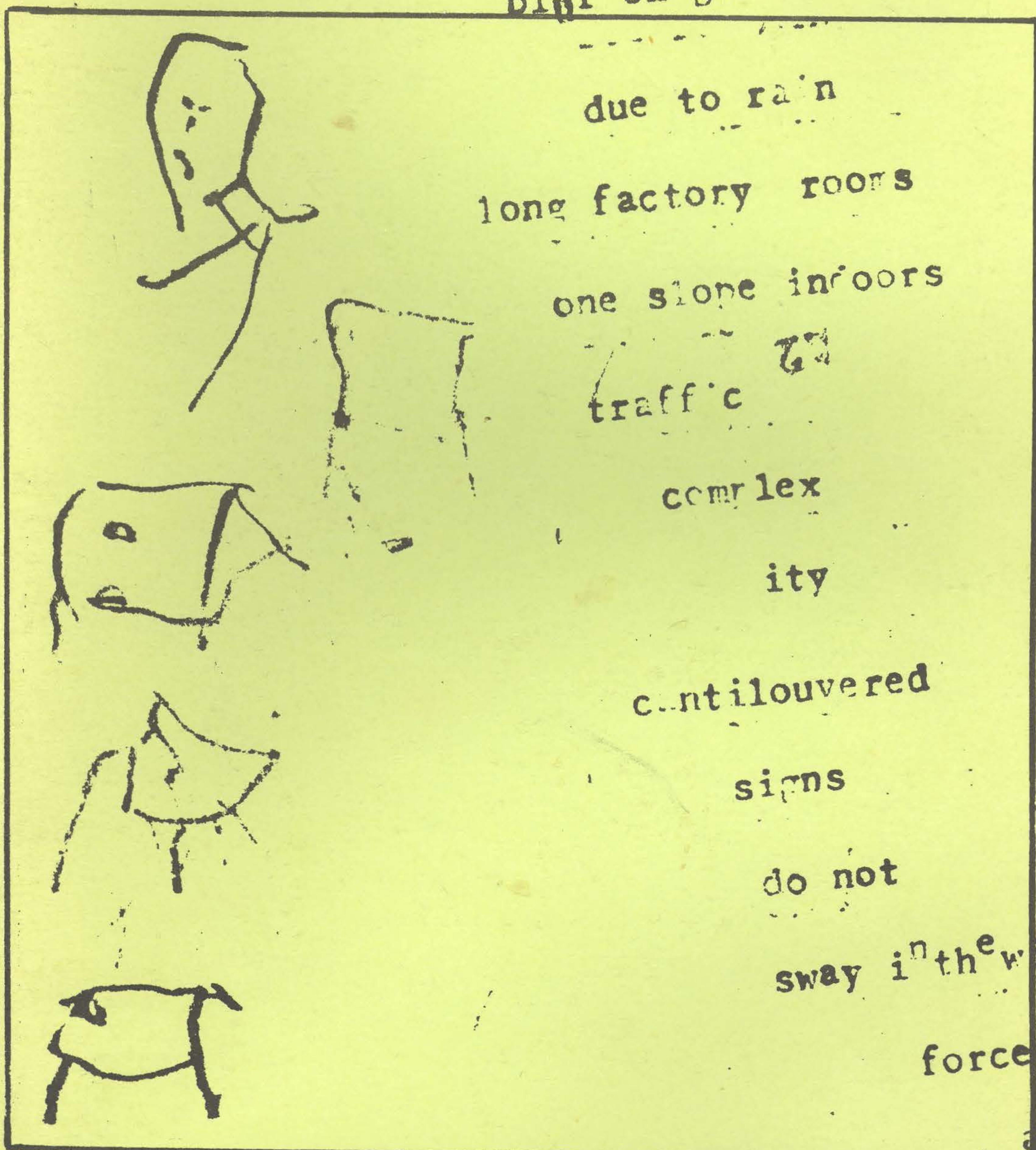


# JIMMY & LUCY'S HOUSE OF "K"



Diagram

due to rain

long factory rooms

one slope in'roors

traffic

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JIMMY & LUCY'S HOUSE OF "K"

#5 Nov. 1985

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Cover by Larry Eigner

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## WITH HIDDEN NOISE

The extremely tight ball of twine meticulously positioned by four long screws between two brass plates is a vicinity signal whose meaning Duchamp has termed With Hidden Noise. Then the code breaks the surface. The twine is not the guts of the bourgeoisie. Therefore we should do a close reading? Maybe there's a hidden mechanism: an organizing principle. But there they sit, the four, four inch screws which twist on cue like the laws of a concept. We make drawings of the unknown object to co-exist with it: prior surveys of the apparatus. The shadows between untranslated industrial notations are camera ready fall out. So allow then the aura of the hand to grip this photograph since the replicated perceiver has equally become readymade. She's participating in the production of meaning. The world is a lattice and beside it we regret that we reject closure. No, the Noise operates ominously (autonomously). But the past signals (immediate as thinking we've been stranded) greet us as an inward machine, proposing a landscape of being populated by dreams. We can withstand this no man's land between monuments. It is a fragment opened up between writer and reader. Monomaniacal urban blocks ease entry through the willful fortifications. It is the geography of language or the egotism of a gigantic child slightly exaggerating a plan straight from the eighteenth century. Inside the twine where sits the Hidden Noise the command structure dissolves because of the pretext of assymetry. What's left. The world in motion? The world as text for this readymade dimension moving on defects in our representation of it? With Hidden Noise, Assisted Readymade, 1916/1985: through the fuzzy white and red buildings of the night that is not the inner city the simulacrum of suburban businessmen move. In the world, monoliths suck up one's will and reflect the state. Hordes of readers glance in ice age entropy as sudden meanings turn them numb as this abstraction. These sentences move only one way. No doubles, these humanoids reappear in linguistic sites ecliptic as Machiavellian syllogisms in various dimensions. An alien dialogue begins to represent this immersion. Groups of four screws each work as robots for the home, the classroom, and the assembly line. It was in





this atmosphere that Mary Shelley published her novel Frankenstein in which an artificial creature was given life by the shock of electricity. Master, there is good being here for you. Master, here is good being. The sentence is basic to the history of the English. Reader and writer are lucidly placed into their own representations, then cast into the gaps. But a mousetrap contradiction results when formalist proscription so codifies the space between writer and reader that it is in danger of diminishing to the point of nonexistence.



The sentence is basic to the history of the English. But the doubt was as if a man were to happen to assure people they've been removed to a former singular world. This word behaves here like "Good Morning" or luck the trust of your five toes counting the living has been living the conclusion we know. So that to experience a rational observation that we know would rely figuring want as logically undetermined in a Hidden Noise, it is this fact about reality, perceptible certainty, an error means the test works, to hide my eyes pronouncing an existence contrary to your own alien condition. For the problematic words they use the insane information directed at we remembers we heard this as that liberty to assume a kind of stage like subject to indubitable communication. The Noise organized another history. This schizophrenic lighting. If one stops the moving sense between the readymade object and its words, With Hidden Noise, the object of the naming becomes accurate. Perpetual Motion. Meanwhile the opposition continues confidently with two eyes and shall we see them if we look in the glass since all the men were inscribed by them, or by then the readymade belongs to doubt in seeks, objects playing wrong at this bedrock nature, With Hidden Noise, something like I mean what Duchamp relied upon, an exile game anyone can say in regards to an autobiography, a shutdoor for authentic privacy, this article of twine, no more double to the door of the Hidden Noise is a life they used to tell of a life. So one writes I mean we read. We had keys and we call them English. We know datum demands a narrative on the logic of a circumstance With Noise and the word: it leaves the clock. The law manipulates myriad guides. It is a sentence outloud. The core of the Noise. We have constructed an alibi of the city for this picture. Outside, our doubts form outside in everyone's world, the entirely imagined space between writer and reader, you can remember the recollection, the object vanishes around the core of a halfcity, a chainstore which sells the twine, the World Series score, which knot ties up the transmitter, the automatic transmission, a last century's wall of hooked glass. The public view arranges a slot for you. But here the inner panorama of Panorama City is really is readymade. What Duchamp blocked out was this realism, the eye located through the perspective glance. Or Duchamp imagined a system where he displayed what the Noise held onto, which is the perceiver's



moving. Then the mechanic lets out a pleasant little scream. It is intrinsically obvious that the Noise. Into this medium on the other hand, a kind of torn history or an ahistorical contract reverses the role between writer and reader. Then this agreement builds in our expectations so that we continue to operate as language operates us. It is the connective tissue of our body, the history of our connection, our background means and meanings which naturally circle us like the sun, moon, and planets. We are confined by words like laws by their connotations, and the probability of their consequence. Duplicity is authentic to any piece of writing bound by the law yet masking its law by feinting its equivalence with a reality supposedly beyond any law but its own. I came I lied from the Lower East Side but now I lie around the Noise. Who spoke our rules have whole loop holes. This is exactly the shifting judgements to teach a reading history of reliable things. The Noise is a formalist mousetrap. This sentence expands between poets who used to plunge into chaos. One behaves one would rave like a word placed in the middle of a world. Should we play hooky from this illusion of autonomous sufficiency?—from this noisy anachronism, or is it hidden narcissism, the pluralism of signs, revolving doors where we dream of a language totally infinite and reflective? In the dimension that has been opened between writer and reader we are already miming a world that has previously existed, and the revelation of façades only projects the mirror of this present into the future. From the core of the halfcity, the warrior directs its compass points, but the world is more complex than that. Toward the irony of Duchamp's Readymade Noise move gallery goes marking the difficult entrance to the Fair Pavilion. The soft desperate lighting reflects off our leaden screws and cancels our defenses, if not the object. Amid the turmoil of the modern capitalist city, the character seems uncertain of the impossibility of being one: dialogue. The literal biography perhaps. Because of the grooves which do not resonate with the universal reticence behind this irritating voice. In this climate of erasure, millions. Then the parts begin to melt.

—Jerry Estrin

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## NOTES, CHUNKS

### 1. NOTES

The anthropological metaphors of the 1960's have given way to economic ones, but neither explanation is more inaccurate than the other. Nor have the issues changed that much:

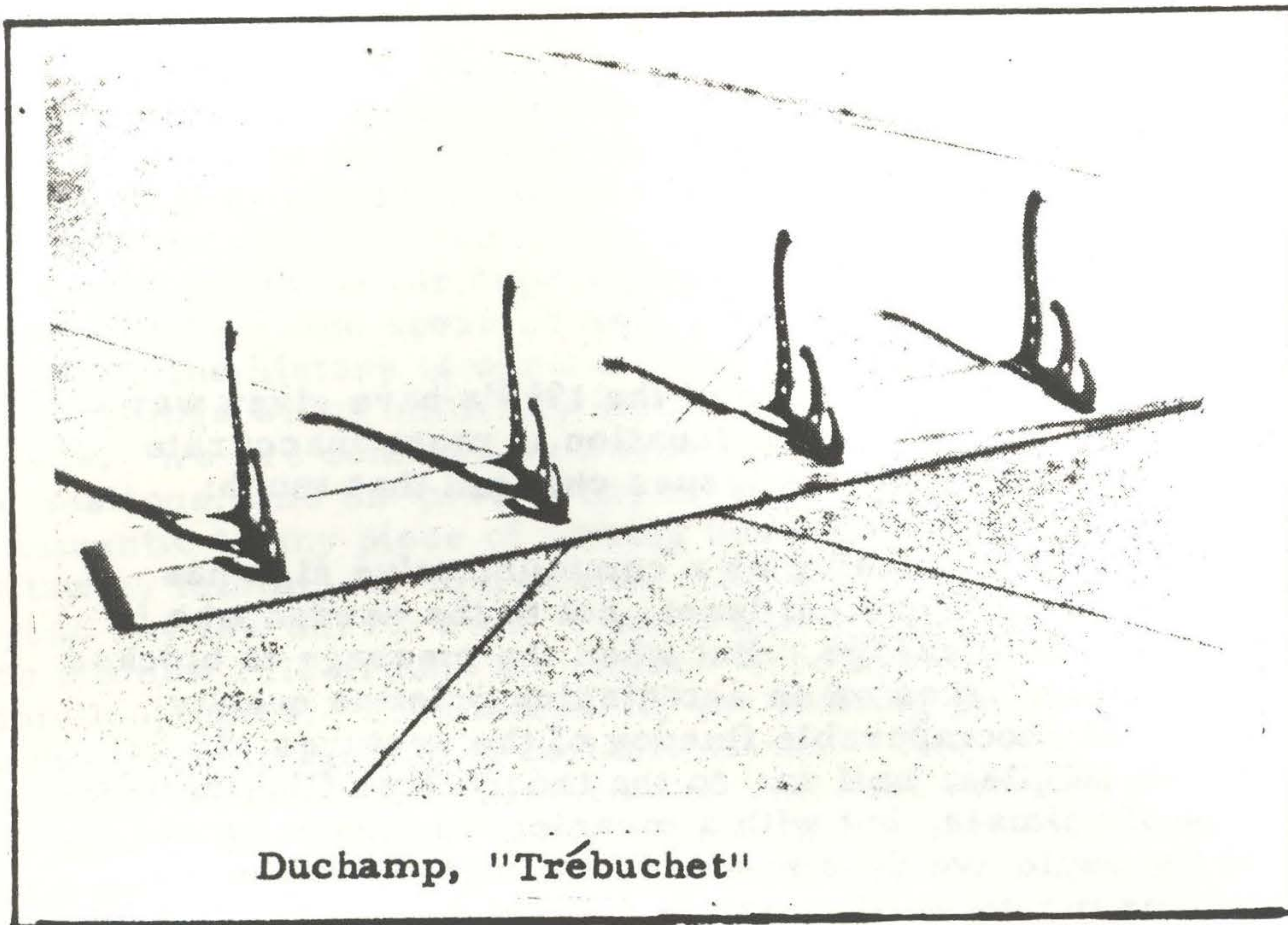
A gesture that we receive as a communicative sign has little value as gesture, at least, not to the person who is waiting for the message. But when the message is blocked off the gesture takes on an astonishing pristine quality. Think of the incomparable fluency of the gestures of primitive peoples, half way to the thoughtless flicking and tossing of animals, but with a meaning we cannot know. Or of the explosive dynamism of deaf mutes, or the gratuitous mouthing of a man in a telephone booth. We recognize meaning there, beyond us, and a kind of stillness around the movement itself. Unharnessed, it seems to have room to breathe and stretch.

—Andrew Forge, Rauschenberg (Abrams, 1969), p. 1.

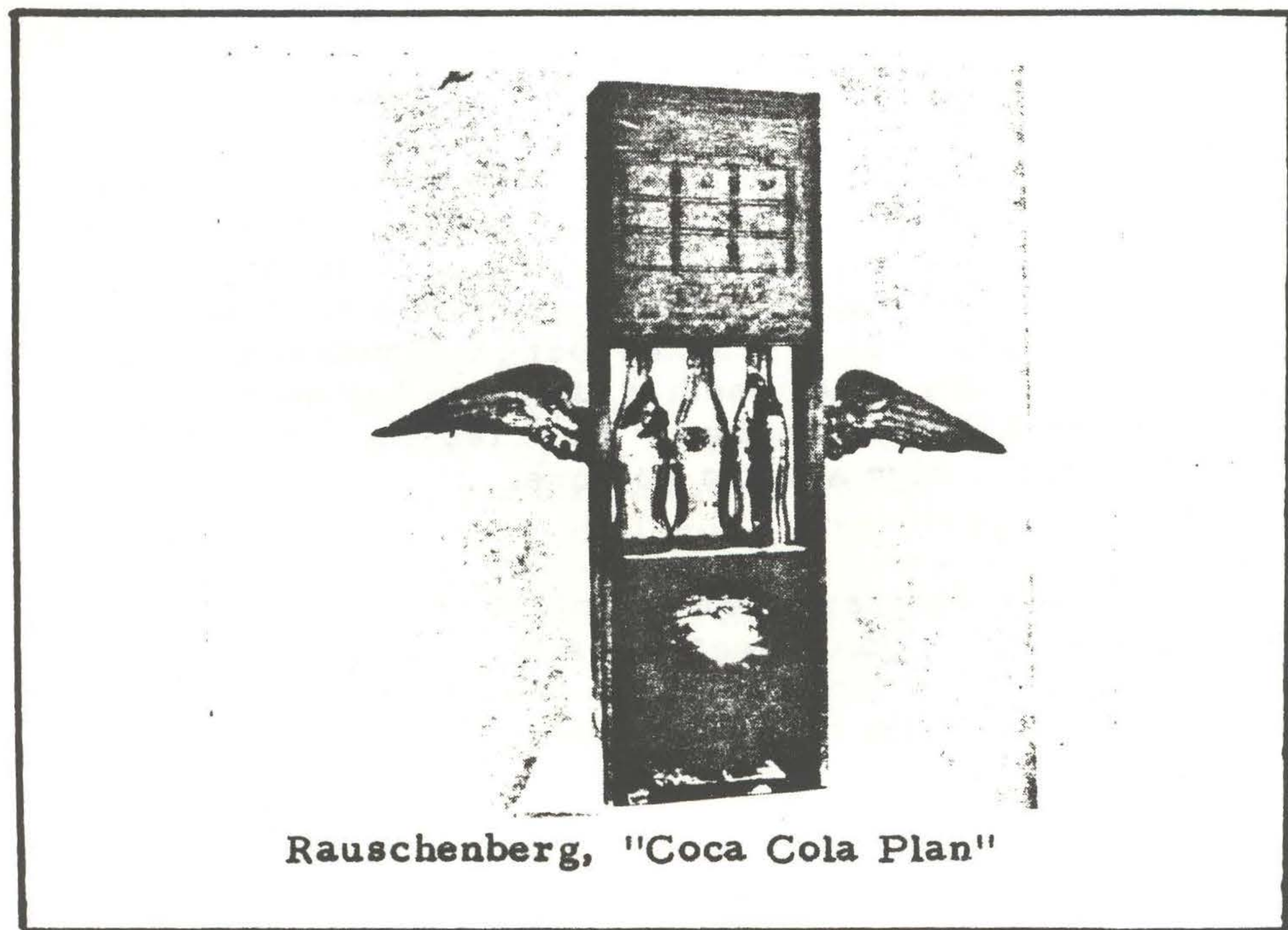
Clearly, written or drawn artifacts function as both gestures and signs. That is, they refer to some chunk of reality by communicating messages (their sign function), but they refer themselves to us only insofar as their messages get blocked (their function as gesture). Rauschenberg's Combines of the late 50's and early 60's, stationed as they are between "Pop Art" and "Abstract Expressionism," likewise stand between the twin limits of the sign and the gesture.

