste: I do not want to make an inventory of these, but rather let them come into their own in the only way possible: by using them.<sup>18</sup>

As the concise expression of a theoretical wish with no boundaries – focusing on the particular while pointing to the universal –, the self-reflective stance of this passage simultaneously encapsulates Benjamin's specific intent for the Arcades Project and unravels its potential as the quotation of all quotations, both literally and symbolically: it alludes to a method without entirely disclosing its functionality.

These lines can and have been read as one of the main sources that help contextualize and explain Benjamin's project as a whole, either against the backdrop of a psychoanalytic, a theologically or a politically charged

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<sup>16</sup> M. Voigts, "Die Mater der Gerechtigkeit. Zur Kritik des Zitat-Begriffs bei Walter Benjamin", in N.W. Bolz, R. Faber (Eds.), *Antike und Moderne. Zu Walter Benjamins Passagen*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 1986, pp. 100-103.

<sup>17</sup> GS VI, pp. 171, 162, 170.

<sup>18</sup> GS V.1, p. 574.

terminology<sup>19</sup>. Adorno famously wrote of the *Passagen-Werk* that it resisted reconstruction as a whole: «Benjamin's intention was to renounce every discernible interpretation, and to let meaning become apparent solely through a shock-like montage of material. [...] To crown his anti-subjectivism, the magnum opus was to consist only of quotations». However, he noted, «no canon indicates how the bold undertaking of a philosophy purified of argumentation was roughly to be accomplished, or even how the quotations were to be strung together in a somewhat meaningful way». As a consequence, «the fragmentary philosophy remained a fragment, the victim perhaps of a method of which it is uncertain if it allowed itself to deliver in the medium of thought»<sup>20</sup>. A less critical tone is adopted by Hannah Arendt when she mentions the «ideal of producing a work consisting entirely of quotations» as Benjamin's «greatest ambition» and «greatest pride» as a writer. Arendt goes on to describe «his method of drilling to obtain the essential in the form of quotations» as «the modern equivalent of ritual invocations»<sup>21</sup>. This begs the very simple question: where does the ideal of quotation begin, and where does it end? What becomes of Benjamin's method once it is out in the public domain and turns into the waste which it initially saw as its object? And to which extent can it be appropriated and distorted so as to legitimize a contrived, perfunctory discourse on the method itself of drilling?

## Capitalizing

Kenneth Goldsmith's book project *Capital: New York, Capital of the 20th Century*<sup>22</sup> uses Benjamin's methodological frame for the original Arcades Project with the aim of reframing and relocating its themes and items within a new urban and mythological space, New York City, modifying,

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<sup>19</sup> See A. Gelley, *Benjamin's Passages: Dreaming, Awakening*. Fordham University Press, New York 2015, pp. 102-146. B. Hanssen (ed.), *Walter Benjamin and the Arcades project*, Continuum, London 2006, pp. 14-16, 82-83, 105-106, 136-137, 157-183. S. Buck-Morss, *The dialectics of seeing: Walter Benjamin and the Arcades Project*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1989, pp. 73-75, 221-227.

<sup>20</sup> Th.W. Adorno, "Charakteristik Walter Benjamins", in *Prismen. Kulturkritik und Gesellschaft*, Tiedemann, R. (Ed.), Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a.M. 1992 (1976), p. 246.

<sup>21</sup> H. Arendt, "Walter Benjamin 1892-1940", in W. Benjamin, *Illuminations. Essays and Reflections*, Schocken, New York 1969, pp. 4-8, 47-48.

<sup>22</sup> K. Goldsmith, *Capital. New York, Capital of the 20th Century*, Verso, London-Brooklyn, NY 2015.

updating or replacing names, images and references. More perhaps than other similar or related efforts<sup>23</sup>, Goldsmith's approach in displacing the Arcades Project onto a new temporal and spatial setting raises a wide range of questions which, despite having been discussed in great depth in the wake of conceptual art during the 1960s and early 1970s, are far from being solved. One of those recurring questions is the relation of authorship to appropriation and quotation.

