Dennis Cooper on writing as sculpture



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The L.A.-born, Paris-based writer Dennis Cooper is an iconic voice in gay and experimental literature. For 14 years, he ran the popular blog, The Weaklings. In recent years, it was hosted by Google's Blogger Platform. When Cooper tried to access his Gmail account on June 27, 2016, it had been disabled. When he checked the blog, he was met with this message: "Sorry, the blog at denniscooper-theweakling.sblogspot.com has been removed. This address is not available for new blogs." Cooper reached out to Google to see why, and didn't get a response. It didn't seem like he'd get a response, or the defunct blog's data, until a few publications like Artforum, the Guardian, the NY Times and the New Yorker, picked up the story, brought up issues of censorship, and Cooper hired a lawyer. Almost two months later, on August 19, Cooper got his data and email archives back from Google, including a just-finished animated GIF novel (his most recent form of writing).

Now, his blog has a and he has a different, non-Google email address. On August 26, Cooper posted a message to his Facebook page explaining Google's reasoning behind the takedown: "Google says some unknown person's flagging of one image on a ten year-old group-curated page that wasn't even technically on my blog is the reason they disabled my blog and email account." You can read it all here.

As told to Brandon Stosuy, 2522 words.

Tags: Writing, Art, Culture, Process, Identity, Focus, Multi-tasking.

You've written about specific subjects for a long time—sexual fantasy, torture, drugs, pornography, depressed teenagers, punk, the idea that language is never enough and usually fails. Your books are different, and each one finds new paths into the material, but people often talk about your work as being repetitious. How do you keep it interesting for yourself?

Right, I've always written about that stuff. Well, not always, but pretty much always. I always attempt to get away from it; I do a huge amount of planning before I do a book. Usually that planning is to try to get me as far away from the material as possible, and see if I can work there. Each book is a progression because I pay attention to what's going on, and I'm always trying to learn from whatever's happening in the culture that interests me. Different music or artists or films or whatever. It seems to always end up being my fuel. It seems like I need to have that stuff there to get me to this place where I'm not just rattling off something that's stylistic. It's weird because that material is re-framed, and it is evolving, but it's where this kind of terror and excitement still is for me. I need that. I seem to need that to actually do the laborious stuff it takes to, say, write a novel—because I'm really, really slow and novels take forever.

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I end up always going back there, dragged back there in a way, and then it's just a matter of never, ever repeating myself. I know that seems really weird because, like you said, everybody thinks I write about the same thing every time, but every single book is completely from scratch. I have never repeated the same kind of structure, style, or approach from book to book.

I'm always reinventing what I do, the way I make things, or the way I look at things, or the way I write every single time I start a book. I don't know… I stopped worrying about it for a while. I used to worry that I really shouldn't labor over this stuff because I know there's limited interest in it. I certainly have learned that over time. I know that it's like this huge problem for my work because it's made me this super marginalized artist. For me, it isn't. That world is huge to me.

I feel like there's so much more there that I can do—there's so much stuff there it's really volcanic to me—but when people see that material their interest is so limited. You have to have a real prescription to even approach that work. I realize I can't do anything about that. They can't see the nuances, and they can't see the changes, they just see the same thing. That's the beginning of an answer.

The Fales Library at NYU has the scrapbooks you made. Seeing those, it's clear how important structure is to the material. These started out as traditional scrapbooks with cut-and-paste images, and then they became drawings of bullseyes and other shapes. Eventually, the last one I saw, was a CD-R stored in a small wooden haunted house. For you, is the structure as important as the content?

It's all I ever think about. I don't think about the content at all. I just don't. It's fuel really, it's just fuel. I mean, it's not like I'm immune to the power of that stuff. It's not like I treat it disrespectfully or without interest or anything like that. I treat it very carefully, and I am really drawn to it, but I only think about the writing. I never ever think about that stuff, that stuff just happens and it's really about controlling that and shaping it and just trying to find exactly where I am in relation to it. I try to use form and structure and style to map out an exact location that matches exactly what I feel about or where I am.