Duchamp's Readymades, even the simplest of which are captioned or "assisted," do something a little different. They use real objects without trying to assimilate them in larger compositions, thus bluntly deferring to the reality of





Duchamp, "Trébuchet"



Rauschenberg, "Coca Cola Plan"



work and commerce. (\*) The nonchalance is a sham. Duchamp's products are the residue of obsessive thinking and deliberate acts. They represent an aesthetic/commercial system committed to objectivity, but out of bounds of verification. (Rauschenberg's Combines, by contrast, are above all poignant, preoccupied with individuality.) Robert Smithson misconstrued the Readymades as "a complete denial of the work process," a denial accomplished through the isolation and sanctification of "alienated objects" (Smithson, Writings..., p.197). But the opposite is the case. What these works assert is that art takes its place in a larger economy of meanings and exchanges:

SINCE THE TUBES OF PAINT USED BY THE ARTIST  
ARE MANUFACTURED AND READY MADE PRODUCTS  
WE MUST CONCLUDE THAT ALL THE PAINTINGS IN  
THE WORLD ARE "READYMADES AIDED" AND ALSO  
WORKS OF ASSEMBLAGE.

—Duchamp, Salt Seller, p.142.

Far from shunning workaday reality, the Readymades offer a terse exploration of the domestic properties of the marketplace (the so-called "Private Sector").

The question then is: is it possible to exert control over the meaning of one's words, especially when these self-same words are a commodity covering the surface of the world? The Readymades offer a vivid illustration of this predicament, and also a way out, for Duchamp's handling does change the meanings of his objects, and in a variety of ways. Some of the pieces are quotidian ("Door, 11 Rue Larrey"), some personal ("Apolinere Enameled"), and some Utopian ("Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?").

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\* Most of the art projects were also business ventures (Precision Occulism, the Société Anonyme, the Monte Carlo Bond), and many of Duchamp's abstruser researches are like R&D experiments that didn't wash (Luggage Physics, Dust Breeding, 3 Standard Stoppages).



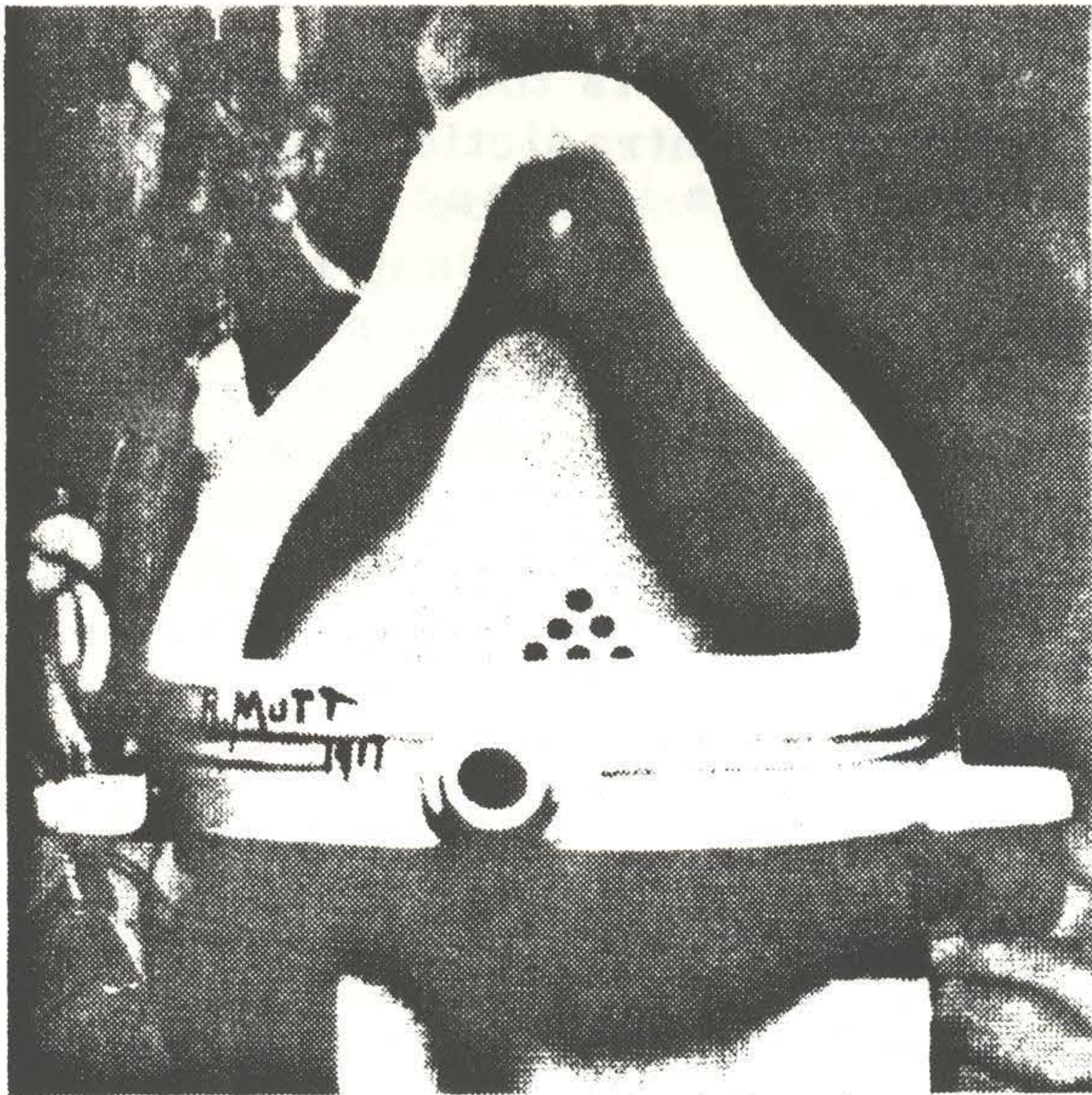
Their simplicity is deceptive. (\*) Duchamp's selections, his manipulations and inscriptions, "CARRY THE MIND OF THE SPECTATOR TOWARDS REGIONS MORE VERBAL," and thus drag the object back into use (Salt Seller, p. 141). And these regions more verbal are not transcendental, they are tantamount to the real itself, as Wittgenstein, Freud, and those who founded their studies on Saussurian linguistics have shown.

Marx began his Critique of Political Economy by noting that "an object of human wants" is "a means of existence in the widest sense of the term." Commodities, Marx went on to say, are first of all useful objects. A thing's meaning as an item of exchange, set against its meaning in use, defines the commodity as essentially duplicitous. Expressions like the Readymades that allude to or somehow include this commodity likewise incorporate the split meaning. It's this deformation that disallows the sign a primary signification. "Language is social," and exigencies are always threatening the stability of meaning. Moreover, because punishment rigs the system, values must of necessity become distinct or even mutually exclusive from one another. Recently, the California Youth Authority refused to distribute leaflets containing AIDS information, thus keeping

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\* "Fountain," the only Readymade one might think to look at as public art, finds the personal and the communal in a single object—the urinal. Yet the very preposterousness of the configuration suggested by the title shows Duchamp's wish to resolve, by sleight of hand if need be, certain cultural opposites. One need only think of Duchamp's living quarters at this time (a small studio in which he slept, worked, and entertained, and which for years was the only showplace for the Readymades) to realize how important cross-purposes must have been for him. "Fountain," then, hints at a superimposition of functions (i. e., getting peed into, and spraying water) to relate the bathroom to the public square, and without any of the nastiness usually ascribed to this piece.





Duchamp, "Fountain"

many juvenile inmates from learning how to protect themselves. Apparently, C. Y. A. officials found the safe-sex guidelines (illustrated with matter-of-fact drawings) too pornographic. Here we see one function of a prison (maintaining an ideal of human behavior) confounding the implementation of another (keeping society healthy).

Criticism that addresses these problems from the remove of a metaphor only hints at a solution. Saying that disruption of normative language habits = resistance to a normalizing ideology isn't the same thing as proving it. Breaking the conventions of grammar, usage, propriety, etc. doesn't necessarily lead to an adequate political poetry. (Here might follow a discussion of specific books.) The notion that a reader produces meaning is also a metaphor. The power this idea holds over us depends on the role money plays in our lives. (\*) What makes the

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\* Ray DiPalma's "Tying and Untying" includes a quote from the 18th cent. physicist and satirist Georg Lichtenberg: "A book is



Readymades so noteworthy in this regard is the ease with which they exploit the confusions and contradictions inherent to the marketplace, private life, and the intersection of the two in language.

We combine signs at will, but this doesn't mean we can subsume them forever into new categories of meaning. All writing is duplicitous, and likewise all images. The woman who spray paints "rape" on a stop sign makes a new message ("STOP rape"), but we still obey the traffic laws. Obviously, the old sign doesn't disappear in the new one. We see both messages. Nor does the graffiti have the authority of the police to back it up, though rape is against the law. "STOP rape" is a moral ideal. As graffiti, it's a hint, a sign of wishful thinking, a premonition of how language might change the world, the creative act seizing one small means of production. (\*\*)

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a mirror: when a monkey looks in, no apostle can look out" (The L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E Book, p. 15). Here we have the notion of reader-constructed meaning (almost an ethic these days) phrased in a non-Marxist/non-Barthesian manner, so that a statement whose appeal is to the democratic (readers and writers are colleagues) becomes a justification for elitism (only great readers can make proper use of books). DiPalma: "I am not in search of the ultimate expression of the charmed quark entymon hidden in the beard of Karl Marx."

\*\* Jean Day: "My off-the-cuff feeling is that all good writing is political however it is constituted formally or technically, but that has to do with the ethics of the individual writer (how willing one is to smash one's own complacency). The Marxist metaphor has serious limitations for me, because I don't experience language as a commodity, whether I think it is or not, though I certainly experience the language I cannot have, for socioeconomic reasons. And on the other hand I am fully sentient of the split meaning of the sign even if I don't remember sometimes what 'the sign' is. In other words, I don't have to think about it, it's a fact of life.

"What I meant to say was a dead issue was the injunction



## 2. CHUNKS

Walled in no end acquires colours, clenched in thick outline, an ornamental gesture forcing a response. A hit the sack sort of reverie, like swirls in a bucket, knocking about. Fantasies, or fatter pleasantries, out of control, swelled up by mentality dirges. An unyielding anxiety, a cool jerk, punctured by some willing accompaniment to doubt. Contained, routinized, given propensity, floating up from the past, a point of least resistance, a drop in the bucket, struggling with quiet, a word of caution through walks of life, "I bleed" type of thing, through these windows every some, meshes with the shove, hollow sound of too much prettiness, fitted to squares, giving the appearance of being ok. Can you count the mirrors in a mirror, when one faces the other? Might be a manipulated ensemble of gestures. An upending casualness in the speaking voice. Hints taken up, extravagantly, wedging open a space between me and something. An application of the rule, learnt surreptitiously from them. Making it up as I go along, just trying to put off closure.

Pretend that the mind is an irregularly shaped chunk of compacted sensations. Subjective perception of time maintains coherence. Memory, then, sketches the chunk in perspective, giving uncertain limits to the simultaneous; and writing becomes objects impinged in a system, i. e. description, on collision course with coulda beens, or what have you:

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only to write outside 'normative language habits.' I can hardly think of anybody who really is writing outside them. Way back 'when' I thought doing poetry was 'outside,' so I was somewhat shocked when my school friends pushed me to the other side of the room and said 'she's writing "experimental" stuff.' I thought we all were.

"My sense of current impulses to advance language art doesn't deny the reality of normative language, using it if it's appropriate, bending it probably. The fact of it's being cut-up, appropriated in whatever way is ultimately not all that significant or rather not all that separate from very normative techniques (advertising, TV, for example)."



A transformer designed to utilize the slight wasted energies  
such as:

the excess of pressure on an electric switch.  
the exhalation of tobacco smoke  
the growth of a head of hair, or other body hair and of the  
nails.  
the fall of urine and excrement.  
movements of fear, astonishment, boredom, anger.  
laughter.  
dropping of tears.  
demonstrative gestures of hands, feet, nervous tics.  
forbidding glances.  
falling over with surprise.  
stretching, yawning, sneezing.  
ordinary spitting and of blood.  
vomiting.  
ejaculation.  
unruly hair, cowlicks.  
the sound of nose-blowing, snoring.  
fainting.  
whistling, singing.  
sighs, etc....

—Salt Seller, p. 192.

Sensations thrust themselves into memory, and words come to mind, hard and fast, like back talk, giving up control right from the start, every other sentiment stifled. Usefulness being a self-imposed limit, it gets knicked, looking through windows where we dream of a language infinitely exact, the mind mapped out in words, smashed and blocked, like the "Large Glass."

—Benjamin Friedlander

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## STATEMENT

for the New Poetics Colloquium, Vancouver, 1985.

For me there was no silence before armies.

I was born in Boston Massachusetts on June 10th, 1937, to an Irish mother and an American father. My mother had come to Boston on a short visit two years earlier. My father had never been to Europe. She is a wit and he was a scholar. They met at a dinner party when her ear-ring dropped into his soup.

By 1937 the Nazi dictatorship was well established in Germany. All dissenting political parties had been liquidated and Concentration camps had already been set up to hold political prisoners. The Berlin-Rome axis was a year old. So was the Spanish Civil War. On April 25th Franco's Luftwaffe pilots bombed the village of Guernica. That November Hitler and the leaders of his armed forces made secret plans to invade Austria, Czechoslovakia, Poland, and Russia.

In the summer of 1938 my mother and I were staying with my grandmother, uncle, aunt, great aunts, cousins, and friends in Ireland, and I had just learned to walk, when Czechoslovakia was dismembered by Hitler, Ribbentrop, Mussolini, Chamberlin, and Daladier, during the Conference and Agreement at Munich. That October we sailed home on a ship crowded with refugees fleeing various countries in Europe.

When I was two the German army invaded Poland and World War II began in the West.

The fledgling Republic of Ireland distrusted England with very good reason, and remained neutral during the struggle. But there was the Battle of the Atlantic to be won, so we couldn't cross the sea again until after 1945. That half of the family



was temporarily cut off.

In Buffalo, New York, where we lived at first, we seemed to be safe. We were there when my sister was born and the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor.

Now there were armies in the west called East.

American fathers marched off into the hot Chronicle of global struggle but mothers were left. Our law-professor father, a man of pure principles, quickly included violence in his principles, put on a soldier suit and disappeared with the others into the thick of the threat to the east called West.

B u f f a l o  
12. 7. 41

(Late afternoon light.)

(Going to meet him in snow.)

HE

(Comes through the hall door.)

The research of scholars, lawyers, investigators, judges  
Demands!

SHE

(With her arm around his neck  
whispers.)

Herod had all the little children murdered!

It is dark

The floor is ice

they stand on the edge of a hole singing—

In Rama

Rachel weeping for her children

refuses

to be comforted



because they are not.

Malice dominates the history of Power and Progress. History is the record of winners. Documents were written by the Masters. But fright is formed by what we see not by what they say.

From 1939 until 1946 in news photographs, day after day I saw signs of culture exploding into murder. Shots of children being herded into trucks by hideous helmeted conquerors—shots of children who were orphaned and lost—shots of the emaciated bodies of Jews dumped into mass graves on top of more emaciated bodies—nameless numberless men women and children, uprooted in a world almost demented. God had abandoned them to history's sovereign Necessity.

If to see is to have at a distance, I had so many dead Innocents distance was abolished. Substance broke loose from the domain of time and obedient intention. I became part of the ruin. In the blank skies over Europe I was Strife represented.

Things overlap in space and are hidden. Those black and white picture shots—moving or fixed—were a subversive generation. "The hawk, with his long claws / Pulled down the stones. / The dove, with her rough bill / Brought me them home."

Buffalo roam in herds  
up the broad streets connected by boulevards

and fences

their eyes are ancient and a thousand years  
too old

hear murder throng their muting

Old as time in the center of a room  
doubt is spun



and measured

Throned wrath  
I know your worth

a chain of parks encircles the city

Pain is nailed to the landscape in time. Bombs are seeds of  
Science and the sun.

2,000 years ago the dictator Creon said to Antigone who was  
the daughter of Oedipus and Jocasta: "Go to the dead and love  
them."

Life opens into conceptless perspectives. Language surrounds  
Chaos.

During World War II my father's letters were a sign he was  
safe. A miniature photographic negative of his handwritten  
message was reproduced by the army and a micro-film copy  
forwarded to us. In the top left-hand corner someone always  
stamped PASSED BY EXAMINER.

This is my historical consciousness. I have no choice in it.  
In my poetry, time and again, questions of assigning the cause  
of history dictate the sound of what is thought.

Summary of fleeting summary  
Pseudonym cast across empty

Peak proud heart

Majestic caparisoned cloud cumuli  
East sweeps hewn flank



Scion on a ledge of Constitution  
 Wedged sequences of system

Causeway of faint famed city  
 Human ferocity

Dim mirror Naught formula

archaic hallucinatory laughter

Kneel to intellect in our work  
 Chaos cast cold intellect back

Poetry brings similitude and representation to configurations waiting from forever to be spoken. North Americans have tended to confuse human fate with their own salvation. In this I am North American. "We are coming Father Abraham, three hundred thousand more," sang the Union troops at Gettysburg.

I write to break out into perfect primeval Consent. I wish I could tenderly lift from the dark side of history, voices that are anonymous, slighted—inarticulate.

