

Wayne Koestenbaum on finding freedom in form



April 11, 2017 - Wayne Koestenbaum is an American writer, visual artist, and cultural critic. He has published over a dozen books, which include poetry, criticism, and fiction.

As told to Amy Rose Spiegel, 2271 words.

Tags: [Writing](#), [Art](#), [Process](#), [Anxiety](#), [Inspiration](#).

What do you concentrate on when you're writing?

When you put down a sentence, you don't always know what it is as you're writing it. Isn't that thrilling? This morning, I sat down and thought, "I really am wasting the morning. I have to do something." I have this pink typewriter that I just got fixed up. It's a Royal typewriter from 1955. It is so beautiful. It's all oiled, and it works. I sat down at it, and... I have this copy of *Satyricon*. I bought it in Italy. On one side, one page is Italian; the other is Latin. I take a paragraph and I translate it, which means I let my eyes fall on the words and I write a poem that is inspired by those lines. I wrote one this morning called, "Scruff's Tyricon." It ends up being about Cyclops. I think Cyclops was the only word I could figure out from the Latin.

It was fun to not know what was happening as I did it, to feel the keys, and decide it would be a couplet, double-spaced. To find myself traveling down a certain path.

Is fitting a form onto a work you're otherwise not planning out beforehand often the way you free yourself up to have that fun? Like, "OK I'm going to do this math equation of writing a heroic couplet, or I'm going to write a sestina".

Something like that. I've been writing little fiction-like parables in response to certain artworks. [The parables] were commissioned by various artists who've asked me to write pieces, and they've given me permission to do whatever I want. It's a collaboration. I'm not commenting on their work. One, a wonderful, younger Brooklyn artist named [Eric Hibit](#), does these charming, sophisticated, naive acrylic paintings that are both abstract and figurative, and utterly playful and sexy. He's going to do a little book with six of my little parables.

The parables are single-spaced, and always 500 words of prose—and I do look at the word count as I'm writing. I write on a laptop in a café for this project. It's very important. It has to have a certain site-specificity.

I love the form in this case—that it needs to be 500 words, and at least one word of it to have to do with the artwork. It's very important to single-space these, so I can't read them too carefully, so I don't get too hung up on fine-tuning them.

Why do you need to be careful to avoid fine-tuning in that initial stage?

I'm a very painful self-reviser. I think any writer is, but I'm trying to make it more fun. For example, I write these parables, and I don't double-space them until the end when I send them out, and maybe even not then. I use a fountain pen that I like, and I try to make my revision notes visually beautiful in some way, so that the act of making the revision is an act with its own beauty, and is not just correcting something.

I make a palimpsest of these corrections, and then I go to the computer and I input them. I used to do the corrections, input it, read it, hate it; put new corrections, input it, read it, hate it, instead of just going a little more slowly, invested loosely. I try not to make them horrid-looking.

Your eye for the aesthetics of your words often comes through in the mood they ultimately create. Mood is so apparent and prominent in your essays. How do you place words and sounds to make what you've written feel a certain way?

Sound is important to me—the sound of the syllable, more than the word. I'm very aware of syllables as separate particles of words. I choose words because I like the syllables in them, which is a kind of poet's thing to do. I don't do it consciously, like, "Oh, I'm going to have assonance or consonance, but I'm aware that I want to use a word because of a pattern of Os or Is. Often, the adjective-noun juxtaposition has a lot to do with the vowels. Vowels come first, in a sense. I know I want a kind of sound, and I find the word that will have that sound.

I like your vocabulary. I think often of when, in the essay "A Manual Approach to Mourning," you recall receiving 'abreactive' from your friend Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick. Where else do you collect words?

You get more words as you grow older, even though you also forget with age. Certainly when I was in college and starting to write, I didn't have very many words. Or, it didn't feel like I had very many. I got more in my 20s, but even midway through graduate school, I didn't have as many. I got more and more in my 30s and 40s, mostly from reading.

I'm not so big on looking up words in dictionaries. I rarely interrupt the reading to go look it up. If I don't know a word, I write it down. I used to keep word lists—the words start adding up if you read a lot. I've tried to read more difficult things with age, like, maybe things I avoided reading when I was younger. I don't shy away from reading boring or difficult things anymore. Those teach you a lot of words.

The most boring and difficult thing I ever made myself read was Deleuze and Guattari's *A Thousand Plateaus*. It was great. I read a lot of it in Ithaca. I was giving a reading, and I was put up in a pretty bad hotel, but the worst thing about it [was], it was on a highway. It was not in a pedestrian area, and there was no restaurant in the hotel. I had to walk along the highway, and it was frightening. I remember really buckling down with *A Thousand Plateaus* and loving the difficulty, the preposterousness of the speculation, the sudden arrival of just a mind-blowing insight—I took that to prepare for writing about Harpo Marx.

There's one word I know that I took from it, which was *haptic vision*. I love that. *Haptic vision*: because *haptic* refers to the fingers, like the sense of touch. Deleuze and Guattari talk about *haptic vision* in Cézanne: that, when you look, you're actually touching it with your fingers. It's an ugly word, *haptic vision*, but, like [abreactive](#), it opens up a new sensual door. Now you have *haptic vision*.

Are there less incidental ways that you gather your vocabulary?