In a chapter of his book *Uncreative Writing*, fittingly titled "Why Appropriation?", Goldsmith discusses the problem of appropriation and citation in art and literature by contrasting Ezra Pound's Cantos and Benjamin's Arcades Project as «two different approaches to constructing an appropriated text». Pound's Cantos are described by Goldsmith as «an exquisite built construction cobbled together by a master craftsman» whose genius lies in the ability to collect, gather and synthesize his heterogeneous sources and found material into a unified whole of pure beauty and sensuousness. His constructive, intuitive method allows him to arrive at an epic sense of totality encapsulated in a frozen composition where his «own language» and intervention remains clearly perceptible from end to end. One is drawn into the work or held in close proximity to it by reason of its «absorptive» quality. Conversely, Benjamin's method of literary montage supposedly «makes no attempt at unification, other than loosely organizing his citations by category». Being first and foremost a «scrivenerlike process» operating through the juxtaposition of «fragmentary wholes», the Arcades Project is not set on cohesion but rather on filling preordained blank spaces with the «accumulation of language»<sup>24</sup> taken from others – in the form of transcriptions and quotations. Its effect on the reader is therefore not absorptive, but reflective: instead of being pulled into the work's core, one is forced to turn away from it.

Goldsmith's effort to separate what he sees as Pound's «synthetic skills» from Benjamin's disjunctive «choices» of quotable material is fraught with many inconsistencies, but not unjustified on a subjective level. Pound's

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<sup>23</sup> D. Kishik, David. *The Manhattan Project: A Theory of a City*, Stanford University Press, Stanford 2015.

<sup>24</sup> K. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing. Managing Language in the Digital Age*, Columbia University Press, New York 2011, pp. 111-114.



«exquisite creation» is perceived as a finalized text, at the source of which stand numerous literary and nonliterary sources which «have been chosen with distinctive and carefully cultivated taste». The Arcades book, on the other hand, is branded a «successful» work on account of «the exquisite quality of Benjamin's choices, his taste»<sup>25</sup>. In both cases, taste dictates the selection of the quotations that are to shape the work to come. The difference begins in the choice of method: synthesis or disjunction, consolidation or dispersion. The first invites an immersive, the latter a specular movement, a mirror-like reflection pushing us «away from the object, throwing us back on ourselves»<sup>26</sup> – to use Goldsmith's own words. To all appearances, the two methods trigger two different sides of the artist's psychology: while Pound's achievement is met with admiration from afar, Benjamin's project is seemingly experienced as a personal challenge.

As «a great, unrealized project» and «a stand-alone work»<sup>27</sup>, the Arcades Project is everything a contemporary artist could hope for, and more. Historically, it bears all the traces of modernity, above all fragmentation, the refusal of organicity and completeness, nurturing a continuous obsession with the peripheral and the marginal. Aesthetically and culturally, it is the promise of non-linear reading and intertextuality as a self-generating text surface. Goldsmith speaks of the Arcades Project as «an enormous proto-hypertextual work»<sup>28</sup>, a «constellation-like construction» similar in many ways to the Web, which he regards as «one massive Benjaminian dialectical image». He does not hesitate to compare the perception of the ever-changing reconfigurations of Benjamin's handwritten note cards to the drifting movement of «virtual flaneurs, casually surfing from one place to another».<sup>29</sup> Finally, given that the originally intended form of the whole project is and will remain unknown, and since every printed edition of it appears as little more than a tentative gesture of recomposition, one is left to play with uncertainty. With unlimited combinations at hand, the Arcades project

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<sup>25</sup> Ivi, p. 113.

<sup>26</sup> Ivi, p. 110.

<sup>27</sup> Ivi, p. 114.

<sup>28</sup> Ivi, p. 115.

<sup>29</sup> Ivi, pp. 116-117.

necessarily appears as the archetype of «a text without end» and anticipates every notion of «a work in progress»<sup>30</sup>.