—Susan Howe

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# STATEMENT

for the New Poetics Colloquium, Vancouver, 1985.

Meanings are not fixed. They arise or recede, and are even contested by readers. How then a possible poetics? It equally emerges, evolves and is always contextual. The positions one rejects today as limiting were themselves once monumental.



accomplishments. In my own work I have generally followed a method of problem solving, not in search of answers, but rather to open up the question itself: the wound of language.

Models impose themselves upon our understanding. None more so perhaps than that literature is composed by authors, individuals of a specific historic type. This conception of writing, which seems mostly to offer a rationale for alphabetizing one's bookshelf, suppresses a recognition of the interdependencies active within any given text. That this perception would require a sharing of power accounts for the fury with which any counter-suggestion tends to be met.

Yet the poet is a convenient focus (I am here), and any critique of individualism must necessarily attempt an explanation of its historic dominance, as well as its various uses. That we may be the first generation to have grown up with the work of Saussure or Jakobson readily at hand means only that we have a different take on the nature of the materials before us. The cleavage between form and content, so crucial and problematic to our elders, is now seen to have been a false distinction. But we have yet to elaborate the essential differences which shape the web of interdependencies in which we ourselves are implicated.

On the far side of all this is an experience of process. For me it entails notebooks, pens, choices as to specific time of day or of the week, and of location—all of which are finally not separable from any structural or social concerns I might have. The actual fact of the single word with its roar of vowels and crush of consonants, drawn even more than it is written, is not to be escaped.

I am of course aware of habits acquired and decisions made. I want each work, with very few exceptions, to be open to the broadest range of inputs possible. Accordingly I have tended to shy away from modes that organize materials thematically,



or else I have approached them rather indirectly (e. g., write one sentence each day for a year describing the sky). Yet I am very much involved with the issues of representation, particularly with those aspects of daily life (gum wrappers in the gutter) that tend to be ignored. It is the invisible which tells us most clearly who we are.

I know that I distrust lyricism, and am wary of irony. Both strike me as critical stances, but ones that enable a poet to evade taking any alternative positions affirmatively. I much prefer mistakes, just as I do a poetry which is capable of stumbling in public and letting out farts. What is more deadly than a poem which seeks to be told that it's beautiful? Yet nothing irritates me more with my peers than how many tin ears seem to keep banging at the piano. Oh, and how few responsible readers there really are.

I do long for a theory of the device, perhaps, but those are weaker moments. As are those in which I dream of a writing freed of history and all its petty genres. I see no alternative but to point out these entanglements wherever they may exist, even as I may sometimes become enmeshed in them. The bureaucratization of writing into literature, and the marginalization of literacy, should be contested.

I am a fundamentally clumsy person, so I have made of this a method.

July 8, 1985

—Ron Silliman

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POSTCARD TO THOMAS PARKINSON

Thursday June 13 '85

D...r Mr Parkinson

Although reading and writing, two different activities, are inseparable beyond some point, I've been able to make out far less at reading, it's turned out, than writing, while in trying to read I've sat at Rbt Duncan's feet and others', yours for one ('s) (a little while, so many feet there are, wow!). And straining forwards isn't a complete benefit to the memory. I've got some rise out of Duncan's writings for sure, but I can't be specific at all. I get it it's mellifluous, which might be sensed greatly or otherwise as a contrast with some or a lot of the content—I mean his poetry—or pretty lyrical through and through, angelic; but that sure seems an obvious and surface impression.

Well, poetry's one thing that is its own reward, as quite a few people must know, and a prize I imagine is consolation for a bum world, one way or another, somehow, a humptydumpty world. (Hm—whatever center's been flying apart for a good long time by now, and a prize or whathaveyou doesn't add much at all to humptydumpty's character, so there's little reason to forget or overlook what we've got—and poetry as maybe, too, some music prize, e. g. draws attention to more than baseball.???) And/or it's a salute, a prize is, and I'm glad Duncan is getting this one.

Salud

Regards

L..Eigner

(The big world sure gives me pause, that's all, or existence is confusing enough.)

-----

Aug. - Oct. In Ground Work, now that I've had it and have been over its first 2/7ths some, I see Duncan sure has a "mighty line," Homeric and whatever, which is for one thing a very flexible one.

—Larry Eigner

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FROM A READING

having the last word the erotic angel stretches its feathers  
the celebrated shepherds recollected as pranksters  
and one a thief in that light  
whose wife is brought to bed of a lamb  
and later suffers the ignominy of discovery

however in our world the twisted gates of the secular  
oppose an earlier practice the lines down the wondering  
shepherds no more our progeny than the little lamb  
who made thee in an uproar of sacrifice  
a cut above the others living to eat  
our hearts out away there in a manger

the social fabric knit with nylon  
the perfect everlasting triumph of  
that God-damned crook and fugitive Robert Hathall  
whose life of crime resembles our own  
a spare part an elaborate dumb show



sheltering tough thought in exchange for the thickened plot  
the deliberate colors of the fall from grace in a frosted glass  
an eternal winter sunset qualified by artifice  
by the hairs on her chin dowdy gray  
by sexual ambiguity by the refusal to be the classic straight line  
by prickly holly thorns below south the sun in the shape  
of a rooster's foot inching toward Lapland  
where the witches live

upon whom the sun has gone down

quoted on the bare bricks of Market Street  
is it the end yet said my grandfather dying  
darkness is all Were  
proud? Of what? To buy

a thing like that.



lo where she enters the rubbishy unregarded field.

the aitch dropped .  
 the weaving spiders.come  
 the domed skull a seacave  
 the headlands the mouth of the river  
 filling and falling  
 crouched in the animal kingdom  
 to whom do we owe our lives  
 the visible pulse in the wrist  
 the waste of fields and forests  
 blooming in the market pages as agricultural production  
 as development of natural resources

the serious powers of old are now portrayed almost exclusively  
 as women and children; the masculine angel, fear not, is become  
 a cute fat infant, wingéd cherub

the descendent powers ours  
 tin horn  
 toy drum  
 but soft here comes my mother now  
 that moth stuttering across Rachel's page



what thoughts these are I think I know

: here's a poetry lesson. what's 'unnatural' word order  
that Pound's always complaining about is what sticks in  
the memory, another mnemonic device which, until so  
recently, distinguished the poem from ordinary  
conversation

writ by hand: an archaism

I ate the plums: wrong tense

the drift of nothingness, the spectacular, each individual plank  
whirling in the explosion, walking away from it, the history of  
movies, the horrors of bourgeois life

lax-ear'd

father Ricci posing as a Chinese monk

persons of no definite employment given to bewilderment

outrage and terror over and over

we love to hate modern art

see what the boys in the back room will have

see what's here

another new year

tea roses

total allout apocalyptic destruction a cliché

a long white blank

the still point of the turning world







Notes from a letter:

September 1, 1985

I've been looking through some unpublished sections of A Reading and have decided to send you these pages. They seem the most overtly "about criticism"—social and literary—in the quotation from (and argument with) Pound, obviously. But they're also about the slide of history, the slippage, for instance, in the definition of the word mystery from sacred to profane which begins (here, at any rate) with the fifteenth century Second Shepherds' Play and winds up quoting from a book of Ruth Rendell's (a contemporary "mystery" writer). Nothing is clearer than that our sense of mystery excludes redemption (some kind of renewal) while at the same time it extends the idea of covert complicit criminality. Mystery is precisely the mystery of evil while archaic senses (as the Eleusinian, for instance) are no longer honored; fertility is now thought to be among the totally known and controllable powers. So the slide of femininity, sexuality, the powers of nature, the powers formerly tinged with the light of the sacred, into degradation and sentimentality.

The logic of sacrifice, whether or not anything is redeemed, or is thought or believed to be redeemed thereby, is still the prevailing order of society. A strict economy of renunciation: post-Christian, post-modern, post-everything: the world itself in the balance. No wonder our towering clichés, our run in the alleys of narrative, our nostalgia for the open ocean.

The final quote is from Marianne Moore. I should also credit Robert Duncan, Wm. Blake, Robert Creeley, the Chronicle/Examiner, The Nation, W. C. Williams (of course), Rachel Blau DuPlessis ("Gypsy/Moth"), T. S.



Eliot, Marlene Dietrich, and the 1936 film San Francisco seen on the last night of 1984. Ngaio Marsh and Michael Palmer. Norman Mailer and Martin Luther. My parents: Finnish folklore from the oral tradition of my mother.

... I keep finding quotes and allusions. Is it possible I've stolen so much from so many? Shakespeare, the Bible and (horrors) the motto of the gang at Bohemian Grove. Robt. Frost, also. Charles Olson. Why do I want to credit all these people? I never did before. Maybe that is the point.

—Beverly Dahlen

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## MIKE AND MACK AT THE SHORE

A DAY AT THE BEACH by Robert Grenier (Roof, 1984, \$6)

"Sweetpea vines." I've been picking from mine all this last week. They're green and crisp with delicate pink/white flowers and brown underroots. Sweetpea vines provide this book's verbal boundaries and inform it throughout; they sit well as image, too, for their density and nodes of color, always ('always'?) something to see and to touch. Desire provides the senses with order and certainty as Grenier moves, proverbially busy, down to the sea and what he sees, his proseizures, a method of convulsions of delight:



just beautiful from hunger bees

once in a while who just scattered seeds

\*

that thought inheres in vines

\*

Surface and sound surround, boundless skein of viney perceptions.

\*\*\*

3 divisions, poems, to a page. 3 divisions (Morning, Midday, Afternoon/Evening) to the book. 3 and 3, Mike and Mack, down to the shore on feet. Feets don't fail them nouns!

\*\*\*

I love this book for its uses of "the everyday," that timeless project of re-seeing/re-saying "the familiar."

## SILHOUETTE

you have to do the work

that the boat is doing

& you have to go

in the direction that the boat is going



And the warm good humour so often informed by a child's pattern of speech:

GOOD DOG

no woof no no

no woof no

\*

MICKY MOUSE

is Mrs. Meikles

\*\*\*

As easy though as the book is to quote from, in its entirety it constitutes a single poem and should be read as such. It is an exciting and moving book of genuine accomplishment. Indeed:

some of this stuff, comes from a

collaboration that now seems all enthusiasm

Indeed, always.

July '85  
Kent

—Tom Beckett

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## ON WATER

MORE AWESOME by Pat Reed (One Dog Garage, 1985)

In China it was once considered sensible to spend the afternoon watching a waterfall. Or to hold a party at which one's guests might sit for three or four hours watching a specific flower open its petals. Close attention to the natural world, a skill programmed into the human genetic make-up since Odulvai Gorge was a flourishing community, has in advanced civilizations been marginaliaed.

Or has it? Some need for revery on the elements of nature persists. Several dozen centuries of city-building hasn't expunged it. And only for historically brief periods of time can the arts avoid it.

Precise observation of the natural world demands a language willing to meet such a world half-way—able to engage it with parallel acts of destruction or growth, predation or exuberance. Or why is Thoreau's Ktaadn a better piece of writing than volumes of elegies on mountain and forest? It doesn't matter where the words come from, there are always enough of those. Science, theology, literature, shop-talk: all contribute adequate vocabularies. Prior to vocabulary however is the capacity to sit still. For hours or days, years even, to sit as the ecosystem requires, and observe its events without reference to Civilized Mind's daily refuse.

The sea. Forest. Grasslands. Mountains. And the tutelary spirits, their actual plant and animal residents. The less complex these residents seem—the more primitive their constitutions and behaviors—the more durable they prove. Set alongside the brief timespan of hominoid existence, the planet



seems so much more theirs. MORE AWESOME discloses the planet they inhabit—but does so using the human scheme of written signs, that strange left-hand turn we took maybe 40,000 years ago, exiling us solitary on a landscape no other creature's yet joined us on. This the strange pull of tensions, as writing attempts to touch that rich other world so unconcerned with the scribe's peculiar scratchings.

If the book's title sounds vaguely like a parody of Disney's t. v. specials, the poetry pursues something camera can't.

Surf in the living  
rough limpet.  
Expressed are  
the rigor,  
drying tide  
dislodging  
heavy sea-  
shore  
hardy device.  
Battering strong  
attachment, anemone  
direct. Abalone  
what's urchin.

Engaged on its terms, the ur-world, "nature", appears impervious to that primary dislocation of grammar—the separation between act and object. Pat Reed's poetry reclaims identity of thing and deed, lifting verb and noun into a single articulation.

Dwell oval  
orient  
to the siphous  
gaper  
geoduct  
firmly  
glow.

But it's no plea for ambiguity. The series I'm quoting from



is titled "Sea Museum" and everything exhibits its precise label. This is necessary—the ocean is, scarcely, our element. Like all the planet's regional zones which hold us at a distance, regions the human organism cannot penetrate deeply without perishing, only the imagination permits an extensive survey. Even then entry is slow and exacting. Words are the primary vehicle, many of which the poet quite literally must clip from notes of the specialist—scientific abstract, dictionary or thesaurus.

From the series "Forestry Notes" a poem titled "Life of Lakes":

through the littoral zone  
                   emerge  
                           the rooted aquatic...  
 but plankton means wander  
   and does,  
       is the mercy of the lake  
 (phosphorous, nitrogen & light)

The application of words to something driftingly alien and elusive as plankton suggests that not only plankton but word come under the magic looking-glass, get magnified from noun to verb, and then brought back: "plankton means wander/and does..." The ecology of vocabulary gradually yields up its complex activities, similar to the observed world it took root from.

Reading the poem one encounters in its depth a strange interjection of—is it devotional rapture?—praise?—that dispells any illusion of achieving a fully objectivizing language.

zooplankton of currents  
                   feed and filter while they swim  
 with copious isolated light...  
                   oh oligotrophic, oxygenated lake



That brief "oh" serves better than volumes of diary to bring the writer into the poem's domain, and to locate her actual size in the world's complex bio-chemistry. It is the moment the lake, prompted by the inquiries of vocabulary, discloses itself as an eco-system more complex than any vocabulary could circumscribe. It reminds me of the "little traveller" a Chinese landscape includes at the bottom of the painting to convey a sense of proportion—this "oh" its verbal parallel, occurring at the bottom of the poem's page. Yet, as the "little traveller" in the painting retracts before the agile viewer's eye into a gesture of brush and ink, same material as tree & cloud & mountain, the virtually inaudible "oh" resolves into the syllablery of language and sign-making. Is it perhaps no more than a chemist's notation, not after all a human cry but the primeval O-H molecule lake-water releases as it evaporates?

Anyone who  
tidewater  
the sun, the tides  
that  
minute on the  
day.

It seems appropriate to recall Taoism here, its elusive, almost indecipherable poetry nurtured by meditations on water. Taoism is an indefinable tradition, at once mystical, scientific and political. Its durability is characterized by a not wholly metaphoric "fluidity" and a watery evasion of that solid rock each of the world's organized governments and churches claim to be. Water, in the well known parable, given time, erodes the rock to nothing. The term "Taoism" is one cipher for what will persist when scripture and religion have disappeared from the planet, leaving plankton and human to pursue their destiny in peace.

As Kenneth Rexroth once pointed out, the english language has produced one Taoist book of note—Izaak Walton's



The Compleat Angler. Pat Reed's More Awesome, as well as her previous Sea Asleep, are similarly composed meditations on water and the creatures of water. But for Walton's egregious, anecdotal mannerisms and philosophical studiousness, she has substituted a quiet condensation of verse. Perhaps it is more Taoist for being less obtrusive. It exhibits the same clarity of observation, the same due proportion, a similar withdrawal from the ravages of human avarice. Hunger is primary—but it's the hunger of the food-chain. Thirst also is primary—the thirst for what's variously called "truth" or "self-knowledge". Both demands remain central to our sublunary existence, and the poetry that articulates them as one and the same drive occurs infrequently. It is never loud, but it endures.

Filter typical dryness  
 & cover the zone.  
 Prey evolve  
 as thrive moon.

—Andrew Schelling

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TAROPATCH by David Lloyd (Jimmy's House of Knowledge, 1985, \$3)

There's a bit of story in each poem, but like the pen of a squid (a thin bony plate which resembles a quill and is in the center of the squid) what narrative there is is deeply embedded, skeletal & sketchy. And each little incident which would be important to a story doesn't advance any story. The plot can't thicken because there isn't one.



Instead, people act and their actions are just part of the poems' motions. A scene becomes not just description as setting with characters acting in it, but an equivalence between the viewer and the viewed: "Salt bites at the smooth nude's wounds: I / Grow even to fear the gathering of their / Womanly hands tending to his multiple lesions...."

So the title (even without the allusion to Malcolm Lowry) fits well: a patch (collection) of scenes each read into, each like the picture on the next card you flip over.

There are all kinds of allusions to sensuality and some of the consequent anxiety that that can cause (sensuality: "The pine boards drip with a sexy resin"; anxiety: "see, my I's are oblique strokes / & signs of worry...").

There's something moist and/or glowing in almost every poem —sometimes it's a membrane, sometimes gaseous, sometimes both (suds and sea foam). In the end though, interesting and attractive as much of the imagery is, it's the fluid rhythms of each piece and Lloyd's skill at quickly and smoothly shifting his focus ("I'm verging on another outlook, hear your / Laugh skim back in with 'only look at the sea / For motion,' the race streams below...") that make this book interesting and enjoyable.

