

*tripwire*  
a journal of poetics

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Writing as Activism:  
The Aesthetics of Political Engagement

edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck

issue 2  
fall 1998

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The theme for issue 3 is **Gender** (see editors' notes for details). Submissions for issue 3 should be received by March 1, 1999.

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## Editors' Notes

Confronted with the contemporary economic, political, and cultural climate, citizens respond with short and long term survival tactics and strategies—some intuitive, some spontaneous, some organized—that retain both a political and an aesthetic (creative) dimension. Historically, such maneuvers have included the collective organizing of class alignments, the strength of unified (political, cultural, and economic) resistance, and the vigorous traditions of protest, revolution, and social change. In a vast global culture industry constantly threatening to appropriate, censor or ignore new aesthetic and cultural production, how does the artist-citizen's responsibility manifest itself? What constitutes a politicized aesthetics for our times?

The work presented on the following pages tends towards an investigation of the methods by which (and the conditions within which) innovative creative work occurs. For these writers, "political engagement" seems not so much a question of *if* but of *how*. At times questioning, at times extending the various traditions of radical and experimental literature, these writers take on the crucial challenges of (re)constituting a progressive and innovative poetics that attempts to narrow the diffusive gap between theory and practice. We hope that the work in this issue may contribute to the continued (re)formation of a revitalized practice of citizenship.

### *tripwire 3: Gender*

How does gender enter into, shape and reconfigure language and vice versa. Gender & economy, authority, autonomy, identity & experiment. Pronouns, power & representation. Feminist theory (evolution & application). Gender & tradition, inheritance, audience & community. Gender & genre. Formal exploration, meaning & value. Gender & current practice.

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*Tripwire Statement*

"Writing as activism." What can be said? Perhaps a few points addressing production primarily, and by default, identity, as the two in practice end up closely intertwined.

For young artists, the act of writing or the making of art is at first not as "political" as it might later become, intended or not (that is to say, regardless of content). For myself, in my twenties I took out \$10,000 in school loans (all paid off now) essentially to educate myself, to gain knowledge I would otherwise never have had access to, to earn two degrees in writing and english. But what I was really doing was buying time to read, write and think, to spend my life doing something other than just surviving economically. And to be fair, given the state of the rest of the world, I (we—in "the first world") should be somewhat grateful that such a pursuit is even an option.

But as the years go on this pursuit takes on a more urgent color. Should one decide to have children, for instance, or if one doesn't come from money, or if one's extended family has no resources (or doesn't exist), the stakes become higher with each passing year. In this sense, writing is activism, a battle to define ourselves, how we will spend our time on this earth. There's no way around it: time is (has become) money and writing takes time. It will require sacrifices in all other areas of one's life *because and primarily because* life is defined to us as the *pursuit of the accumulation of capital*. How much simpler can this be stated? What obfuscating "political" discourse should I turn to in order to make this point any more salient?

Within our lifetimes, the San Francisco Giants may (will?) become the Pacific Bell Giants, the Padres the QualComm Padres. Are all shoes Nikes? Schubert sells Mazda, Vivaldi for hairspray. Pianos tinkle for the elderly (vaseline on the camera lens) . . . *family values to sell insurance*. What areas of our lives are not subject to this profane encroachment?

I'm referring here not just to the appropriation of art by capital, but to the subjugation and silencing of all cultural production by same. Yet, another critique of capitalism isn't going to save us—(although such critiques should continue, particularly *outside of* as well as within a writing discourse). Something like a critique of human nature might come closer. . . but, from my perspective, many artists and non-artists alike are to some extent at war for the very definition of their being within this system. What does this commitment cost, and *why should* this commitment cost.

## *Disassemble*

materials known to the state  
to cause a suspension of disbelief

tepid requiem  
safety in anonymity

factory / forest / office, alert

for breakfast, a trucker's lunch  
is the highlight (mention collapse and get half off)

trellis of summer and nimrod cups, the curfew's  
been lifted to whenever you can make it

noir or muffle the noir

inexpensively disconcerted easy living, the distribution  
of some kind of beetle or small chocolate

drop the fingerprint records, credit reports  
distinguishing marks or scars on the body

harmonious purchasing, strong language, nudity, violence  
rise to the top, compete

next, a remarkable family visits  
cultural peasantry

now as else

lottery mocking the state's sobriety, odorless and loud

## *Terms of Suppression*

Decor of restraint. Territorial threat of  
the margin pressing a cistern, cavity, maw.