Elsewhere, Goldsmith defines his own book *Capital* as «a rewriting of Benjamin’s Arcades Project for New York in the twentieth-century», adding however that it «really isn’t a rewrite of *The Arcades Project* since it was a book that was never written by Benjamin”, but rather “just a bunch of notes sorted into various folders»<sup>31</sup>. Given that «we’re still not sure what final form the book was meant to take by Benjamin», he concludes that «the book itself was actually written when it was constructed as a book decades after his death»<sup>32</sup>. Its materiality and flexibility as a text redefine reading and rewriting by providing «simple categories into which an infinite number of artifacts can be filed», and a space where «new categories can be added or subtracted at will». In short, Benjamin’s project heightens «the act of collecting and sorting» heaps and bits of language into an individual «writing practice»<sup>33</sup>. This largely explains why Goldsmith saw the Arcades Project as belonging to those object-like texts «so ridiculously epic [...] that they begged *engagement* rather than *reading*»<sup>34</sup>. It is clear, however, that such engagement still ended up pacing back and forth between the need to programmatically invalidate originality by working solely with quotations, and the temptation to ultimately make a «beautiful work»<sup>35</sup> out of those same quotations.

*Capital*, the project, is deeply aware of what it owes to Benjamin, but even more so when it comes to reducing such awareness to pieces. After all, in addition to being «the greatest book of uncreative writing», the Arcades Project also happened to be a book with «no fixed form»<sup>36</sup>, making it all the more appealing for wild speculation on what that form might be. For the self-appointed *Lumpensammler*, the rag-picker of digital mass culture who sees reading as writing, and creation as reproduction, the Arcades Project is ultimately the absolute clearance of form as process. It sets the example and

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<sup>30</sup> Ivi, pp. 114-117.

<sup>31</sup> K. Goldsmith, *Kenneth Goldsmith in Conversation – Kenneth Goldsmith and Francisco Roman Guevara*, De La Salle University Publishing House, 2014, p. 13.

<sup>32</sup> Ivi, p. 28.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>34</sup> Ivi, p. 6.

<sup>35</sup> Ivi, p. 28.

<sup>36</sup> K. Goldsmith, *Uncreative Writing*, cit., pp. 109, 114.

signals one more chapter in the unfolding of a «waste-management poetics», a term which has been used to describe Goldsmith's activity as an artist<sup>37</sup>. In many respects, Goldsmith's monument of a book is strategically wrapped but no less trapped in the rhetoric of self-effacement. On the one hand, it conceptually dismisses traditional values of creativity and originality in favor of the factitious invisibility of the artist/writer, whose only task is said to be the assemblage and montage of quotations. On the other hand, the very idea of renouncing expression or inspiration is clearly driven by the notion that the collector of quotations is more than just a mere hoarder, since in the end, he composes his work by taste. While ideally suppressing his own words altogether, Goldsmith's book is nevertheless based on his choices of words, sentences and figures. It is, after all, Goldsmith's own version of Benjamin's unfinished project, and its simulated denial of authorship and creativity can be readily understood as a self-aggrandizing operation in disguise.

*Capital*, the book, therefore capitalizes on both fronts: it implicitly purports to be the realization of Benjamin's dictum «nothing to say, only to show», while at the same time saying too much due to its overly conceptual gesture. It is true that a sense of faithfulness to the original project seems to be at odds with the necessary poetic license demanded by the new time and place. In the end, however, it is no longer a matter of doing justice or being true to Benjamin's original idea, but rather of being able to perform or conduct it in one way or another. Hence, the Arcades Project becomes no longer a simple object of study, but a test case in free adaptation, at once denying and illustrating authorship as such. From the very start, the making of the project is the remake of the original version. But given that such a version never came to be, it is up to the copyist to turn it into what it never was, namely a book. Scholarship has achieved this by recomposing what it believes to have been Benjamin's plan, acknowledging the arbitrariness of its conjecture but making it look credible on account of its rigor. The artist-scrivener, on the other hand, chooses to impersonate Benjamin himself as the grand collector of language and cultural debris, but

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<sup>37</sup> See C. Schmidt, "The waste-management poetics of Kenneth Goldsmith.", *SubStance* 37.2, 2008, pp. 25-40.

risks redundancy by replicating not only the method, as it claims to do, but its author's battle with authorship itself. If Goldsmith's *Capital*, a one-word nod to Benjamin's working title – Paris, capital of the 19<sup>th</sup> century – and Marx's majestic final title, attempts to answer the question of appropriation and quotation, it does so in the form of an ornamental monolith that showcases the artist's trial-and-error pilgrimage to his own self.