In my seminars, once a semester, I assign something like, "Make a list of 15 words you've never used, and use them in a 250-word composition." It's kind of high-school sounding, but I do that myself. I went through a phase of these: I would always go to a dictionary before writing a poem and find the words, or I'd play the dictionary, the *N-plus-something* game, where you revise a piece by taking a word, and you look up the word in the dictionary, then choose a word from the same page of the dictionary near it.

The strict rule: It's *N-plus-seven*. You're supposed to choose the word that's seven down in the dictionary from the word that's there. It's a very good revision game. If you don't like... let's say *Poland Spring*. I don't like *Poland*. Look up *Poland* in the dictionary, find a word near *Poland*, and put it next to *Spring*. It will always be better than *Poland*.

When you said, "I like your vocabulary," I can accept the compliment because I don't take it very personally, because they're not my words. They're anybody's words, you know. It's a very nice feeling. It's the way I feel about painting. That they're not my paintings, you know. I just bought them.

Do you feel more responsible for your syntax, and the ultimate way your thoughts are combined in a piece?

As a writer I feel like I've been living in a paint store my whole life. The word-paint store. I have a lot of paints in my palette, so any felicities aren't really exactly of my own making. It's just that I'm available for the arrival of the words. I like that feeling a lot.

I feel like a good curator of a museum like the Morgan Library. I have some good, old things lying around. I just have to make sure it's climate-controlled and that they're arranged. not *fortuitously*, but the opposite.

So in writing poetry, you become a sort of warden.

I started writing my poetic work beginning with, not with an idea, as much as picking up a kind of old-fashioned word like *nacreous*, and really letting it enter me. In my very first book of poems, the first line of the first poem is, "One word, 'nacreous,' coils in me like a conch, a minaret, or a question always in the process of being posed." One word, 'nacreous'—it's that exactly. It's the one word. It means a lot.

I noticed how you make centerpieces of your adverbs, too-how you set up sentence adverbs so conspicuously.

Adverbs are fat. They really are. They're always three or four syllables. *For-tu-it-ous-ly* is five. You could say fortuitously anything and it would be interesting, almost.

Why do you prefer writing in semi-public spaces now?

It's that I'm not by myself. It's that I'm alone and, when I'm not writing, I'm not doing nothing. I'm observing. The stimulation of eavesdropping is very important for the generation of sentences. Very important. It's like looking at the page of the *Satyricon* and finding a word that looks like Cyclops. I'm thinking of a waiter who said, "Do you take mustard?" That became the title of a piece.

A lot of [the poetry collection] *The Pink Trance Notebooks* was written on Metro-North or Amtrak. On a plane, I rarely have a seat empty next to me, and I feel self-conscious for no good reason, about the person reading it or something. I still don't think that's the real reason. I don't know what. It's that maybe I just don't feel the same spaciousness.

When you're set up where you write, what do you need, and what happens when you have it?

Each project has its own agonies and perks, so that there are different rewards that I set up for each kind of thing. The way I do prose is always in phases. There's the first phase—that would be something like brainstorming. Then, there's the phase that's something like planning, and that's the briefest of phases. Very brief, if at all. Then there's the first-draft phase, which is often similar to the brainstorming. There's a kind of haze of brainstorming and planning [the] first draft. Then I produce, with a lot of caffeine, a mass of messy material. I wouldn't say caffeine slims the brain, but it makes it move more quickly, and less of a sense of being a centipede. [It's] a foundation garment for the mood.

Then the revision starts, which has a logic of its own. They're very, very separate for me. I never write, or very rarely write, deliberately and slowly—putting a good sentence down at a time and then it's done. Sometimes it happens that way by luck, but it's usually really inchoate and messy for a long time.

When you're revising, are you ever surprised by what you've written?

Sometimes I like things I've written, but usually, when I'm revising it, I'm appalled by incoherence, wordiness, lack of specificity, boredom, like many other stylistic and material sins. It can get very dreary. I have revision techniques that can usually work to combat those errors.

You write and speak often about parataxis: an ordering of short sentences or phrases which links thoughts by giving each one equal attention. When does that technique enter the process?

I impose the parataxis to make the edges between two things clean enough that each will be flatteringly lit. It's like any kind of cropping or lighting to get the object looking intended just where it is. I can take some quite messy stuff, isolate parts, and sequence them in a way that they have a kind of shininess to them that I like.

What other techniques do you favor right now?

I'm big on phases—like, going through. I get very inspired when I'm in a phase. A phase doesn't necessarily last very long, but I'm very devoted to it. The wet-on-wet paintings I was making were a phase of a couple of weeks, where I discovered the thing I was going to do. These big paintings were a phase that I'm kind of still in.

You figure out, as an artist, or a writer, or just as a person, how to do something. You need to build up a group of, like, eight similar things. Before you forget how to do it, you need to do it a few times. Because then you're going to forget how to do it.

Wayne Koestenbaum recommends:

Simone White, *Of Being Dispersed* (published by FuturePoem books).

Lara Mimos Montes, *The Somnambulist* (published by Horse Less Press).

Hervé Guibert, *Crazy for Vincent* (published by Semiotext, translated from the French by Christine Pichini, with an introduction by Bruce Hainley).
the paintings and installations of *Laeza Meksin*.

the photographs of *Paul Mpagi Sepuya*.

Name

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Vocation

Writer, Artist

Fact

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