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I don't care about the characters; they're just configurations to me. None of the stuff that people normally like to read books for. All that stuff is just the story. The characters and the plot is all structure to me. I'm very aware of how those things work on people, and how they can be shocking or disturbing, and the limitations of people's interest in that material. I think I have a fairly good idea of when it's pornographic, what that effect is in a general kind of way. I understand how to modulate those effects. I really have to be deeply connected with it to be able to that. It ends up being because that's where I feel things.

Is it important to you that your readers know about the scrapbooks?

They're just for me. Well, they published the first scrapbook [for the novel *Closer*]. This guy wanted to do it, and I thought a lot about it and I said, "Okay." But, really, those things are just for me. For some of the last novels I was doing the actually scrapbooks on the blog because that's become my main workspace. In that case it was open to the public, and I was interested to see what people would do with these little fragments and ideas and stuff, but mostly people just went, "Wow cool." They didn't really pay attention, so it was kind of like working in private. If people want to look at them in the archive it's cool, if somebody is studying what I do. But I don't think they're my art or anything.

My influences:

Notes on Cinematography by Robert Bresson (book)
Charles Ray's "Rotating Circle" (artwork)
Mr. Toad's Wild Ride (amusement park ride)
Robert Pollard's *Kid Marine* (record)
The Space of Literature by Maurice Blanchot (book)

Five favorite books by newer writers that I've read in 2016:

Dodge Rose by Jack Cox (Dalkey Archive)
A Bestiary by Lily Hoang (Cleveland State University Press)
You With Your Memory Are Dead by Gary Shipley (Civil Coping Mechanisms)
WAVES by Lucy K Shaw (Gumroad)

Two Teenagers by John Colasacco (Horse Less Press)

Is a successful novel one that follows the structure the way you've initially envisioned it?

I allow myself to completely reinvent the structure as I'm going along. I built these structures because that's the only way I know how to write. I never learned how to write fiction. I don't know how to do those things. I have to build this structure to create this kind of graph, so I can create something that that's long and that has a certain kind of momentum. I have the structure, but then as soon as the structure's in place, I improvise. I have it in my head really clearly what I want, and then I improvise and the improvisation sometimes finds these new things that conflict with the structure and so the structure gets reinvented. Then I have to go back and reinvent the whole structure. It happens to me all the time.

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It's not so much whether it's able to fulfill what the original structure wanted as much as like it's really about… It isn't about the original thing. I just know when I'm inside it whether it's doing what I want. The last book, *The Marbled Swarm*, is by far the best thing I've done. That novel, with its multilayers, and its deep, complicated, available internal structure, and its disempowering of the surface level requirements of narrative, characters, and plot, and so on, is the kind of the novel I had always hoped to write. When I finished it, I was still very interested in what I was able to do there, but I always need to destroy my voice and start from scratch each time I start a new novel, and I didn't think I could take my prose any further in that direction.

How did you come up with the idea for GIF novels? They seem like taking your interest in structure to the next level.

The GIF fiction is definitely a continuation and possibly even an advancement of the work I've been doing or trying to do with my written fiction. I started making GIF fiction initially because I was playing with GIFs on my blog.

I was making these posts that were tall stacks of GIFs organized along a thematic. I started to realize that really interesting things were happening between the GIFs—rhythmic, poetic, narrative, associative things. So I started experimenting with organizing them in a deliberate way, and then dividing them into groupings.

I take the GIF fiction as seriously as I do my written fiction.

At one point, I realized that I was trying to write fiction using them as the equivalents of sentences, phrases, paragraphs, and that I was able to do that using pretty much the exact same compositional methods I've used with my written fiction. And so I wound up writing the first GIF novel, *Zac's Haunted House*.