Similarly to every other conceptualist born too late, Goldsmith's rise to stardom is well-wrought in controversy and calculation. Whether by "teaching" uncreative writing, «printing out the internet» (the title of one of Goldsmith's projects from 2013) or announcing the coming of age of «post-internet poetry» (one of his contributions as a columnist for *The New Yorker*), each individual move seems to have been orchestrated in an irreprehensible manner for the sake of effect and impact. The all-too-present author whose vocation it is to question authorship, the artist who refuses invention and originality, the poet who comes forth as a plagiarist, the self-made copyist who reframes the essence of writing in the digital age, and so forth: all of these apparently contradictory characters converge into one and the same amplified caricature of the poet-artist as performer. And because performance is essentially a machinery that reactivates paradox – author and non-author, writing and non-writing – by embodying it without end, every critical awareness of the work is forced to deal with the persona standing not behind, but in front of it. This twisted logic alone cuts off judgment as such, since denouncing the work as illegitimate is a task already fulfilled and celebrated by the work itself, and exposing the author as a fraud is a role the author himself claims as his own. Critical reactions to one or the other are therefore often more perplexing than the object they refer to<sup>38</sup>.

### **Convoluting**

In *Capital*, Goldsmith borrows Benjamin's method of collecting notes and isolated phrases, only to restage them in a different environment, thereby addressing a different reality and audience. Something else occurs in the

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<sup>38</sup> See D. Kaufmann, *Reading Uncreative Writing: Conceptualism, Expression, and the Lyric*. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham 2017.

exhibition *The Arcades: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin*, held at the Jewish Museum in New York from March 17 to August 6, 2017. Presenting work by 37 artists and meant as a «meditation on» and a «reconsideration of» the Arcades Project, it presents itself as a «curatorial experiment that understands the exhibition space as a microcosm of our neoliberal capitalist society»<sup>39</sup>. Each piece is accompanied by a series of quotations chosen and assembled by none other than Kenneth Goldsmith himself. As the guest of honor and master-quoter, Goldsmith is now in a privileged but delicate position. On the one hand, he is forced to let go of the large-scale, open-ended gesture of his own book undertaking by adapting his selection process to the conceptual and formal limits of the exhibition space. On the other hand, his choices introduce a textual element that ultimately determines or changes the perception of each visual work, literally framing it – in each and every sense of the word. Dealing in and with quotations made to blend, but not identical with the artworks on display at the exhibition, his discussion of appropriation and quotation begins to shift into the more complex dynamics of text and image.

For the purpose of the exhibition, Benjamin's alphabetical listing of topics for the *Passagen-Werk* is maintained, pinpointing motifs and themes central to his work, but subsequently used as the pretext to introduce a large ensemble of new quotations by artists and authors as diverse as Duchamp, Mallarmé, Beckett, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, Debord, Flusser, among many others, including quotes from newspapers, the internet, popular culture and music. Goldsmith's quotations, arranged graphically in geometrical and swirling word formations, invoking the tradition of concrete or visual poetry, are said to be «Annotations» to the convolutes – and in yet another mimetic move, both the exhibition and the exhibition catalogue are said to have been “convoluted” by those who would otherwise be referred to as its editors, organizers or curators.

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<sup>39</sup> J. Hoffmann, Jens (ed.). *The ARCADES: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin*. Convoluted by Jens Hoffmann with contributions by Caroline A. Jones, Vito Manolo Roma and Kenneth Goldsmith. The Jewish Museum, New York, Yale University Press, New Haven-London 2017, p. 18.