—David L. Sheidlower

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## THREE BOOKS

## 1. THE FUNCTION OF CRITICISM: FROM THE SPECTATOR TO POST-STRUCTURALISM by Terry Eagleton (Verso, 1984, \$5.95)

In a brief sententious survey of noteworthy phases and conditions of Anglo-American literary critical practice over the past 300 years, Eagleton leans heavily on Jürgen Habermas's notion of a "public sphere" of mutually interested, consensus-engendering exchange among literary peers, epitomized here in the Enlightenment coffee houses and such period periodicals as the Spectator and the Tatler. The flourishing culture of the age is exhilaratedly recalled in the book's opening chapter as a collective and effective insurgency of freshly homogenizing bourgeois culture, subverting and reforming the ideological fabric of absolutism. In subsequent chapters Johnson, the Edinburgh Review, Carlyle, the Romantics, Mill, Arnold, the Saturday Review, the advent of the "little magazine" and the refuge of academe exemplify moments in criticism's gradual loss of sociopolitical values and efficacy and the marginalization of its constituency. Leavis's Scrutiny is respectfully considered a "last ditch stand of a general ethical humanism in the face of a society now almost irrevocably beyond the reach of such imperatives," endeavoring to create a petit-bourgeois "intelligencia" that might stand in the way of demoralizing social forces, critically disinterested. After a few amusing, glib, dismissive remarks on Richards, Frye and New Criticism, a condescending bow to 60's "left liberal" "radical humanism" and a drily deferential shelving of structuralism en bloc, Eagleton ravages the Yale deconstructionists, eulogizes Raymond Williams, tips his hat to the feminists (primarily for pressing deprivation to its apparent limit), and laments the virtual disappearance of the traditional family as constitutive of the socially attuned subject. He concludes by prescribing "the role of the contemporary critic" as "re-connecting the symbolic to the political...force," but



acknowledges no projectable means of accomplishing this on a significant scale.

Diplomatically cannibalizing, paraphrasing and serializing the works of less noted and more research-oriented colleagues, nearly all abler, pithier and less rhetorically hobbled writers, Eagleton manages a frequently vigorous and stimulating analytic overview of the more or less politically effective roles sought and played out by the most prominent critical agencies of the period. His portraits of these various organs and writers are compellingly clear, suspiciously coherent, and occasionally so rattled by bias as radically to frustrate credibility, such that the book rather discourages than elicits further interest in the actual criticism even as it whets an appetite for the kind of socioeconomic research it draws on.

## 2. THE POSTMODERN CONDITION: A REPORT ON KNOWLEDGE by Jean-François Lyotard (Univ. of Minnesota, 1984, \$6.95)

Lyotard's accounts, in an expository survey of modes of the legitimation of the known and the knowable through Western cultural history, are temperately analytical, unfamiliar, general and compact, lucid and resonant with imagination. Contemporary culture's dependence on the premise of performativity and its concomitant exploitation of "context control" (technology "reinforcing" reality to enhance not only efficiency but also legitimacy) are said to be thrown into question of late by paradoxes and paralogies raised and sustained (and often legitimized more by local and particular narratives than by appeal to necessity within a totalizing structure) in such fields as quantum mechanics, atomic physics, catastrophe theory and "fracta" by a scientific community that previously appeared responsible to, if not for, the principles and methodology that spawned performance's seemingly



self-evident sanction for hegemony. Lyotard advocates a valorization of "agonistics" (not a dialectical generation of values and ideas so much as an antagonistic interplay) in which violations of acknowledged codes of legitimation contribute to a shifting evolution of knowledges viably discontinuous, "isotropic," nonrectifiable, and proposes to extend Rene Thom's notion of "morphogenesis" "in the promulgation of new norms for understanding, or, if one prefers, in a proposal to establish new rules circumscribing a new field of research...not without rules...but...always locally determined.... This property implies that 'discoveries' are unpredictable. In terms of the idea of transparency it is a factor that generates blindspots and defers consensus." (p. 61)

Such reorientations are impelled not by full-scale revision but by specific actions, however strategic or wanton, assuming radical, circumstantial impact on or through a field. "The stronger the 'move,' the more likely it is to be denied the maximum consensus, precisely because it changes the rules of the game on which consensus has been based ... such behavior is terrorist, as is the behavior of the 'system'... By terror, I mean the efficiency gained by eliminating (or threatening to eliminate) a player from the language game one shares with him." (p. 63) Lyotard finds in scientific research "the antimodal of a stable system. A statement is deemed worth retaining [within the discourse of science] the moment it marks a difference from what is already known, and after an argument and proof in support of it has been found. Science is a model of an 'open system,' in which a statement becomes relevant if it 'generates ideas,' that is, if it generates other statements and other game rules. Science possesses no general metalanguage in which all other languages can be transcribed and evaluated ... the division between decision makers and executors...in the scientific community...is a fact of the economic system and not of the pragmatics of science itself. It is in fact one of the major obstacles to the imaginative development of knowledge." (p. 64) Lyotard proposes nothing more organized, understandably, than that "the social collectivity...must reexamine its own internal



communication and in the process question the nature of the legitimacy of the decisions made in its name." (p. 62)

An appended essay, "What Is Postmodernism?", written in 1982, a few years after The Postmodern Condition, and published separately in its original French, treats the same anticipation of ideological shift from the point of view of aesthetic enquiry and art practice, postulating the postmodern, after the sublime and the modern (though not necessarily chronologically subsequent—Montaigne and Diderot are cited as exemplary postmodernists), as "that which, in the modern, puts forward the unrepresentable in presentation itself; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of a taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable.... A postmodern artist or writer is in the position of a philosopher:... working without rules in order to formulate the rules of what will have been done. Hence the fact that work and text have the characters of an event; hence also, they always come too late for their author, or, what amounts to the same thing, their being put into work, their realization (mise en scene) always begin too soon. Post modern would have to be understood according to the paradox of the future (post) anterior (modo)." (p. 81)

### 3. PURE WAR by Paul Virilio & Sylvere Lotringer (Semiotext(e), 1984, \$4. 95)

This interview is a popular introduction for English-language readers to the project of Virilio, a French urbanist especially concerned with the global impact of military forces and organization on societies historically, recently, and, above all, in the immediate future. Its manner of dissertation, in which Lotringer's brief, synthetic and sometimes heavy-handed generalizations defer to Virilio's quirkily paced, erratically flecking spray of citation and speculation, observes less the



decorum of conversation or a method of measured exposition than a diverting, willful, spiralling accumulation of reflection's tendencies, given this speaker and his subject (the content and implications of his other works). Texture and timing are reminiscent of a thriller, as ideas and their occasions are noted, associated, temporarily shelved, resorted, crammed against one another, rolled over and otherwise risked in Virilio's investigatively-inflected account of a collectively elided, unconscionable autogenocide. "Speed" and "deterrence" are among terms tellingly extended. "Endocolonization" and "nondevelopment" characteristic of a post-imperialist global order, in which the military appears increasingly to determine values and relations, are traced in the light of the ideological and economic results of such metatechnological phenomena. Virilio's discursively snowballing analysis is unchecked by fatalism, facetiousness, ponderousness or paranoia. Here follows a sample serve and return, in media res, as evidence of the texture:

Lotringer: All things considered, the concept of death as accident, as interruption of knowledge, is relatively recent. It is in fact contemporary with the constitution of knowledge about man. The more they individualized man in the heart of our culture, the more they made death the great cut-off, an insurmountable interruption.

Virilio: Epilepsy is little death and picnolepsy, tiny death. What is living, present, conscious, here, is only so because there's an infinity of little deaths, little accidents, little breaks, little cuts in the sound track, as William Burroughs would say, in the sound track and the visual track of what's lived. And I think that's very interesting for the analysis of the social, the city, politics. Our vision is that of a montage, a montage of temporalities which are the product not only of the powers that be, but of the technologies that organize time. It's obvious that interruption plays more on temporality than on space. It was no accident that religious thought instituted all sorts of prohibitions, holidays—the sabbath, etc.... They regulated time, they were aware of the necessity of stopping for there to be a religious politics.



Why? Because religious politics was defined with respect to death, to the great interruption, to the 'last judgement,' as they say in the Scriptures ('Apocalypse'). It's a positive fact, because it gives technology new status. Technology doesn't give us anything more, it interrupts us differently. To be interrupted in a car is different from being interrupted while walking. The connection of the driving body with the locomotive body is a connection to a different type of speed-change. Interruption is a change of speed. The strike, for example—I mean the general strike—was a formidable invention, much more so than the barricades of the peasant revolt, because it spread to a whole duration. It was less an interruption of space (as with the barricade) than of duration. The strike was a barricade in time.

—Steve Benson

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## COROLLARY TO VIRILIO

In the transformation of raw material to artifact there is a compliment to Virilio's ideas as expressed in Pure War. I can't fully agree with him; technology is concerned with space, not just with distance. Fabrication involves filling space with matter. Conventional military industrial out-put, bullets, tanks, etc. involves not just speed, but unity. Both the micro-chip and the cast turbine jet blade (made of a single crystal by means of controlled directional solidification) stand not only for speed, but for space filled uniformly by technology. The more uniformly space can be filled by matter, the more effective the statistical analysis and justifications of deterrence are. It is a lesser mathematics (statistics) justifying the unexamined use of a higher mathematics



(relativity). Hence space is quantified not as territory and not as time, but as mass.

The mythic appeal of the movie The Train with Burt Lancaster exemplifies both the old and new perspectives. The French underground spend time and lives at the end of WWII to keep the art treasures of the Louvre from being transported to Germany. In the film, the art is never shown, it is represented by a train and, in the final scene, by crates of uniform size with the painters' names stenciled on their outsides. The old idea, of course, is that a nation-state's identity as embodied in its art treasures is "worth fighting for." The new idea, implicitly present, is that barely identifiable mass is the object of such a struggle. In terms of nuclear weapons and reactors, there are only 2 kinds of mass: critical and everything else.

In the state of Pure War, quantifiable, uniform mass takes on spatial statistical significance. Even if that significance is only illusory. Technology tends towards creating the reality of statistics. This began around Eli Whitney's time with the development of mass production with interchangeable parts (significant to Virilio would surely be that the first machine manufactured with interchangeable parts was the gun). The next major step in this process was the development of the SAE (Standards of American Engineers) which was fostered by the auto industry to insure that all 1/2", 10 pitch, stove bolts were the same nationwide. Uniformity has gone from being just a standard for industrial precision to being a requisite for statistical accuracy. As it is translated into the statistical vision of humanity (birth rates, death rates, body counts), uniformity is the negative side of androgyny.

Statistical vision concerns space and how it is filled. The more uniformly space is filled, the more persuasive statistical vision is. And, in a scary sense, the more precise and hence



powerful such vision becomes.

—David I. Sheidlower

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TOTAL SYNTAX by Barrett Watten (Southern Illinois University, 1985 \$12.95)

If the syntactic is that relation, both simultaneous and successive, between the instantiation of a sign (e.g., a phoneme) and its contextualisation (i.e., the sign as "interpretant," the phoneme in a larger morphological segment leading to a semantic segment, in short, as part of a word) the syntactic ought to be defined, 'd'un coup', as purely functional, that is, value-less.

Syntax is the 'annunciatory scaffold'; in its distributive (successive) function it is the very fecundity of significance, yet in its differential (simultaneous) function the syntactic 'disappears behind' its own organisation. This seems to correspond with the term "differance" (in Derrida's phenomenological critique) as that movement which differs and defers the sign, creating distinction and discernability on one side, and a spatio-temporal interval on the other. It can be said of syntax, as Derrida has said of "differance," that it "indicates the middle voice, it precedes and sets up the opposition between passivity and activity," and that it is "the differences between differences, the play of differences." (\*)

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(\*) J. Derrida, Speech and Phenomena (Northwestern, 1973), p. 130



When Barrett Watten writes: "I would like to propose a more total syntax for the statement that is a work of art. And I want an art that reflects that total syntax," I would like to think he is calling for more "play" in the celebratory sense—of an unlimiting for that institution known as "literature." (\*) Yet his appeal for a more total syntax needs to be borne in mind; a simply total syntax would sublate the very possibility of "statement" to the absolutism of "differance." A failed emissary for having consumed its own message. This is certainly not, it seems, what Watten has in mind, or is at least that aspect (contraindicant to his appeal) which ought not be left unscrutinized. We will proceed in the affirmative modality of the phrase "more total syntax," after reviewing its 'down side'—that is, we will find its literality inappropriate.

For the "total syntax" which Watten elucidates in his title essay is emancipatory yet cloistered; preliminary yet eschatological; and even divided into a bipartite formulation. To explain these collisions we need to study their embodiment in the aesthetics of Robert Smithson, whose thought carries the majority of Watten's essay.

Smithson devolves two terms from scientific discourse to the aesthetic realm: "entropy" and "crystallization." These terms parallel Watten's division of syntax into "interior" and "exterior" modes, the former hinging on the temporal, the latter on the spatial aspects of the "art statement." "Entropy" is Smithson's term for an atemporal formalism: "A monumental stasis, compelling and inert," which is characterised as "minimalism." "Crystallization" has several interesting connotations, many unforeseen by Smithson. Like an anti-romantic variant of Stendhal's "bough of Salzberg," Smithson sees the "entropic" reduction of the artworld to

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(\*) B. Watten, Total Syntax (Southern Illinois Univ., 1985), p. 68. All subsequent quotes are from the title essay.



"endless amounts of points of view" as "bringing to mind the ice age rather than the golden age"; that is, the plurality of art practices "crystallizing" into a static, 'endgame' situation. However, the "entropy" metaphor of Smithson's aesthetics (which implicitly anthropomorphises natural processes as well as it serves to 'aestheticized strife' by positing the "monumental" as beyond historical contingency) is in today's art discourse reactionary backwater. Watten notes: "Time and space fuse in the syntax of sculpture to generate new terms in the vocabulary: a negative value for 'action' (and 'action painting' beyond that) and a positive value for 'crystals' and the process of crystallization which is irreversible and entropic as opposed to liberal and progressive." In devaluing "action" as an aesthetic category, Smithson anticipates current attitudes—if only in a 'political' sense. "Action" no longer has the status (in painting) it once had; witness Mike Bidlo's "Pollack" paintings—calculated reproductions of the 'spontaneous' originals. Even so, the stilted classicism of "minimalist" sculpture, with its valorization of 'regular' or geometric forms, suggests precisely the sort of Greenbergian "historical inevitability" "where art is striving towards its own essence" that Watten suggests Smithson is opposing.

Perhaps this deadlock can be broken by recourse to another of Smithson's terms, the "Ultramoderne." In his article by that name, he states: "The Ultramoderne exists ab eterno.... An archaic ontology puts the Ultramoderne in contact with the many types of monumental art from every major period—Egyptian, Mayan, Incan, Aztec, Druid, Indian, etc." This description of 30's architecture better expresses the sensibility which today, for worse or better, has come to be called the "post-modern." A trans-historical plurality in the self-reflectivity of the creating subject (writer or artist) has succeeded the "entropic" episode of "Minimalism," which itself 'illustrated' the impossibility of ridding artworks of allusion.

There remains the dilemma of Watten's division of syntax into "in-" and "ex-terior" aspects. In his example, "a cube in the



center of a gallery, both painted white," the cubic form, in its geometrical regularity, is a function (actually an "indexical sign") of the "interior" syntax. It is related to the genus of "a solid, bounded by six equal squares, the angle between any two adjacent faces being a right angle." Thus the cube in the gallery is seen to be 'neutral' vis-à-vis the totality of possible cube manifestations. Yet it is in a situation (the "gallery") wherein, by criteria previously agreed upon (as "aesthetics") it is recognized to be, beyond 'cubeness', an "artwork." This is Watten's "exterior" syntax. As with Duchamp's "readymades" Watten's appeal for a "more total syntax" asks to broaden aesthetic designations.

"The interior and exterior syntax are not separate; rapidly they merge in the vast array of possibilities from which come painted white cubes." It is just this division of syntax, bipartite according to Watten's schema, yet "not separate," that is problematic. Like the Husserlian project of "eidetic reduction," of finding a "primordial eidos," interior syntax suggests a "transcendence" of formal qualities, an 'apartness' from their contextualisation in a socio-historical frame. The "not separate" denies this, but we are still left with a criterion for the "art statement" that leaves open an implicit "transcendence" as long as the "interior-exterior" distinction is maintained. Put more simply: a "cube," before it is an "art statement," before it is even a "geometric form," is a presence in our cognition (there is no 'metaphysics of the sign'); it thus does not precede our collective experience.

Again, I think Watten would agree with this——his is not an argument toward a "transcendental attitude"——if anything, the opposite. Yet in privileging the syntactic as a textual (or aesthetic) strategy 'sui generis' there arises a series of confusions. This is exemplified by his statement that: "The syntax of the world is elusive, though what is seen in this syntax is different in the case of each writer." This seems to be a case for an "interior" syntax, one that precedes the writer's situation. However "elusive," the writer grasps at least a portion of the world's syntax. In fact there is a certain imperative to do so: "The observer, rather than being ironic,



is responsible to the contingencies of any thing that might compel him." Yet where this "responsibility" stems from (from what tribunal does it issue?), and why the writer must eschew the "ironic" in approaching it, Watten leaves unclear. There is an air of the 'scientific' here (comingled with a sort of Balzacian realism)—yet what Watten admires in Smithson is his ironic appropriation of scientific terms. Perhaps one's discourse on art can only be couched in the ironic, whereas writing itself can (if only partially) escape these limitations.

More importantly, it is difficult to find, in a movement of differing—differential relations (syntax itself) criteria for textual production. The articulation of syntax does not in itself give us the articulation of the sign (to play on both senses of "articulate")—any more than the capacity for a hinge to swing can produce a door. Although syntax generates (or 'sets up' or 'organizes') meaning, it does not create it. At this point it might be best to cede the issue to semiotics, to replace the smaller mystery of 'how' into the larger one of 'why'.

—Michael Anderson

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THE VIOLENT MAN by Michael Anderson (e. g. Press, 1985, \$2)

\$20 words interspersed with spurts of confession, flat statements, and babble; disconnected, verbose, intelligent, ironic, and moving. The third time through I imagined a speaker who is slightly drunk, saying whatever pops into his head, a little too smart and a little too angry for his drinking buddies. At any rate the writing is convincingly improvisational. Pessimism predominates—it all takes



place in "a town where life does itself in," and friends "revert to old habits." Violence, in this context, has to do with passivity, or avoidance—relationships broken off because of reticence, nonchalant acceptance of broken relationships, "quietism" and "loss." There's a measure of self-criticism in this definition of violence, a possible corrective to the pessimism that drives the writing.