I take the GIF fiction as seriously as I do my written fiction. I consider *Zac's Haunted House* and the new GIF novel, *Zac's Freight Elevator* to be my 10th and 11th novels. And I think the second book of short GIF works, *Zac's Control Panel*, is easily one of the best things I've ever written.

You can actually take the stuff I don't like about fiction—the characters and the plot lines—and you can put it on the bottom, and it turns everything inside out. You see the structure first. The structure's fun and pleasurable and scary, and so you see that first, and everything that isn't interesting to me becomes the ground work. It's still there, it has to be there to work, but it's not on the surface. That's why the GIF work has been so exciting to me. It's like I'm able to do this thing I've always wanted to do, and actually get away from what these strictures that written fiction have place on you.

Do you see yourself going back to written fiction, or do you think with *The Marbled Swarm* you've achieved what you wanted to do and now you're more interested in the GIFs?

I have a novel that I've been working on for a while. I had to put it aside for a couple years because I made the film, and then I'm working with this opera and doing all these theater things…and we're making another film. It ended up getting pushed away. I really was so happy with *The Marbled Swarm*, and I wanted to completely reinvent what I'm doing now. I'm doing something that's personal. It's really simple. It's something very different for me. I want to at least do that book. I always wanted to write 10 written novels and then stop. I would like to at least finish that book.

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With the GIF work, you borrow the animated GIFs. You don't make them. To me they have to be found or else it becomes visual art. That's what makes it fiction to me. But, honestly, I think you can only go so far using that as your form. I've pushed it the furthest I'll be able to go. If I went on, I'd end up repeating myself. That particular investigation is probably going to end with this new book.

I'm interested in making films now. I'm working with [filmmaker] Zac Farley. I'm happy with the film, and I'm excited to make films with him. I'll write fiction, but working in film is something I really want to do.

Is part of the appeal of film that is has a very particular structure? A screenplay is written in a certain way. It feels maybe less malleable than fiction?

It's a different process. I have no directorial eye at all—Zac directs—but we're incredibly in-tune, so it's really a collaborative work. Our film *Like Cattle Towards Glow* is pretty complicated. It seems like it's a more limited form, and there's less you can do with structure, but that's just because you have the visual there. I'm beginning to realize that you can complicate the structure in film; it's just that you can't take away, the eyes are always dominating. You can't blank out, you don't go into your imagination, which is this vast world. Your eyes are always focused on things, it's always the eyes, it's working through the eyes. I think there are a lot of possibilities there at the moment.

Can you tell me more about that new novel?

It's based on my actual autobiography, which I've never tried to do before, and it's not at all a conventionally novel-like novel. People will probably think of it as an imaginative nonfiction book, but it's definitely a novel employing deep personal matters and a personal, discursive voice in service of fiction.

A project I've wanted to do for decades is to rewrite Carson McCullers's novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter* because, when I was younger, I felt like that book was me, or at least my deepest problems, in the form of novel. The novel I'm working on isn't a rewrite of McCullers, per say, but it employs that book, or what it means to me, as a central concern. It's a novel about love and about me, to be simple.

Has your background in visual art, and your teaching of visual art, influenced the way you see writing?

Visual art is super influential. I'm friends with Charles Ray. He and I were very close in the late '80s and early '90s, and I learned an enormous amount from him. The way he thinks about his art is genius—he looks at particle physics and space in relation to sculpture in general and his own work. That was massive for me. Just in general, I've learned a huge amount from visual art, especially sculpture and installation.

Do you view your novels as sculptures?

They're really constructed in that way. I see them as three-dimensional, and the structures I use are three-dimensional. I like the idea that even though you view the book from one side, there's another side, and you can also view it from there. When I'm writing, I think about what would happen if you saw it from the back.

Name

Dennis Cooper

Vocation

Novelist, Poet, Playwright, Critic, Filmmaker, Teacher, Blogger, GIF Novel Pioneer

Fact

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