With *Capital*, Goldsmith's conceptual gesture implied a geographical and temporal transposition – from one city to the other, from one century to the next. Assertive authorship and the lack thereof coexisted in a strange shadow play between an inflated artistic persona and feigned anonymity. For the artists in the exhibition, or the curators selecting their works, reading is immediately echoed in seeing, forcing them to transpose the Arcades Project, or at least a part of it, from one medium onto the other – from word to picture, from text to image. It is no longer a matter of identifying the thought-image or the dialectical image in specific places and contexts, but rather of incorporating the literal image as an inherent part of the text. It ceases to be a game of words to instead become a tangible struggle in image-making. At the same time, were it not for Goldsmith's visual poetry of quotation, Benjamin's project, let alone his presence, would hardly be detectable in most pieces. While some contributions can be seen as visual translations or historically updated versions of the convolute titles, most of them are simply random images from each artist's own catalogue with no apparent connection whatsoever to the Arcades Project.

One exception is worth noticing. For convolute N, the artist Taryn Simon presents two folders with colored images (archival inkjet prints) depicting «swimming pools» and «handshakes». Goldsmith's input here consists of quoting Benjamin's much-quoted statement on quotations as the guiding principle of the Arcades Project, with an emphasis on the three initial sentences: «Method of this project: literary montage. I needn't say anything. Merely show»<sup>40</sup>. This is one of the few quotations by Benjamin selected by Goldsmith for this particular project. The reasons for his choice are hard to miss: Simon's serial approach to image composition and presentation appears to be the perfect illustration of montage as method. Goldsmith's own appropriation of Benjamin's quotation, on the other hand, does not move by associative logic. Instead, it takes on the second sentence – «I needn't say anything: Merely show» – and goes on to reproduce four different discussions of the contraction «needn't» taken from The New

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<sup>40</sup> W. Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, transl. by H. Eiland, K. McLaughlin, Cambridge, Mass.-London, England 1999, p. 460.

Yorker, Wikipedia, an internet forum, and a CD booklet, respectively<sup>41</sup>. By focusing on a single linguistic detail and exploring it in a tongue-in-cheek manner, Goldsmith is most likely addressing Benjamin's methodological imperative by putting it into practice, while at the same time rejecting the semantic burden attached to it: he quotes Benjamin's passage from its by now canonical, yet partially flawed English translation. The original German version reads: «Ich habe nichts zu sagen. Nur zu zeigen»<sup>42</sup> – literally: «I have nothing to say. Only to show.» As an accomplished *dictum* in the strict sense, Benjamin's turn of phrase is assertive in both ways: showing (in the sense of pointing or alluding to a given object) is depicted as the consequence of voided speech (saying, as in *speaking or writing*), but the elimination of one by the other is thwarted by the self-sufficient, hybrid nature of the formulation. The emphatic “I” always seems to be on the verge of retreating into obscurity, while the sense of possession is cut into two equal halves: showing is only foreseen as possible by virtue of having nothing to say, and saying is only deemed impossible in order to allow for something to be shown. This self-enclosed dilemma is shaken to its foundations once it is itself turned into the object of appropriation and reappropriation.

If Goldsmith is indeed verging on Benjamin's words not as the petty robber of brilliant phrasing, but rather as the self-stylized rag-and-bone man who collects his items and sets them up for others to see, one has only to look for that which he would be lacking: his silence. Since the difference between having no *need* to speak and having *nothing* to say is not only a linguistic, but a structural one, it could be argued that Goldsmith's uncreative talent in spotting old quotations and sifting out new secret ones is seemingly out of touch with the physical nature of the thing itself he wishes to bring forth by simply using it, namely language and words. This being said, it is not a matter of exposing a philological blunder or linguistic illiteracy as such, none of which are ultimately decisive for the purpose of artistic practice. But accurate or not, Goldsmith's praxis of literary montage as word processing is actually more complex than he might have imagined.

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<sup>41</sup> J. Hoffmann (ed. by). *The ARCADES: Contemporary Art and Walter Benjamin*, cit., pp. 64-65.

<sup>42</sup> GS V.1, 574.

It feeds off the classic contradiction between text and image that Benjamin's sentence so pointedly epitomizes in the duality of saying vs. showing, but it also questions the self-evident nature of the dualism as such.