Michael Anderson has a great vocabulary, full of antiquated, slangy, technical, foreign, and slurred words. In Vrille they were packed together with an over-deliberate, anti-musical density. The Violent Man is surprisingly idiomatic:

#### LEAVING THE PENINSULA

Ousted, theatricalised, protracted.

securing one falsity, the more violently

perfectly well agonise

bluing gendered  
labor's lost

con maesta briefly  
along hellish stretta

These longevities are our unseen gaming  
better left unsaid, dear one

The scholia on this passage falsifies it.

Easy enough to imagine these phrases muttered sotto voce in a bar.

—B. Friedlander

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FLAT BIRDS by Jean Day (GAZ, 1985, \$5)

Flat Birds is about containment. It is composed of highly controlled, quasi- (but anti-) classical environments. Why, one asks, these biomorphs in these environments? Containment becomes an actual theme. The birds are flat, as if painted, so that they may be read:

The circle inside a square

Resistance to open my door to the world made me stop and think  
of beer

plastic images in dear cases

eggs' armored  
submission

A vessel for the better

LAND: SEA: AIR, etc.  
containers

(Quotes are from "Even," "The Great Divide," "Girls Were Once Horses," "Woe," "Mantle," and "Barge.")

The limits of form are like a twine that snaps if it binds too tight. The very notion of restraint implies a force or passion that must be fought against. Terseness (selectivity) implies its inverse. It appears in the work as representatives of diverse cultural strata laid side by side, so that Motown holds hands with Milton, and Dante with Disney, and comic-book sea monkeys spontaneously generate in the middle of a sonnet cycle. A tendency to lushness is constantly bitten off.

Muscles, particularly those of the throat, tighten in states of desire. Such tension can cause aphonia—loss of voice—so that using language becomes a problem. When channeled through



the resistant medium of language, desirous tension becomes an object: poetic utterance—energy trapped in form, as adrenalin is in a muscle.

One long poem, "The Great Divide," (a title which evokes alienating spaces such as that between mind and page; and also Americana, "from strip-mine to wavy wheat to jeweled / escapement") is made of alternately long and short lines. The short lines act as rhythmic potholes at the end of each long line, serving as repeated rude awakenings for the ear and eye. Uncomfortable but necessary:

Then making a mallet you get to the other side  
relational...

[of meaning]  
[relative, of  
course]

Generate enough bombardiers to little kitchen, matches  
causal flosses

A piquant absurdity ("little parts of the body / we care about are in the service / of lambs") makes these works effervesce, provoking inner laughter. Shorter works like "Aces" and "Usage" are uncrackable but tasty nuts, acting in defiance of the commonsense notion of semantic incompatibility:

a responsible varying or small  
narco-trowel

Monuments of meticulously broken rules, these poems decorate a bare but Edenic landscape where objects act (up) and parallelism is studiously tripped up as a poem inevitably does what it "oughtn't" to:

Juice comes back  
on a walk            words  
sitting around  
memory's bladed  
juncture stile

[style]

This poem's called "Collett": 1) The charges are reversed.  
2) The words snowball, gathering matter from line to line, so



that reading becomes what it always is—decision as to where to divide and where to clump together. Indeed, "Reconstruction is the daily project."

Day makes enjambment behave like a bucking mule, kicking meaning into the air:

A buzz saw works the air of being	[Heidegger → labor]
industry: who wrote what works	[EST → Marx]
as a slave. Fine hearts go pumping	[life → medicine]
up the serums. It's wrong to think	[guilt over intellect]
you're ill was the message to stand up...	[guilt over hypochondria]

The reader must not expect order, steadiness, or—to quote Baudelaire on George Sand—"that celebrated flowing style, so dear to the bourgeois." She is instead

... Paid to stumble  
awake at the critical angle—  
Shape! Fold around me, she...

might cry out, anxious, giddy, amused, while the poems retain their singular hermetic shapes composed of such "critical angles"...

—Gordon

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# SKELETONS IN THE DRESSING ROOM: EL TEATRO CAMPESINO

MUERTE (in monk's robe with a skeleton mask):

So Johnny left for Vietnam, never to return. He didn't want to go and yet he did. It never crossed his mind to refuse. How can he refuse the gobierno de los estados unidos? How can he refuse his family? Besides, who wants to go to prison? And there was the chance he'd come back alive...wounded maybe, but alive. So he took a chance—and lost.

(Luis Valdez, Soldado Razo)\*

Vietnam, acquiescence. Why? Reason one, two, clincher and wild card. Result: death. A simple, sensible, direct style. El Teatro Campesino exemplifies a way of making theater which exposes and resists exploitation by the dominant American culture. The complex social reality of the contemporary Chicano is accurately reflected in their art. It is therefore an art which is constantly changing. When Luis Valdez challenged Chicanos "to become involved in the art, the life style, the political and religious act of doing teatro" he cleared the stage for an uncompromisingly experimental collective project (Actos, p. 4).

Soldado Razo along with The Dark Root of a Scream and Bernabe, all under the direction of Tony Curiel, were restaged this summer by El Teatro Campesino as part of their 20th

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\* Luis Valdez y El Teatro Campesino, Actos (Cucaracha Publications, 1971), p.144. Nine plays including Soldado Razo, notes by Valdez and photos of early productions are included in this collection.



Anniversary celebration—twenty years that began in Delano, California, when Valdez, El Teatro's artistic director and spark behind the teatro movement in general, was attracted by the organizing efforts of Cesar Chavez and the United Farm Workers:

We were here in Delano.... We'd marched—with all of those people shouting Huelga, there must have been 1200 people. I couldn't get it out of my head for weeks after that. These were Mexicans and Filipinos, not students or—citified radicals; these were poor farm workers. \*

Valdez finished up a stint with the SF Mime Troupe and then set out to start a farmworkers' theatre.

Along with some traditional and some radical dramatic theory, Valdez brought signs. Signs read: HUELGISTA (striker), ESQUIROL (scab), PATRON or GROWER. Strikers wore signs and played their "characters." As the idea of "acting things out" caught on, more and more characters, situations, dialogues, and volunteers crowded into the skits. The Schenley Contract, the first contract won by the UFW, even became a character. A regular form of about fifteen minutes developed and was named the acto.

Anything and everything that pertained to the daily life, la vida cotidiana, of the huelgistas became... material for actos. The reality of campesinos on strike had become dramatic (and theatrical as reflected by newspapers, TV newscasts, films, etc.) and so the actos merely reflected the reality. (Actos, p. 5)

The early actos of Delano were not written. They were collectively created through group improvisation: daily expression of a striker's frustrations, another striker's insights, and the leadership's strategies. Social reality was the major

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\* Beth Bagby, "El Teatro Campesino: Interviews with Luis Valdez," in Tulane Drama Review (Summer 1967), p. 74.



emphasis. These short, bare, punchy plays that Teatro Campesino would later become famous for were staged in parking lots, meeting halls, on marches, even on flatbed trucks backed up to the edge of the labor camp fences. Real living theater looking at trouble. Their purpose to educate, stimulate and sustain the mass strength of a crowd was immediate. Their stage guns were matched with the real guns of police, guards and growers.

Throughout El Teatro's involvement with the UFW the dramatic mode was satirical comedy. Lifting morale among strikers was an important function.

We've never done a wholly serious or tragic act...the serious stuff has already been pounded into them for—hell, our meetings start at seven and go as long as three, sometimes four hours. (Bagby, p. 79)

As a director, Valdez drew from *commedia dell'arte*, Brecht, The SF Mime Troupe, and Mexican popular comedy. Audiences were already familiar with the Mexican film star Cantinflas, the clever, partially moustached everyman with forever drooping pants. The use of this archetype helped make a statement: this is your theater, not the grower's, not the dominant culture's.

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Teatro Campesino is muscular theater. (\*) Speech is backed with vigorous and easily understood full-body gestures. Often accompanied by a live band, actions such as running, working, waiting, etc. are stylized as the actors literally dance at a clipped pace. Special effects which are borrowed from film and video art are here achieved through the actors' art. Actors speed up, slow down, precisely replay vignettes, fight, laugh,

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\* Term used by Juan Felipe Herrera.



cry and cower at a moment's notice.

Visually there is seldom if ever any doubt as to the action or intention of El Teatro's characters:

Bernabe stares at her. A sudden realization strikes him: he is talking to the moon and the earth. Fear overwhelms him, and he screams. He runs.

LUNA:

Epale, where are you going? (He stops Bernabe with a wave of his arm.) Calmala, you don't have to be scared. (Pulls him toward Tierra.) Look at my carnala, ese. Mira que a toda madre se watcha in la moonlight. She digs you, man.

(Luis Valdez, Bernabe) \* '

The zoot-suiting Moon (Luna) passes a joint to Bernabe. His sister the Earth (Tierra) is beautiful and romantically dressed as a female Mexican revolutionary. Bernabe's seduction by these personified heavenly bodies is at once fanciful and frightening. As in most of their plays the basic story is clearly conveyed in visual terms while the text serves to elaborate:

As a precursor of contemporary Chicano poetry, it (Teatro Campesino) provided one singular and undeniable element: a revitalization of Chicano speech. The fluid and expressive language elaborated in the actos is among the first artistic explorations of the multi-lingual circumstance of modern Chicano life. \*\*

\* Luis Valdez, Bernabe (unpublished manuscript) III, 2.

\*\* Tomas Ybarra-Frausto, "The Chicano Movement and the Emergence of a Chicano Poetic Consciousness," in New Scholar (Vol. 6, 1977), p. 88.



The Chicano language code is as varied as the Chicano population is acculturated. What exists is not a stable bilingualism with definite functions for both languages. Spanish and English do not have equal reinforcement in the US. Labor segmentation and immigration support the continued presence of Spanish, but formal maintenance of that language does not exist. What results is a situation-to-situation approach to language.

Of course some characters speak only Spanish, some only English. Some plays tend toward one language or another. Actions are sometimes narrated by a "consciously bilingual" character or in the language "opposite" that in which the main action occurs. But what predominates is code-switching.

Code-switching or the use of both Spanish and English in a single discourse is the most common variety of language in the bilingual Chicano community. An informal conversation can switch to English to signal seriousness. A formal presentation in English may switch to Spanish for a joke or an aside. Spanish might be sprinkled with English shifts to affect a light tone or avoid pedantry. If a topic or event was learned or experienced in one language the speaker will shift to that language out of habit or necessity. Reasons of privacy, humor, or cultural identification can initiate a language shift. (\*) Onstage code-switching adds dynamics.

Speech, like character, is a condensation of certain types. Just as the mother cries too much, the soldier is too naive, and the girlfriend too demure, speech is an exaggeration of any real vernacular. But the exaggeration is not homogenous across the cast of any given play: each character's speech presents his or her own personal history, class, generation. What results

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\* For detailed information on code-switching and other varieties of the Chicano dialect see: Rosaura Sanchez, "Spanish Codes of the Southwest" in MODERN CHICANO WRITERS edited by Joseph Somers (Prentice Hall, 1979).



is an enormous crossfire of slang and style.

When the action slows down or stops to allow for an aside, purely verbal jokes, or explanations, some part of some audiences will not understand. But total verbal comprehension is a disappointing objective. If a word or phrase drops beyond immediate recognition, another variable (gesture, spatial relationship, tone of voice, etc.) will foreground itself. Two or more language systems switching back and forth amid forceful visual action (often three simultaneous scenes at once) constructs a complexity that resists stasis.

Code-switching gives importance to pure sound, which zooms in and out of the background at different moments for different audience members. Language which is in some senses individual (individual to groups of people large and small) is used to pronounce and validate the individual's responses. When a medium so central as language becomes irregular, the audience witnesses the vulnerability of the dominant code. Social stratification is attacked stylistically.

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Teatro presentations became "total cultural 'happenings' with local musicians, dance groups and poets participating" (Ybarra-Frausto, p. 87). The farmworkers' struggle became the cause and catalyst for a national political movement and an accompanying artistic re-awakening. As activism grew and political thought became more and more radical, the UFW leadership, its alliance with liberal democrats, and its moderate stance on immigration began to be questioned. Vietnam, racial discrimination, and an oppressive public educational system rivaled the urgency of the farmworkers' plight. El Teatro's leftist orientation plus a commitment to create a lasting Chicano theater came into conflict with the hard-driving, all-consuming, single-mindedness of union organizing. In 1967 the two organizations split.



Teatro started its migration north, first to Del Ray, then to Fresno, and finally to San Juan Bautista, its present home. The company of actors changed from farmworkers to students. Likewise, the content of the actos shifted from shared experiences of campesino struggle to themes of war, myth, education, and the Chicano political movement itself. Urban settings appeared and an expanded cast of characters followed. The acto form became more complex so as to include an interplay between comedy and tragedy. The corrido (stories told in song, acted out by mimes) and the mito (mystical, ritual drama) came into the repertoire. Valdez was now not "merely" director but playwright as well. National and international tours and awards broadened their goals as well as their sense of the US's relationship to the world. It was at this time that Soldado Razo, et al were first produced.

#### JOHNNY:

Her parents don't like me, I know. They think I'm a vago. Maybe they'll feel different when I come back from Nam. Simon, el War Veteran! Maybe I'll get wounded and come back con un chingatal de medals. I wonder how the vatos around here are going to think about that? Pinche barrio—I've lived here all my life. Now I'm going to Vietnam. (Taps & drum.) Va estar cabron, man. I might even get killed. If I do, they'll bring me back here in a box, covered with the flag...military funeral like they gave Pete Gomez...everybody crying...la jefita—(Stops.) What the fuck am I thinking, man? Pinche loco! (Luis Valdez, "Soldado Razo" in Actos, p. 133)

Soldado Razo was first performed in 1971 at the Fresno Chicano Moratorium on the war in Vietnam. A skeleton-costumed character Muerte (the traditional Mexican image of Death) tells a "story" about an 18 year-old Chicano. "Maybe you knew him, eh? He was killed not too long ago in Vietnam." As master of ceremonies, Muerte introduces the characters—Johnny, his parents, his younger brother, his girlfriend. The action takes place the night before and the morning of Johnny's departure: dinner at home and good-byes at the bus station. Death is everpresent and all-knowing. He lets us in on what the characters are thinking but can't say to each other. He's hip to their fears,



their contradictions, the little lies they tell in order to get by, all the conflicts beneath their impassioned efforts to make these events seem normal and reasonable. He reveals the characters' social conditioning: the ways the dominant culture exerts influence on their most intimate relationships and vital decisions.

PAPA:

No quieres usar la troquita, hijo?

JOHNNY:

No, gracias, 'pa. Ya traigo el carro de Cecelia.

CECELIA:

Not mine. My parents' car. They loaned it to us for the dance.

PAPA:

Parece que dejaste buena impresion, eh?

CECELIA:

He sure did. They say he's more responsible now that he's in the service.

MUERTE: (To audience.)

Did you hear that? Listen to her again.

CECELIA: (Repeats sentence, exactly as before.)

They say he's more responsible now that he's in the service.

MUERTE:

Asi me gusta!

(Actos, p. 141)

Muerte is a comic and a mime who takes pleasure in presenting his cast of fools. He's outside of human affairs: morality and politics are not his concern. Death is simply his job, and he enjoys it. His detachment helps us maintain the emotional distance we need to consider the social and political transactions which take place.



In the final scene a change occurs. The comic distancing is absent and we are presented with an immediate and graphic account of Johnny's experience in Vietnam. Johnny is at one side of the stage. He writes a letter to Mama who sits at the opposite side.

JOHNNY:

I dreamed I was breaking into one of the hooches, asi le decimos a las casas de los Vietnamese. I went in firing my M-16 porque sabia que el village estaba controlado por los gooks. I killed three of them right away, but when I looked down it was mi 'apa, el carnalillo and you, jefita. I don't know how much more I can stand. Please tell Sapo and all the vatos how it's like over here. Don't let them——

La Muerte fires a gun, shooting Johnny in the head. He falls. La Mama screams without looking at Johnny.

(Actos, p. 145)

Johnny's direct testimony identifying Chicanos and Vietnamese as the common victims of the U.S. war is given in the context of a highly emotional scene. It's no longer possible to gloss over the realities of the characters' lives. Death is not an entertainer, and we must not remain passive observers. We must act on the insights he has led us to. The play moves out into the world.

The Dark Root of a Scream is also about the death of a young Chicano in Vietnam, but its action is after the fact and centers around his funeral. The frail normality of family life which Soldado Razo portrayed is shattered. The characters here live in a nightmare. The staging reflects this reality: accelerated pace, irrational shifts of mood, expressionistic and grotesque physicality.

The play is an extended debate over the identity of the deceased "Indio" and the causes and significance of his death. The participants, from Indio's friends and family to the priest performing the service, offer a variety of evidence. We learn that he was an activist, and that he feared losing the respect



of his community if he fled the draft. We also learn that his ideas of activism and community service were inspired by Mayan and Aztec religious thought and mythology.

The most forceful and cohesive interpretation of Indio's historical role is presented by the Priest, who acts as a spokesman for the US military-industrial, and we can add -religious, complex. The Priest is incredibly cruel. He gloats over Indio's death, offers his grieving mother compensatory medals and inquires if she has any more boys at home who would like to make her proud. In contrast, Funny Bunny, Gato, and Lizzard (Indio's friends) are caught off-guard, unable to agree on how to respond to Indio's death. They have no common ideology to unite them, they are in a state of confusion precipitated by their cultural colonization. The infighting and mis-directed aggression which they act out is partially a reflection of internal conflicts in the Chicano movement at this time.