The deliberate exclusion of a desire  
from consciousness, surface to depth. A catered

agreement offered to brace and embroider  
the core against hell and bacteria.  
Scrawl like the others did, get in, out of  
here. Dream men falling into a well

who become our suppliers of lint. Dejected  
beside a formal machine for wrecked  
invisibility, Quixoticism addressing an

underground treasure a rogue become harmless  
submits to. Intently watching the walls  
to it crack. Internalization of tesserae roots.  
I saw the circles under your eyes. Why

aren't there any more shrubs out here yet?  
Random power source. Random lines.  
Claws and honey tones living among  
the angelic choir of the carnivores.

A plea for combustion, the reeds are aglow.  
Their border covenant, thin and in shreds.  
Formal dare of the overused moon  
where beauty seems forced when the name

for it flickers, eyes bright with liquor before  
they go dull, twelve beats of expression in change  
at the moment of composition. Waning loyal  
to give this character (pain?) Idiot carousel

spins in the lights, your money is just like mine  
prompting a target's blatant caricature  
... over-run hamlet. ... neon food chains  
some light bled to rejuvenate chronicles  
some light bronzed as a voice in the blaze.

With the thought that with it we would be  
armed. But how it clamps to put it on. Worn

as protection and broken by sense  
on the next episode of fetters and keys.

Increasing the sheer emotion spent  
embellishment a lustrous yoke  
the debt incurred to get to this point  
where no one would notice the debt incurred.

Where often I am not permitted  
since the farms have been mechanized  
at a lower volume of transformation.

"Consistent but not irresponsible desertions."

Dormant leaf. Carafe for Monsieur.

The housing calls for intransigence  
as drugs have ravaged the drugs

leaving a flare on a field of incognizant thriving  
asked to carry on. Where the summoned  
was held as a frame, turned off. Where the critical  
element left the party with nothing  
to eat, and might be withheld.

Disembodied the young shoots look heavenward  
which is a language of promise and vapor.

A trust in rapture and transport.  
What is the desperation under that.

Freelance design and production. It broke.  
Laotians are stealing the weeds.  
With a great mis-trust of intellect, take  
heart where it's not but its red flag is.

How many inches from trailer park pride.

How many scotches in region nine

where bells go in the sauce to give the  
appetite its anonymous service  
anonymous terms. To feed it.

## BENJAMIN FRIEDLANDER

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### *Notes on Political Poetry*

for Marcus Coelen

*Premise:* Content has no intrinsic role in the definition of poetry, though poetry as such cannot exist without it. Through this initial compromise of pure aestheticism, poetry makes its unavoidable entry into the sphere of the social.

What is most poetic about a poem is only indirectly a matter of content. A poem must say something, but *what* a poem says matters less than *how*. And this is so notwithstanding the fact that our treasuries of poetry are also books of wisdom. In this sense, the scandal of "political poetry" is less its compromise of pure aestheticism, than the fact that this compromise is accepted as more than a mere convention.

\*

\* \*

*Premise:* There is no political poetry without content.

This is, I would guess, a tautology: the political poem does not exist as such independent of its extrapoetic concerns. What Charles Bernstein calls "the politics of poetic form" is in effect a reframing of the question of form in terms which privilege content. This is not an original notion. Robert Creeley's well-known dictum, "form is never more than an extension of content," overturns the priority given the aesthetic in all post-symbolist poetics (epitomized in Valéry's notion of *la poésie pure*) by acknowledging that the social determines the manner in which the aesthetic makes itself known.