## Epilogue

Benjamin's *Passagen-Werk* is the raging dream of philology in a void. Ideally, it is the appealing realization of a book consisting «solely of quotations». Empirically, it is an amorphous, ultimately indeterminate assemblage of written objects and images. Left to its own devices, it presents itself as the autograph score for a text whose composition lies in waiting. As the storage place for hundreds of notes and quotations, its fate is to keep reeling on the surface of its own instability. At the end of a rich profusion of source materials stands the hollow form of the whole, that is, the very impossibility of wholeness and completion. In the tradition of modernism and its many aftermaths, this status of the work as the fragment of an unknown totality has been met with exulting fatalism and contained elation. The 20<sup>th</sup> century has evinced the fragmentary with its inborn ability to generate euphoria from anguish and turn obstacles into opportunities. Despite its complexity, Benjamin's allusion to «literary montage» as the method of his work still belongs to this acute consciousness of the broken and incomplete nature of things that incessantly plays hide and seek with its opposite. In turn, Benjamin's intent to transpose «the principle of montage into history» by assembling «large constructions out of the smallest, keenly and incisively customized structural components», while discovering «in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event»<sup>43</sup>, presupposes the identity of synthesis (joining together, assembling parts into wholes) and analysis (taking apart, dismantling parts as wholes). This apparent contradiction is at once the core and the fate of the Arcades Project, and even propels the celebration of fragmentation surrounding it. However, before a discussion on the technique of montage can be taken up<sup>44</sup>, it is important to acknowledge where the rhythm of such a gesture comes from.

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<sup>43</sup> GS V.1, p. 575.

<sup>44</sup> See R. Heynen, "Literarische Montage als Organon der Geschichte", in V. Borsò, P. Krassnitzer (ed. by), *Medialität und Gedächtnis*. JB Metzler, Stuttgart 2001, pp. 155-190;



Not unlike his theory of quotation, which can only be reconstructed in a tentative manner, Benjamin's practice of quotation never ceased to oscillate between a stark speculative intent, on the one hand, and the impossibility of its fulfillment, on the other. Such fluctuation is manifest in the diverging practices of appropriation through quotation that emerge from the gripping deadlock hovering over the unfinished Arcades Project, conceived and perceived as a montage of quotations. On a scholarly level, a sense of «authoritative quotation»<sup>45</sup> – a term used by Benjamin in his *Origin of the German Tragic Drama* – tends to be retrieved and used to reconstruct a meaningful whole. In the arts, by contrast, quotation can be vague and lend itself to distortion: it approaches the text as a visual intimation of something that lies beyond or around it. In other words, the reception of the Arcades project as a theory of method is far from being agreed upon in practice. More often than not, the philologist's worst nightmare is the artist's unbounded playground. In fact, when confronted with radical modes of appropriation – such as Goldsmith's histrionic displacement of the Arcades –, it is perhaps advisable to refrain both from applauding or condemning such practices too soon, on the risk of falling prey either to plain futility or scholarly conservatism. The mere notion that there should be a right and a wrong way to quote, both in form and content, is contrary to the dynamics of uncertainty implied in quotation. At a first glance, Benjamin's reflections on the methodological, technical and political constraints of the creative act may seem downright reproachful of a utilitarian logic, but they do contemplate the question of the «writing technique» of a work as defined by its function «within the relations of production of a [given] time period»<sup>46</sup>. The road is therefore open for all sorts of readers and robbers – diligent or idle, creative or uncreative. In the end, there is still no indisputable formula to fully master the «art of quoting without quotation marks»<sup>47</sup>.

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S. Kramer, "Montierte Bilder – Zur Bedeutung der filmischen Montage für Walter Benjamins Denken und Schreiben", in A. Lemke, M. Schierbaum. (ed. by), "*In die Höhe fallen.*" *Grenzgänge zwischen Literatur und Philosophie*, Königshausen & Neumann, Würzburg 2000, pp. 195-212.

<sup>45</sup> GS I.1, p. 208.

<sup>46</sup> GS II, p. 686.

<sup>47</sup> GS V.1, 572.