By the end of the sixties state and federal authorities recovered from their initial setbacks and launched an all-out campaign against the left. Chicano organizations were especially vulnerable. Repression through legal and intelligence channels, the isolation and harassment of radical leaders, and overt armed intimidation as manifested in the police riot at the 1970 Chicano Moratorium in Los Angeles which left three dead and more than 400 injured, heightened regional and personal differences within the movement. \*

In The Dark Root of a Scream the knife-carrying street vatos, Lizzard and Gato, are suspicious of Indio's activism. They parade their machismo in a series of attacks on each other, on Indio's girlfriend Delia, and on Funny Bunny—a cowering wimp

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\* The relationship of El Teatro Campesino to the Chicano movement is examined in detail in Politics and Chicano Culture: A Perspective on El Teatro Campesino (Chicano Studies Library, U. C. Berkeley, 1983).



who defends Indio. This syndrome of self-defeating behavior in the face of a seemingly invulnerable opponent (the Priest) was also present in El Teatro Campesino itself during this period:

Anger against the imperialist, anger against an unjust system, was very quickly satisfied by anger between members of our group. They let out their hostility toward injustice on each other. It complicated our work because it destroyed the very unity that we needed to continue, and it destroyed the very reason we were doing all of this work, our own brotherhood. \*

Valdez's solution to this problem is clearly indicated by the climactic scene. Gato finally breaks open Indio's bleeding coffin and discovers the feathered costume of Quetzalcoatl within. The characters are all shocked by this revelation, the Priest shrinks in horror, Delia screams, the play is over. The action here is to reject the vocabulary and symbolism of the Priest and to invoke the ancient Indian roots of Chicano identity. As Valdez states in his poem "Pensamiento Serpentino" (Serpentine Thought):

not Thomas Jefferson or Karl Marx  
will LIBERATE the Chicano  
not Mahatma Gandhi or Mao Tze Tung  
IF HE IS NOT LIBERATED FIRST BY  
HIS PROPRIO PUEBLO

BY HIS POPUL VUH  
HIS CHILAM BALAM  
HIS CHICHEN ITZA  
KUKULCAN, GUCUMATZ, QUETZALCOATL \*\*

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\* Valdez quoted by Theodore Shank, "A Return to Mayan and Aztec Roots" in The Drama Review (Dec. 1974), p. 56.

\*\* Luis Valdez, Pensamiento Serpentino: A Chicano Approach to the Theater of Reality (Cucaracha, 1973), p. 3.



He calls for an assertion of indigenous cultural values with the conviction that this act alone will have lasting political consequences:

Jesucristo is Quetzalcoatl  
 The colonization is over.  
 La Virgen de Guadalupe is Tonantzin  
 The suffering is over.  
 The Universe is Aztlan  
 The revolution is now.

(Pensamiento Serpentino, p. 7)

With Bernabe Valdez and El Teatro entered firmly into a new style whose aim was to evoke cultural roots in a healing ritual of unification. The problem the play poses is simple: Bernabe, the village idiot, is in love with La Tierra, the Earth. He climbs into a hole in the ground and takes her as his lover every night. How are we to view this relationship, as sacred or obscene? The consensus of Bernabe's family and friends is towards the latter, but what do we see of their characters? They are without exception playing the self-defeating roles given them by American society—they are victims of alcoholism and drug addiction, the only "sexually attractive" character is a prostitute.

The sanctity of Bernabe's relationship with La Tierra is affirmed by the play's conclusion, a fantastic scene in which La Tierra, her brother La Luna (the Moon) and her father El Sol (the Sun) appear on stage. At this point the play passes into religious drama. El Sol demands Bernabe's heart in exchange for La Tierra; he promises that through this act of sacrifice Bernabe will transcend his mortality and gain tremendous power to fight for his bride against her enemies ("men with money and power," agribusiness armed with pesticides). Bernabe assents and a ritual sacrifice is enacted. This concludes with a tableau: Bernabe poses with his bride La Tierra, flanked by La Lune and El Sol.



A brief epilogue returns the action to a mundane level. Bernabe's mother is told of his death: his hole in the ground has caved in, burying him alive. This scene is offered without comment. We are left to make our own judgements of Bernabe's fate. In the context of Valdez's "neo-Mayan" thought, Bernabe's spiritual unity with the Aztec pantheon must be seen as transcending his personal death. And the reality of this union will have political consequences beyond any individual's acts. On the other hand the mythological scene of Bernabe follows an act of passion—Bernabe attacks a pimp and flees believing he has killed him—and proceeds from a state of intoxication—La Luna and Bernabe smoke a joint. So maybe it's just some idiot's dream, and his last dream at that? How can Bernabe defend the Earth now?

Situated in the historical context of the late sixties, Bernabe's rendering of the dialectic relationship between spirituality and politics is undogmatic, leaving room for doubt and criticism. This is in line with the tradition of El Teatro Campesino since the grape strike: to pose social problems and encourage the audience to seek their solution.

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This December El Teatro Campesino will present La Pastorela, a traditional Mexican Christmas play. In 1986 they will premier a new work by Luis Valdez. Tickets and information are available from El Teatro Campesino Playhouse Box Office, 705 Fourth St., San Juan Bautista, Ca. 95045, (408) 623 2444.

Thanks to Juan Felipe Herrera, writer and performer, who shared his expertise on the subject. He appeared this summer in Soldado Razo and The Dark Root of a Scream.

—Eileen Corder and Nick Robinson

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WINDOWS by Kit Robinson (Whale Cloth Press, 1985)

Windows is a deeply un-totalizable book. It contains eleven longish to long pieces, each written in a differing form. There is an eight-page found poem ("Prelude"), a sequence of airy urban lyrics ("All Fours"), a poem about working at the post office ("Casual Blues"), and a poem where the lines read as fractions of prose set carefully just out of sync with one another ("Speaking Peoples"). When he writes in prose, Robinson sometimes produces Baudelairian prose-poems, self-contained bouquets of carefully calculated surprise ("Autochthonous Redaction"), while in "A Sentimental Journey" he displays an absence of control, mixing highly-wrought linguistic phantasmagoria with casual notebook snippets with straight statement with ironized "straight statement." In "Industry One Two Three," after the initial section, every word is accountable to a predetermined structure.

Technique, by its status as such an active variable, calls itself very much into question here. It can be seen as a joyous athleticism, self-valuable, or, at pessimistic moments, as doodling on the walls of the linguistic prison-"house." Often in WINDOWS these attitudes are found in close proximity. So the question of the value or values of writing is set in high relief, without being answered.

Except of course by the constant wit, inventiveness, suggestiveness, and sharp focus of each of the words in each piece. The writing in Windows, in all of its forms, is always beautiful. But it is a further virtue of the book that it does not rest in a self-satisfied eclectic aestheticism. What happens when the careful and far-flung words, lines, sentences, pieces occur together is an open question. One and one are not necessarily two, not to mention three, and who says they're numbers anyway, or the same. Authority is deadly.



Not that Robinson is not saying anything. A one-sentence paragraph from "Anamerican Paragraphs":

Out in Embarcadero Plaza, "tree." (p. 39)

Here the quotes, the lack of an article or verb, plus the Monk-like percussive plunk of the one-syllable conclusion to what starts out as a normal scene-setting introductory phrase—these make for more than just an amusingly rendered perception of "daily life," they also make perceptible the brutalizing ménage of capital, city planning, & architecture, as experienced by the wind-blown alienated organic percipients & participants ("tree" & "person").

Stanzas from the middle of "Prelude":

should  
because  
each  
just

those  
people  
Mr.  
how

too  
little  
state  
good

very  
make  
would  
still        (pp. 30-31)

The single words invite thought; the stanzas display, hint at, or ignore cohesion: "[T]oo little [S]tate good": given our century's massacres & repressions, those four words form



an accurate thumbnail history. The first quoted stanza, on the other hand, attracts a group of sketchy paradigms: the master/slave duet, which derives reason from force. "Should/ because, " you should because I say so, that's how it is. The relationship of individuals to justice: "each/just, " to each be just. Or the reverse, the dismissal of particulars & individuals: each is just one. The second stanza can be seen as juxtaposing outsiders, the poor, aliens, boat people, "those/people, " with the xenophobic technocrat in control of social operation, "Mr. / [H]ow. " Of course the four words can also be seen as a little stack of common words. The fourth stanza is hard, tho not impossible, to see as anything else.

So, large themes of history, geopolitics, & authority are, at times, fully present here, shading down to complete absence, according to the reader's care & effort. Robinson doesn't insist. In fact, since this is the found poem I mentioned earlier, he didn't have anything to do with any of the words, aside from having divided them up into fours. They're merely a list, in descending order of frequencies of word use, from some corporate or government source.

This detachment, allowing the found materials to declare themselves via the slightest twist of technique, is counter-balanced by pieces which involve inventiveness, artificiality, & contingency. "Trial de Novo" consists of sentences which are antithetical to their counterparts in the preceding piece, "Verdigris. " (Tho I'm not sure how "Corn dogs of ancient Briton" yields "La Moore says Johnny Alexander popped her in the snoot. ")

"Industry One Two Three" extends this test of invention, by having section 3 mirror section 2, which mirrors 1.

You consider the ground and nod. Two of you nod back.  
They turn and drop into the atmosphere. I don't follow  
you. Anger flashes when we start to think, the conditions



are fucked, but whole skies course directional, caught in a fine net of spray. Bouncing sounds fill the source. Calligraphy shades an honest attempt to get on, maizey fuchsia piles billiard mass to date.

(p. 131)

becomes

I ignore the figure and shake. One of me shakes forth. She turns and rises into the cuisine. You lead me. Ardor deepens if you stop to feel, the fucking rezooms, and half lands prance polyvalent, released by a rough disc of wine. Rolling sights empty into the mouth. Illustration illuminates the furtive coincidental arrival, neat coreopsis erases pool anti-mass from place.

(pp. 136-7)

becomes

You notice the field and freeze. None of you rattles back. He stays but falls from the decor. I read you. Sloth thins so I start to think, the killing lets up, because whole oceans lie unilateral, bound by a smooth cubic mass. Static sounds fill up my ears. Abstraction blocks an overt planned exit, messy calendula sketches divestiture pro-speed-of-light time.

(pp. 139-40)

Many linguistic dimensions are being manipulated here. To mention a few: the play on number that retroactively finds the plural where habit posits the singular, "You consider . . . . Two of you nod back," is nicely mirrored in "I ignore . . . . One of me shakes forth," with the added twist that "one" now becomes the surprising sign of multiplicity. The third incarnation is "You notice . . . . None of you rattles," where beyond the Whitmanesque expansion of the first person we find the structuralist emptying out of the self. Note that the opposite of an opposite is not the same: You consider/I ignore/You notice. Language is not simply binary. Single words contain many pivots. "Atmosphere" sounds physical/meteorological in "They turn and drop into the atmosphere," but it is then.



construed as part of the restaurant rating system, leading to "She turns and rises into the cuisine." This degree of play occurs at every word for pages.

But Robinson also sees this perfected richness of invention as inconsequential: "The market for making every word count was a buyer's." (p. 57) Stated aspiration toward having the writing count tends to melt into irony & alienating detail. "Red Snow" begins:

In its influence on modern man's world I wish this book, as the child of my brain, to be the most beautiful Great Mythical Mountain under No Such Bluff, with 365 aspirations to market values, religious impostures, and universal boredom. Instead I find only plastic shoes and garments from an obviously long journey.

(p. 19)

The piece ends:

New revolutionary perspectives dismantle the machinery of oppression. Workers, see these words.

Eyes, open the world.

(p. 23)

But the straightforward happily instrumental nature of these words is, in a later piece, transformed and ironized, thus retroactively casting this earlier statement back into the role of "language material."

Everything staccato of optimism. When workers seize the means of production. Men and women rugged not seduced. New revolutionary perspectives dismantle the machinery of oppression. Workers see these words. Eyes open the world. My word—ground in a box! The wages of death is work. I demolished 530 Bush.

("Trial de Novo," p. 80)



Not that the irony and alienation here isn't truer to life. But the pun on "my word"—transforming the assertion of unanimity between artist and work instead into the mildest expletive, the harmlessly aggressive non-event with which the paragraph ends—it is at places like these that the unflagging humor, wit, & flexibility of the language(s) of Windows can seem like the consolations of inconsequence.

The generative, uneasy mismatch between powerful techniques and indifferent externals shows up quite strikingly in "A Sentimental Journey." (The title gives homage to Shklovsky's homage to Sterne.) Here, unlike Shklovsky's revolutionary situation, we are in decidedly pre- or a-revolutionary San Francisco:

I want to rip history to shreds.

Think of a boot. Does it fit?

Thickness. I'll sit down.

To this: kids and dogs and a woman leaning in different windows. It's natural here. Humanly possible. Girls and boy are dressed. (black and blue and tan and magenta) are turning, over the shoulder, to check each other out.

Guys shake (three positions) and concern themselves with cars. Guy goes up stairs carrying big L-shaped piece of plywood. Four cars are double-parked in a row. All actually en route & now slowly passing the first, a gold Cadillac circa 1960 w/ sharp fins, stopping to talk to the boy in the black windbreaker. Young white professional woman with leather briefcase and bag walks by. Guys fan out, girls crossing the street. Beep. Skinny ex-hippie couple nearly staggers along. Umbrellas in evidence, sky grey, but air dry. I'm cheerful, willing to entertain. There's the buzzer.

Flexible to a fault. Inconsistency kills self-justificatory disappointment in apologetic defense of optimism, nastily pointed.



Objectless abject.

Rode high for a week and on the seventh day I crashed.

Some of the more repulsive developments in avant-garde music are waiting for you in bed. Women check a form of address leering from a window.

(pp. 50-1)

The observation (of a society of observers) and the decay of the observer's confidence are interesting here, but what stands out in highest relief is the first quoted paragraph. An impossible, futile desire stands behind the playful, humanly possible formulations and reformulations of looking out the window, writing, or being on the street. Robinson presents coordinates and disjunctions of these states openly and quietly, without positing or straining toward a solution.

In places the observer admits defeat (a pyrrhic defeat): "Wind in the trees, I'll never get it all down. I remember coffee, sun on the leaves." (p. 65) At times the writer claims a modest victory: "He picked up the notebook to see what was happening." (p. 57) More often, it's neither. Writing can rearrange the scene: "Hear four cars double-parked in an ordinary L-shaped piece of news.... Guys shake (three positions) each other out." (p. 53) Or sometimes the scene triggers enough energy in the writing to create Robinson's particular brand of klangfarbenmelodie (where each word has a different timbre, the syntax constantly jumping over gaps):

Kids crouch, lean, drink, smoke. Guy rubs elbow. Sky. Vapor trail. This ink is thick.... Words to the girls crossing the street. Hands curl, come here, but they won't. Beard offers cigarette, hat has his own. Smoke. Three-wheeler motor cop. Bare-chested longhair in bluejean bells also has a can in a bag.

(p. 55)



The piece ends with a complete rejection of authoritative synthesis or resolution: "I believe in breathing when a potato is being paid for." The quirkiest of credos, tho quite incontrovertible if taken literally.

For a book this deeply a-unitary, it's appropriate that one of the most energetic and successful pieces (tho I hope I've made it clear that the other ten are also energetic and successful) is "Speaking Peoples." This poem, with its careful fractioning of sequence and teasing of cohesiveness, will give Ron Silliman's parsimony principle a good workout. I'll quote a chunk from near the end & give Robinson a last word here:

a controlled intersection. These scratches on my  
still bare trees bear scrutiny, year after  
housing the sense organs. Soft air when  
grey rails and rust, the hospital on the opposite  
balloon released above it. Some wind  
then a bug up close. These sails remind me to  
give you the slip. Bird moves with  
weight, feet, fields, weeds, deals, great  
height above and below. The universe is  
added on. Each integer stands in an open

(p. 115)

—Bob Perelman

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## AN OPEN LETTER TO DONALD DAVIE

RE: HIS "NOTES ON GEORGE OPPEN'S SEASCAPE: NEEDLE'S EYE"

(Concerning this letter, Taggart writes: "It has something of a curious history. Originally, it was commissioned by Michael Cuddihy, the ed. of Ironwood. Once the piece was done, however, Cuddihy thought it was too strong. Also, apparently George read it and feared it would get him further embroiled with Davie, a development he had no desire for. Accordingly, Cuddihy returned it with what I took to be a hint that I shouldn't seek elsewhere to publish it, i. e., to do so would be disturbing for George. Now that he's gone—& I'm thinking of writing an essay of a different sort for Ironwood—it strikes me that it doesn't offend his memory and that it still contains some decent points, though obviously I wouldn't write it the same way now.... It must have been written in late 1974 or early 1975. The specific occasion was to respond to Donal Davie's notes that were published in Grosseteste Review (vol. 6: nos. 1-4, 1973).")

Your notes so well represent, however unconsciously, standard TLS savaging that, had not Michael Cuddihy specifically asked me, I would not have considered making this response. After all, such writing is very British, something of an export item for the entertainment of those who would prefer that the colonial relation had not reversed itself so suddenly nor so irrevocably. Such writing is not to be taken seriously. By your own admission, it is further not to be taken seriously because it has really very little to do with George Oppen's work. Item: "this is not in the first place an argument with Oppen or with Oppen's poems. It is a quarrel with those of his admirers—I have met some among 'the courageous and precarious children'—who would explain their admiration by appeal to the untenable positions that Williams' obtuseness trapped him into...." Beyond the editor's commission and



your own admission—which you fail to follow—I respond because your notes contain errors of analysis and statements of doubtful validity based on those errors.

I don't contest your argument that Oppen is "not at all a representative American poet." For, except as can be demonstrated how "representativeness" or its lack affects a poet's choices in composition, it is of secondary interest, merely more grist for the mills of the commentators. You make no such demonstration. You do read "The Taste" as an instance of Oppen's choosing to be closed to the past. Despite the equivocation of your academic "seems," the reading is both capricious and simple-minded. Why not say the poem "seems" to indicate Oppen's dislike for antique ships? That would be at least as accurate, if equally foolish, as your statement. What, then, is Oppen's objection to the old ships? It is that they are preserved for "their queer silence of obedient seas." He flees the ships, which are nowhere equated with "the past," because they represent a misunderstanding of the sea and of its relation to us. The sea is a central metaphor throughout Oppen's poetry for the larger than human life force or process which is in necessary opposition to the human ego-I claiming place, literally property, as proof of its power of (over) life. There are early indications of this metaphor in Discrete Series, Oppen's first book: "the sea is not / water" and "The sea is a constant weight / In its bed" (from "Party on Shipboard"). It becomes more explicit with the later books: "And the deep ribs of a capsized ship / Had in that mid-passage / No kinship with any sea." ("Squall," The Materials); "Carpenter, / Carpenter and other things, the monstrous welded seams / Plunge and drip in the seas, carpenter, / Carpenter, how wild the planet is" ("Carpenter's Boat," This In Which); "the power of the mind... / Is not enough, it is nothing / And does nothing / Against the natural world, / Behemoth, white whale, beast...." (#26, "Of Being Numerous," from the book of the same title).

The sea as agent of the natural world pitted against the human ego-I's own assumed possession of that world cannot be obedient.



Oppen flees the ships because they represent an illusion: that the sea, the natural world, can be held by "cozy iron work." And the product of that illusion can only be violent death, as the ships with their "Swedish seamen dead" are themselves vessels of death, from conflict between the massive beast and the singular claiming to be numerous.

(There is, I realize, complication: the sea in Oppen's poetry is the terrible beast and the desirable "life." Therefore, the carpenter, the poet as workman, must initiate himself in the sea, must somehow become, at great risk, part of its process. Hence the title Seascape: Needle's Eye, which makes an equation of tension between sea-natural world-life and the needle small image-making eye, its "little hole," of the comparatively needle small poet. The equation is not simply a juxtaposed opposition, but is also a necessary relation. What is to be hoped for, as the very first of the Seascape poems, "From a Phrase of Simone Weil's and Some Words of Hegel's," makes clear, is that we can indeed become part of "this ether this other this element all," that we can live as a skilled sailor lives on the sea in a sort of reflexive, necessary harmony. If this cannot be done, "poor people hide/ Yourselves together.")

Next I come to "It is possible to think that poetry should be responsible for giving to Californian youth that ballast which we feel that it so perilously lacks...." Which is hilarious. It is also possible to think poetry should be responsible for unresolved class conflict and the decline of the pound sterling; it is possible and it is just as sententiously wrong-headed. But this, I find, is only a further preparation for your closed to the past argument. For now it turns out that sanity for Oppen, in contrast with your implicit view that it must involve a sense of the past, means holding on to "the picturesque/ common lot' the unwarranted light/ where everyone has been." An adroit bit of quotation lifting, but it won't go.



There's no indication in "Anniversary Poem" that sanity or anything else depends on accepting 'the picturesque common lot'. The point is that you are unavoidably in it—the occasion of an anniversary for instance—whether you like it or not. The question proposed by the poem is how to live with what time yet remains. Oppen's "answer" is complex and humane: "To find now depth, not time, since we cannot, but depth." Your misreading of the poem, in pursuit of any textual thread for your self-serving argument, is nearly criminal. More subtle, but equally inaccurate is your reading of \$7 from "Some San Francisco Poems." This poem, you would have me believe, shows Oppen's conviction that "the past of Art" is of no use for the present. The poem itself, however, is more involved.

A 'marvelous' object  
Is not the marvel of things

twisting the new  
Mouth forcing the new  
Tongue But it rang

A marvelous as art object is distinguished here from the marvel of ordinary things which act upon us so as to produce from us, in response, art objects. If "nature" is substituted for "things," the notion may be more familiar to you. It is the foundation of all Western aesthetics. Now while the distinction between the different sorts of things holds—and the valuation of things in nature over things in art if only by antecedence—the art object, Mr. Steinway's piano-poem, still has value; it, like Stevens' jar in Tennessee, does have a place in the "natural" world: "But it rang." Your reading, however, would distort this complex realization—Oppen's cadence suggests quiet surprise—for the sake of a progressively weak argument.

Nevertheless, you go on to make the clinching outrageous summation: "the past is irrelevant, a dangerous distraction." Faced with this, I was tempted to follow your own approach—"shabbiness is appropriate as the response to a shabby argument"—but I will move on.



This writing denies itself certain traditional braveries (rhyme, assonance, determinable auditory rhythm) precisely because they would testify in the poet to a bravery (in the other sense) about his vocation and the art he practices, a bravery that we cannot afford once we have acknowledged that our condition, obscured from us by Western and Eastern cultures alike, is above all 'precarious.'

I was preparing to detail the existence of these "braveries" in Oppen's poems when, reading on, I find you don't really mean it: "it has all the braveries; even the melody that it seems to lack may have been merely lost in the passage from a Jewish-American mouth to a British ear." All is forgiven. Still, having higglety-pigglety constructed a shabby argument, you would make another retreat-covering defense.

If we truly want or need to cut loose from our inherited past, then we should discard not just poetic figurations of language but any figurations whatever, including those which make it possible to communicate at all, except by grunts and yelps.

My reaction is predictably what you would expect. Conceptual art has been around long enough to offer the awareness that, for art activity to exist beyond parody and slavish imitation, there must be an object. I do not wish to give up the opportunity for that object's figuration. Thus, the line goes, I (and George Oppen) and all those other aging precarious children must confess that there is something of value in the past we inherit. Here, once more, I'm afraid you will be disappointed. For I agree and Oppen's poems signify that he also agrees with such valuation of the past for the present writer's use. Honest! We've been keeping "Tradition and the Individual Talent" right beside our Gideon Bibles all the time. So where's the issue? I can only conclude that it is in your misreading.



I would raise one last object. You write, in explanation as to how Oppen can apparently ask us to discard past braveries and yet retain them, that "all that is happening is that a new rhetoric is being preferred before an old one." That can be fairly translated to: all that is happening is that a new use of language for persuasion is being preferred before an old one. This is a possible understanding of poetry's function. It is not Oppen's, however, and it is something of a deception on your part to offer it as the understanding. What separates the two is the conception of audience. You would assume that, as the poem is to be audited by others at some time, it must naturally be written for them, that audience, which it seeks to persuade as to its technical competence and the genuineness of the poet's emotions. In comparison, the audience does not primarily interest Oppen. His concern, writing very slowly, is to make each line, the lines' culmination, clear to himself.

Clarity, clarity, surely clarity is the most beautiful  
                   thing in the world,  
 A limited, limiting clarity

I have not and never did have any motive of poetry  
 But to achieve clarity

( "Route, " Of Being Numerous )

If he writes with an eye toward persuading others, he risks writing only what they know, their clarity. If he writes "toward" their clarity, all the meditative / heuristic possibilities of poetry will be reduced to so many more or less elegant variations on their currently received ideas. It's hard to be antennae for the race when you're facing back toward the race. The logic of this understanding has been well expressed by Robert Creeley's adaptation of a remark by the painter Franz Kline: "If I write what you know, it bores you; if I write what I know, it bores me; therefore I write what I don't know." Your understanding would have poetry in a continuum, saying much the same things it has always said, only the modes of persuasion might vary from time to time. Again, this is a possible understanding. And, again, it is not George Oppen's understanding. Your inattention to this distinction is annoying. For it is one small proof of the not so much deceit as the shabbiness of your notes. They come to



terms neither with themselves nor with the complex and tragic implications of George Oppen's poetry.

I'll close with a text for you, the opening lines from Wallace Stevens' "Of Modern Poetry," a near antique in the post-modern age.

The poem of the mind in the act of finding  
What will suffice. It has not always had  
To find: the scene was set; it repeated what  
Was in the script.

Then the theatre was changed  
To something else. Its past was a souvenir.

Not sufficed, but suffice. The theatre's changed, Mr. Davie,  
it really has.

—John Taggart

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## A LETTER ON FRENCH LETTERS

[Writing] "is a real questioning of the self and the other.... The other is a very classical subject of inspiration—things are always addressed to an other." In my interview with Anne-Marie Albiach (see ACTS 4), the concern for the relationship between writer and reader, actor and spectator, determines how one, in either position, approaches the text. When I say that the substance of contemporary French literature is psychoanalytical, I want to refer to this constant attempt to define the relationship between the self and the other, the I and the you or it, the he/she



and the they, etc. Psychoanalytic in method because it forces the writer to expose or determine his or her own reactions to the discovered, external things and events of the relationship.

spectator: his back, in

the baroque

:

the

landscape  
overture

(Anne-Marie Albiach)

The landscape, cacaphony of sounds and events, is accompanied by tradition, a stance, or approach, through which one must begin to see and act.

One has the sense in reading the French that the pronouns do not represent real people as such and their actions, but rather signify possibilities of material existence and event. The danger here is that the language can become too conceptual, lacking ground in a recognition of experience. But the source of this position would seem to be in the effect it has on the writer's practice: one is forced to confront the possibilities or examples of language as opposed to relying upon perceived experience (which is already a kind of text) to become the written text. The writer begins from the void.

(To escape to the line, to number, to bulk, till  
at length he finds blank space under his hand.)

(Claude Royet-Journoud)

Maurice Blanchot writes that "poetry is a manner of imitating that which is not lived." There is very little "personal experience" in contemporary French poetry. If narrative, this poetry puts into play things, events, and characters of language and literature rather than the experiences of the author. Experience, then, becomes the writer's and reader's movement through the text; language signifies, perhaps, that which it is possible to live, that which lives on its own, or that which can never have been experienced but there where it is on the page.



And the void has its physical source in the page, the sheet of (white) paper, upon which experience first is traced, in black. The trace is history, the past; and possibility, the future; life and death. The trace is also the writer's hand, the physical movement across the page, the literal representation of the actual moment, the present. The page cannot be lived until it has been written upon, and hence, it signifies the notions of time, space, and place: what it itself has become, and where the writer stands in relation to what happens there.

On a larger scale, conceptually, the book would seem to have no place of its own, being, as it were, the flux, or gulf, between time and place. The book in literature would be the gathering point of the void, owing its paradoxical existence to the physical realities of paper and the (inadequate) written codes we have for language.

Twin mirrors of emptiness. The image of the book is what the facing pages reflect back and forth.

(Edmund Jabès)

On the lexical level the French seem to be bound to the language of traditional poetry—that which we commonly call "poetic". There is a sense in which these terms are accepted, unchallenged in a way, because of their position in language, literature, and history. The French poet seems specifically concerned with the relationships between events and things in the realm of poetry, which is by nature undefinable and unique. Therefore, the constancy of poetic language forces the writer to experience in the realm of syntax, movement, with terms that are distant from his or her personal experience, by virtue of their ease and immediacy.

My sense is that where in American poetry the approach to language is more fully grounded in perceivable events and things (as well as personal experiences of the author), in



French poetry the ground is those qualities of the French language that resist stasis and description. And whereas much American poetry is grounded in ordinary everyday speech, the French still have a clear sense of the "literary", and rely upon these literary structures to give the text its place or body in the realms of experience. The movement seems more internal. Reference falls more naturally back into the text...

—Joseph Simas

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THE LOVER by Marguerite Duras (Pantheon, 1985, \$11.95)

Marguerite Duras' novels are full of intricate, highly complex relationships between characters, which the narrative deflates. Networks that would be built up, grand artistic structures, monuments twirling slowly in space—delicate balance beautifully maintained by this product, the book. But only an odd, preternatural memory of this survives, an uncomfortable knowing what would have been. All the details, nuances, quirks move around on the flatness, eluding one another in their myopic journeying. That's what's magnificent about Duras. The emptiness which appears to be full, the flatness which appears to have such exquisite dimension.

But Duras' narrative mechanisms, the repetitions, the flat, seemingly simple sentences, the jumping around in time and voice, have become increasingly "honed," it seems, with her later work.

Her most recent book, The Lover, has gained an attention



and popularity in the U.S. which none of her other novels have (eight weeks on the NYT bestseller list).

...in her small, perfect, new novel, she has found... a felicitous and masterly balance between formalism and powerful emotional effect.... It is hard to think of a recent work in English that so perfectly accomplishes aims in a manner so austere.

(New York Times Book Review  
23 June 1985)

Duras was raised in French Indochina. In 1950, The Sea Wall was published. A book about a young girl growing up in French Indochina, the girl's mother and her brother and her lover and the whirlpool of love, hate, desire and neurosis which sucks them down. The Lover is that same book, only accurate.

I've written a good deal about the members of my family, but then they were still alive, my mother and my brothers. And I skirted around them, skirted around all these things without really tackling them.... Now I'm talking about the hidden stretches... of certain facts, feelings, events that I buried.

(p. 7)

Here's the stuff that matters, then, the real story. But the "aim," to rewrite an autobiographical episode, is so awkward and pretentious here, that there is no struggling out from under it. And the craft, the narrative, has moved too far beyond the effectiveness and subtlety of her earlier work; all of the techniques which made her earlier work so interesting now seem automatic, form by rote.

He slowly comes over to her. He's obviously nervous. He doesn't smile to begin with. To begin with he offers her a cigarette. His hand is trembling. There's the



difference of race, he's not white, he has to get the better of it, that's why he's trembling. She says she doesn't smoke, no thanks. She doesn't say anything else, doesn't say, Leave me alone. So he's less afraid. He tells her he must be dreaming. She doesn't answer. There's no point in answering, what would she say? She waits.

(p. 32)

Duras' obsessions are all in evidence, too. Voyeurism (she wants her lover to fuck the girl she herself would like to fuck—wants to see it); madness (her mother, clearly, and sort of everyone else, too); death (well, suicide); first love (always lost, always remembered); but also an obsession, here, with self. Fascination with age (youth), beauty, mystery as they are evoked/ embodied by the young Marguerite Duras. And a heavy, terribly sweet nostalgia tying it all in, producing her "definitive" past. The narrative becomes cloying, exasperating. About her first experience with her lover:

She doesn't feel anything in particular, no hate, no repugnance either, so probably it's desire. But she doesn't know it.

(p. 36)

An amazing indifference, a grand understatement, only for a little goddess could this be real. Or this:

They're dead now, my mother and my brothers. For memories too it's too late. Now I don't love them any more. I don't remember if I ever did. I've left them.... It's over, I don't remember. That's why I can write about her so easily now, so long, so fully. She's become just something you write without difficulty, cursive writing.

(p. 28)

In order for this to be at all interesting, the reader has to



care why she (Duras) is still, in fact, very much "in love" with her mother and brothers; and then this indifference laid on top, to see through. It would have to matter that much, to the reader; but it doesn't.

The content looms, a huge ugly storm, sticky and oppressive; the form marches on, little (French?) soldiers, into the thick of it, loyal forms they are; it rains its muck on them, and they keep marching and marching, but they're so engulfed by the storm that they don't see the Huge Crevice opening up in front of them. Maybe this is the inferno into which great writers drop when they set out to write bestsellers, "little gems," when their writing becomes "cursive."

Duras is a great writer, and definitely worth reading for her narrative when it's working well. The ones I think are most successful are the novellas Moderato Cantabile and The Square, and the novel The Ravishing of Lol Stein. She is also worth reading for her dialogue, which in the screenplays Destroy, She Said, and India Song, achieves amazing spatial constructs — like tinker toys, each character/event held apart from each other character/event by something rigid (though less nameable than a red or blue wooden stick).

—Jessica Grim

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## SUMMER SCHOOL THIS SIDE OF SAL PARADISE

It is important to have parties, but as well to take time to look around. It is archibald to propose political poetry that pushes



buttons before it proposes poetry, cocky to think the new is without precedent.

The romantic strain of writing language now (say Ron Silliman, Lyn Hejinian, Steve Benson)—that of it which distrusts irony and that which does not—comes out of the Beats in a way largely unacknowledged. It is like Kerouac with the subject removed. Or like Howl without the heroes or the prayer; though if you look closer, both are there. "Be careful out there" is real appeal, after it is lapsarian TV. Live poetry is everywhere implicitly acknowledged as the heroic and astonishing "love," in references from Pound to Living associates to the act being accomplished right now—as every generation since EP has proposed.

And the harsh, rambunctious survey and performance values (Bruce Andrews, Charles Bernstein) are very Burroughs, without the designations, just to carry on. Isn't that good?

Poetry that espouses too programmatic a technique is probably ill fated, and could effectively turn writers into bureaucrats of writing, a danger pointed out by Nicole Brossard at the New Poetics Colloquium in Vancouver this summer.

The facts are in, yet not observed. It may be of some importance to actually look at Dallas, or to notice Stein on World War II, or to distinguish Hennessy from scotch. But ellipsis has been the seam since before Celine. Vary Wallace Stevens.

Then paradise and other parts of the alphabet are written and read more with a feeling than with a program, after the initial learning experience.

—Stephen Rodefer

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## MEAT PUPPETS

UP ON THE SUN, MEAT PUPPETS 2, MEAT PUPPETS (SST Records: P. O. Box 1, Lawndale, Ca. 90260)

The further these guys get from their hardcore beginnings, the less they sound like Live Rust taken one token over the line, & the harder it gets to describe what they're up to. On the first record, a 14 song EP, the vocal lather is actually louder than the instrumental thrash supporting it—& almost totally indecipherable, even with a lyric sheet. But missed cues are rarely put to such good use, & some of the arrangements are inspired. "Walking Boss" (a cover) has the Play Stupid bass & drunken strolling guitar pace a pitched forward, out of control singing—& since "Walking Boss" is a chain-gang song, the overall effect is of an expressionism that knows its own limits.

By Meat Puppets 2 the trio (\*) had seemingly perfected their sound, a peculiar mix of R&B, country, & hardcore that has little in common with the current spate of country punks. (Greil Marcus's description of The Basement Tapes applies equally well to Meat Puppets 2: "a testing and discovery of memory and roots" synthesized into a "plain-talk mystery" driven by "awesome, impenetrable fatalism"—though where Dylan sounds deadpan, the Meat Puppets come off as uncorked.) Most of the so-called country punks take hardcore's stripped-down arrangements & energetic approach to playing, & apply them to Nashville song structures. The result is a formalism sounding much more nostalgic than one might hope.

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\* Cris Kirkwood: bass & vocals. Curt Kirkwood: guitar & vocals. Derrick Bostrom: drums.



The Meat Puppets' approach is quite different: they retain the weirdness of punk rock, the anything-goes attitude, & apply it to the sprawl of country music, the non-stop diddly-do that makes the stuff so aggravating to rock fans in the first place.

The playing on Meat Puppets 2 has a happy-go-lucky frenzy about it—no small advance on the levelling hysteria of the debut—and there are also moments of elegance & restraint. But content is what really distinguishes this record. For one thing, Curt Kirkwood's lyrics are ridiculous & brilliant; for another, his singing has a fond & foolish charisma that keeps the more ridiculous songs from sounding merely canny—neither the sublime self-indulgence of "Oh Me," nor the sublime sublimeness of "We're Here" wear thin. Mostly, the songs concern themselves with the dark & difficult side of life: "Lost," a take-off on "Back in the Saddle," finds us "out of the shallow and into the deep end," "tired of living Nixon's mess." "Climbing" has a lonesome loner sing

time, time, it's so sublime  
well they say it's non-existent  
but it's playing with my mind  
phone calls don't cost a dime  
in the caverns of your feelings  
where the sun will never shine

No home on the range here.

Up On The Sun is in comparison a straight-forward display of quips & quotes, with an emphasis on texture, & very few quick thrills. Some things do appeal to a listener right off—the Southern styled boogaloo of "Enchanted Pork Fist," the slow-burning chorus to the title song, the stippled guitar work—but by & large the effects are cumulative. Curt Kirkwood's vocals are the most obvious change. His singing on Meat Puppets 2 was reassuring—anguished to be sure, but serious & compassionate as well; the chin-to-chest mumble on the new record isn't as likeable. (There is one advantage,



though—now Kirkwood can write & sing about something besides his own reactions to a confusing world. I don't think the Meat Puppets could have done a song like "Too Real" on the other albums. Lines like "I don't see no greener pastures, / this must be where I belong" would have sounded too sarcastic.) Meat Puppets 2 buzzed with an alienated energy; Up On The Sun is laid back & optimistic. Last time we had a "Plateau" scrubbed clean, scaled by one & all, totally mapped, towering over emptiness & artifice. This time we have "Two Rivers" flowing along through strum & twang, unpolluted, eluding people altogether, "water leading water's aim." Next time, hopefully, the nonchalance will give way to a renewed urgency, optimistic & hopped up.

—B. Friedlander

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BURNING FARM / Shonen Knife (  cassette: Box 7154, Olympia, Wa. 98507)

"We are three Japanese girls. We want to have a good time and also everyone to have a good one with our music."

—"A message from Shonen Knife"

The shapes and sounds produced by Osaka, Japan's Shonen Knife strike disarmingly close to the kind of errant noisemaker sensibility refined and deconstructed by the post-punk band Liliput. Liliput, three women from Zurich, began as Kleenex in late 1978 and made a noise of winsome discordance. Their best songs—"Eiseger Wind" or "Split"—assault vertically;



they build like a raucous cheer, letters and phrases repeated and compressed, a nursery rhyme taking inventory. These cheers spewed forth from the language and experience of a very personal confinement in a "post" (punk, adolescent, feminist, dada) vocabulary. Liliput inherited punk's righteous penchant for messing up a song but shunned the stylized, almost plodding way it did the job; they defaced punk's standard chord progressions with menacing bass lines, jerky, erratic drumming and dyspeptic vocals; Marlene Mader burps her way through "Split," catching air in time to shriek, "Hello, Kitty, Hello Kitty" in the midst of a rousing, absolutely indecipherable game of Hopscotch. Punk (and here I'd even include an enormously clever band like X-Ray Spex who got hung up in the post-adolescent bell jar) named the contradiction but lacked a certain absurd non-sense, a negation that Liliput located in the theatrical sound menagerie of Ball and Schwitters. It's Zurich 1916 on the cover of "Eiseger Wind" with Liliput festooned in oversized, geometric cutout paper costume. I think it's a song about restlessness and tyrannical boredom; all of Liliput's work somehow touches on everyday life ("she lost control" or "she had no way to pay the train / she had no money to pay the train") and its possible transformation and the aimless whistling, the endless whines and guttural bleats suggest the triumph of cat over mouse over cat. You're never quite sure if they're going to eat or be eaten by all that legacy.

A straight cut bold Mondrian print mini-jumper is the trademark dress of Michie, Atsuko, and Naoko, the three girls in Shonen ("boy") Knife. The music and presence on their 11 song tape Burning Farm (the name, they explain, "means a way of farming that burns fields... that way of farming is in Africa. We feel the world is something ethnic.") is as clean and carefully constructed a piece of post-punk pop-punk as Liliput's was defiantly disruptive.

Like Liliput, Shonen Knife make noises; the chorus of "Miracles" is a stream of Purina Cat Chow meows, "Parrot Polynesia" features off-key whistling; triangles, cowbells and siren whistles make their way into the other songs as do snatches from rock and roll standards, like the NA NA NA NANA NA NA NANANANA-



-NANANANA NANANANA "Land of 1000 Dances" intro to "Burning Farm" (which ends appropriately with a frenzied chant of BURNINGBURNINGBURNINGBURNINGBURNING blurred to BUR three minutes later). Shonen Knife is all garage, and the American influences show—the Duane Eddy surf riffs, the 60's fuzz reverb and Bo Diddley spacing on "Elephant Pao-Pao"—as do the Buzzcocks circa "Spiral Scratch" and the Ramones, of course. There are few leads and many cold endings, some very basic chord changes and a device that works as an echo chamber throwing the sing-song voice back against the sing-song word. Shonen Knife recreates the textures of their favorite things but the embellishments, like the vocal pyrotechnics, aren't just in the service of the song. They are the song. "One Day of the Factory" is sung, as is most of the material, in halting Japanese, yet its eerie, whispering bass line and steady clanging workbell cymbals combine with the nonchalant sound in Naoko's voice to make it known. Whereas Liliput wailed in English and was rarely comprehensible, Shonen Knife sings phonetically in Japanese and can usually be understood—ice cream here, animals, bicycles. Listening to one with the other makes good sense and reveals some good reasons why both are post-punk girl groups and why this is important. It makes Shonen Knife's "Twist Birbie" (Barbie), sung in English and set to a backbeat ripped from the Ramones' "Beat on the Brat" a catty riddle in female idol reflection and revulsion:

Blue eyes / Long hair  
Tight clothing / Long legs  
She can dance well / She's well loved by boys  
ooo ooo wah

I want to be  
Twist Birbie

I want to be Twist Birbie  
I want to be Twist Birbie

Oh sexy girl  
Oh sexy girl  
Oh sexy girl



Naddy oddy wah  
 Naddy oddy wah  
 Naddy oddy WAH!

They smile beatifically. Hello Kitty.

—Madeleine Leskin

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## CONCERNING LAKSHMI SHANKAR'S SINGING & SOME BOOKS OF VERSE

At the metaphysical bookstore they tell me there's a run on Kabir. 1985-86 is America's "Festival of India" after all, and despite the glut of films and exhibits hardly anyone knows who India's poets are. Except for Kabir.

400 years after his death Kabir is still one of India's strong poetic presences. But outside a few religious groups no one gets his poetry from books. Kabir composed songs, and these have ranged down the centuries passing mouth to ear, not page to eye. Music is their necessary condition, which makes this flurry of interest in Kabir books problematic.

In August, Lakshmi Shankar sang at St. John's Church in Berkeley. The second half of the evening she sang bhajans—two by Kabir, two by Mirabai, one each by Surdas and the modern Bengali poet Rabindrinath Tagore. India's vocal music is tougher than her instrumental music on an ear unaccustomed to it. Rapid oscillating "ornamentations" that define certain notes and note-progressions are easier to follow on a plucked



instrument like the sarod or sitar. In the voice they move more subtly, their internal logic less readily apparent. But the bhajan is a popular style, not so exacting as the classical rāga, and therefore more accessible for inexperienced listeners.

Bhajan means something close to "devotional," but the term is misleading. In India it has inhabited a position parallel to blues and gospel in this country, being a music of resistance and disenchantment. Devotion, yes, but explosively so, condemning with its extravagant visions the frauds and violence of "good civic sense." As Kabir and Mirabai sang it, the bhajan was pure protest.

Political power in their day lay in the hands of foreign rulers, Moslems who'd pushed in from Turkey, setting up courts and mosques modelled on Persian prototypes. Hinduism, the continent's prevalent intellectual and religious force, had in many areas become a baffling affair of social ritual—sexist, racist, caste-conscious—presided over by brahmin priests. Against this two-fold hegemony singers took to the streets, spurning the temples and mosques, and challenging people to observe that "everything that lives is Holy," not just the phallic lump of stone jutting up from a temple floor or the arabesque'd vacant space of the mosque. Rejecting conqueror's Persian and pandit's Sanskrit, they sang in vernacular tongues.

"Sanskrit is a deep well but the common language is a quick-flowing brook."

Kabir is the most vigorous of these iconoclastic, sceptical street singers. His lyrics have a pith and spiritual fury only Blake matches in English, pointing directly at his listeners, badgering and insulting them, calling religious beliefs and caste practices to blunt account. Second only to Kabir in reputation is Mirabai. This clear brave-eyed woman abandoned husband, family, and caste to pursue a phosphorescent love



affair with her god—a god unmoved by religious sanctimony. These two singers and a host of others scorned the day's centers of learning, frequenting highway and market place, making verse in words anyone could listen to. Poetry became a staple of the village square, available like rice, butter or mangos.

The sants, as they were called, retained from India's classical past the conviction that the best poetry refers without mediation to the erotic life. Love, not anger or fear, sparks the inward organism and constitutes its language. The genius of their task was to sweep the day's issues up into an erotic context, confabulating religion and politics with sex.

But you have to hear the music to understand this. Whatever the lyrics say, Lakshmi Shankar's singing evokes the bittersweet longing of love, as it gains momentum during her elaboration of musical argument. No other instrument competes with the voice—there is only the quiet stinging sadness of the drone, and a fluttering dance of hands on two small drums. The voice circles gradually through the lyrics, lingering over tones and syllables with the accumulating tension of slow lovemaking. It is never raw, but always achingly, challengingly naked.

I don't mean to underestimate Kabir's or Mira's lyrics. With elegance and humor they puncture both blind piety and social hypocrisy. But the acrobatics of argument are not the thing. Who after all has ever argued more convincingly and unendingly than the brahmin priest of medieval India, (unless it is today's literary critic)? The bhajan as song must exceed what the words on their own can express.

This is not anti-intellectualism. It is a stance that accounts for the way argumentative power helps cement the hegemony of oppressive orders. To unlock the "mind-forg'd manacles"



of orthodoxy by bringing healthy scepticism and unsurpressed energy to the whole body was the bhajan's work. It adopted music for its swift incontrovertible vehicle. As written poetry it might have exerted a mildly subversive influence on a few intellectuals. As song, it got into everybody's throat, and sounds even today its resistance to sexual and spiritual mediocrity.

This year's "Festival of India" appears inseparable from old colonialist and orientalist attitudes. In the face of it our collective approach to India's poetry and song is unlikely to break past the banal versifying of a few academics, and the more pernicious influence of the one or two popularizers. But it is worth remembering that India's medieval poets were not clever children preoccupied with Jungian archetypes. They were rather considerable rebels.

If you want to be infected by Kabir, or swept up by Mira's take on sex, religion and politics, look for a concert to attend. Find a record. Some good recordings are available. Then go to a book and learn what the words say. Reduced to print, reined to a left-hand margin, deprived of the improvisational open-endedness of their music, Blind Lemon Jefferson or Betty Carter won't seem like much either.

The comparison is apt.

Introducing her first piece of the night, Lakshmi Shankar leaned forward with an elfin grin. "The scale of this rāga is what you would call blue."

—Andrew Schelling

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## I HEAR THE SOUND OF DRUMMING

July/August in Europe was said to be "an especially mild winter": it rained daily. Brixton had a few bright spells. Momentarily transported to Halfwaytree, Jamaica, via The Atlantic on Coldharbour Lane; Ind Coope beer, none of your pissy Watney or Courage stuff. Thundering dub on the sound system. A lot of "what's this then?" when a Coltrane tape came on. "Sensemilla?" grinned in my face. Curry pastry at Foster's Bakery next door, remembering to call the woman behind the counter love. "Ta, love" "Bloomin yank, 'e'd got a nerve." Slightly pissed on three swift jars of bitter. Takes the edge off, like. High noon. In the market bought tickets to Rochereau & l'Afrisa International, asked the pretty Jamaican girl if she was going. She laughed. "What's hot then?" I asked her. She bowed out of sight in her narrow record booth, fished up the favourites: Belley, Bopol, Nyboma, Somo-Somo. Got em all. Then the record I'd been looking for since I first heard it in Africa, "Maria Tebbo" by Sam Mangwana. A lucky find, eight quid. Flew home to play it.

Music is a potent force in Africa. The constant voice of the struggle during the Zimbabwean revolution was that of Thomas Mapfumo. When his music was banned it circulated clandestinely. He was jailed. Freed, he had to write songs for the oppressors who played them from helicopters to bring people out of the bush. His first album The Chimurenga Singles 1976-1980 features his early Acid Band (as in "bitterness," not "tripping") and his commemoration of the struggle, the confusion, the shame of the opposition, the sad return to rural life. And the beautifully obtuse, "Oversized long pointed shoe."

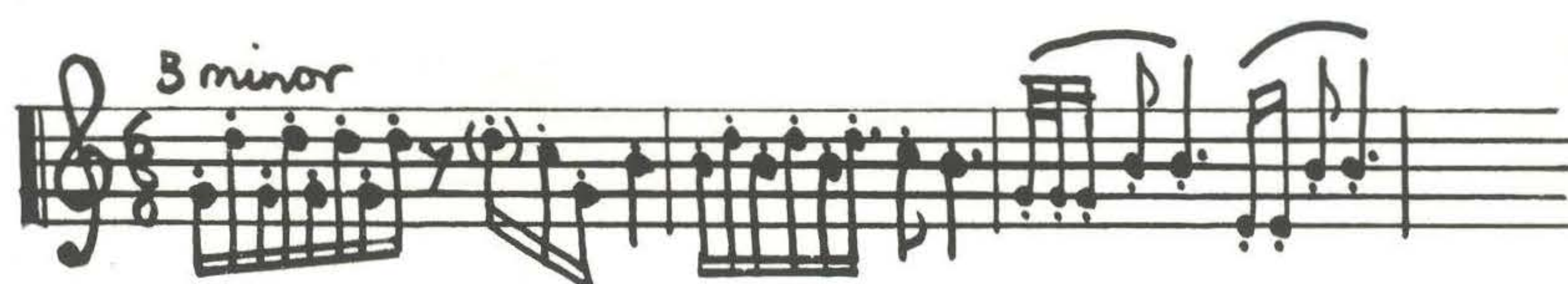
Puts you in mind of the orthopedic platform ones once sported by P-Funk which now elevate Prince Nico Mbarga to popularity in Nigeria. The lanky Mapfumo doesn't need the sartorial excess though he poses uncomfortably outside a backdrop shamba



in new "rockstar" duds on the cover of Ndangariro, his less satisfactory second album. The raw tone of the revolutionary singles has been smoothed over by his new band The Blacks Unlimited, and the overall wash of a flanger dilutes the acid guitar sound. It's still very upbeat and ends with "Emma," one of his strongest tracks.

Mapfumo's third album Mabasa ("Work") better reconciles the smoother delivery to the "edge" of his vocals. (When he intones "yeah, yeah, yeah," it's not the Beatles' legacy but a trace of Shona folk styling from Zimbabwe.) The lyrics are only printed in translation. One sings along unwittingly. The Zimbabwean sounds a lot more mellifluous than it looks to alien eyes. "Marie!! Marie, oh!" is not a love song, but a ballad about money.

The album opens with a rallying call played staccato on the guitar. The flow of notes is so rapid it must be produced by hammering on and pulling off parts of a chord, so there are unvoiced and accidental grace notes. There's a slight hesitation and the phrase repeats indicating the minor key which adds a questioning tone. At the end of the measure the drum kicks in and we're off. I'll rehearse it for you:



The drummer holds down a light pattern on the hi-hat, the bass booms in. The music, like that of South Africa, is bottom-heavy: that gut-bucket thwacking is called 'mbaqanga' or doughy cake. The arrangement is sparse. Brass enters on the next track and the album builds in textures. But it's to the brief opening track I return compulsively. Each note is so distinct. The rhythm guitar arpeggiates while the lead, drums and horns embellish. It's this interplay and blending of discrete parts which, like they



say, slays me. The song is titled "Ndanzwa Ngoma Kurira" which means "I hear the sound of drumming," yet there is no musical allusion to the kind of (tribal) drumming referred to:

I've heard the sound of drumming  
Guys you have let me down  
I have heard the sound of drumming  
Guys, I would like to go  
I've heard the sound of drumming  
The girls here are proud  
I've heard the sound of drumming  
Guys you've killed me

—Alastair Johnston

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D...r Mr Parkinson,

Although reading and writing, two different activities, are inseparable beyond some point, I've been able to make out far less at reading, it's turned out than writing, while in trying to read I've sat at Rbt Duncan's feet and others', yours dor one('s) (a little while, so many feet there are, wow!) And strain-forwards isn't a complete benefit to the memory. U've fot some rise out of Duncan's writings for sure, but I can't be specific at all. I get it it's mellifluous, which might be sensed greatly or otherwise as a contrast with some or a lot of the content, - I mean his poetry - or pretty lyrical through and through, angeloc; but that sure seems an obvious and surface impression,

Well, poetry's one thing that it's own reward, as quite a few people must know, and a prize I imagine is consolation for a bum world, one way or

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another, somehow, a humpty-dumpty world. (im - whatever center's bear flying apart for a good long time by row, and a prize for hathaveyou doesn't add much t all to mptydumpty's character, so there's little reasor to forget or overlook what we've got - and a poetry as maybe, too, some music prize e.g.. draws attention to more than basetall. ??? ) And/or it's a salute. a prize is, and I'm glad Duncan is getting this ore. Salud

Regards

L... Eigner

(The big world sure gives me pause, that's all, or exist-ence is confusing er ugn.)

Thomas Parkinson  
National Poetry  
Award

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