Bernstein goes beyond this, perhaps to the point of undermining once and for all form's solipsistic claim to provide the very measure of the poetic. When Bernstein insists, for example, that "stylistic innovations be recognized not only as alternative aesthetic conventions but also as alternative social formations," he necessarily redefines formalism as a practice in which

"sexual, class, local-historical, biographical, prosodic, and structural dimensions of a poem" all have their say. Since, however, in formalist poetics structure is itself dimensionality, Bernstein would seem to have ceded form's poetic sovereignty for the right to share power in a bigger, more influential kingdom. No longer the locus of a "purely structural interpretive hermeneutics," form has become, in Bernstein's conception, a metaphorical mode of sociality, its meaning now dependent on extrapoetic elaborations.

In practice, perhaps, Bernstein has merely formalized the language of social content in order to rescue his notion of "stylistic innovation" from an oblivion of social irrelevance; in theory, however, by robbing "style" of its definitional specificity, its autonomy as an object of study, he has impoverished the very notion he would save. Stylistic innovation—poetic form—only has meaning now when set within a critical context.

Some might argue that form's autonomy has always been a fiction and that Bernstein is simply clarifying a muddle, but if this is so, wouldn't it be more honest, intellectually, to abandon the form-content distinction altogether, to develop an all-new terminological approach? Why does Bernstein resist this? Why do I?

\*  
\*   \*

*Premise:* Formalism construes the world as a contingency that the poem cannot but help take into account. Creeley, by contrast, construes the world as a form of necessity. Blurring these two views, Bernstein construes form as a contingent world where necessities are nonetheless called to account.

Do I agree with this blurring? Yes and no. Chalk it up to my fascination with deconstruction, with a philosophy that takes up conditions of possibility (and impossibility) as the starting point for all serious analysis: I resist on principle fuzzy definitions. My dogmatism (if I may call it such) is principally terminological—the opposite of Bernstein, whose terms are open-ended and whose "dogmatism" is instead evidenced in usage, in his actual interests as a teacher, editor and critic. Thus, while I *define* poetry purely, i.e., as a function of the poem's formal attributes only, in practice I am drawn by the

impure, by the way a poem dirties itself with non- and antipoetic attributes even in the attempt to wash its hands of these attributes altogether. In this sense, my work embraces social and political content precisely for its parasitic quality—for its apparent extraneousness, which is only an exaggeration of something typical of all poetry.

\*  
\*   \*

*Premise:* If Robert Frost was right and poetry is what doesn't survive translation, then the pure poem resists translation entirely, and translation is nothing more than an analysis of impurities.

Pyrrhic victory of a poem that would wage war on its own translatability. Success at the cost of communication: David Melnick's *Pcoet*.

Heroic failure of a language that would safeguard the poem's untranslatability. Melnick's *Men in Aida*: pure distillation of Homeric song foamy with the bawdiness of English.

\*  
\*   \*

*Premise:* Poetry's greatness derives more from poetry's failure than from its success, from its inability to root out impurities rather than any attainment of what Zukofsky called its "upper limit," music freed from all the vulgarities of speech.

In any case, because this upper limit is unattainable, poets remain responsible for their vulgarities—for the subjects they choose to glorify with a music already compromised by the fact that their instrument, language, is above all an instrument of speech.

\*  
\*   \*

Premise: Poetry is "music" compromised by "speech," "form" compromised by "content," "contingency" compromised by "necessity," "eternity" compromised by "history."

Compromise under duress edges into resistance. Resistance, understood as pure form, renders death itself beautiful. The parable of Mandelstam's Stalin ode—the one that got him killed.

Resistance under duress edges into compromise. Phillis Wheatley's famous couplet

"Remember, *Christians*, *Negros*, black as *Cain*,  
May be refin'd, and join the angelic train"

is scratched by Valéry in all the jim crow cars in heaven.

4 July 1998  
Buffalo, NY

THE PURE PRODUCTS OF AMERICA . . .

Like an infant beauty queen  
strangled in her basement, the poem  
lies inert in its [ . . .  
. . . ] surrounded  
by snow, with no sign  
of forced entry  
and no footprints  
and a phony note.

DANIELLE COLLOBERT

*from Notebooks 1956-1978*

translated by Norma Cole

1956

*June*

Mountains above Sacro Monte — light air — light curves of  
red mountains scraped white wounds — deep — a song — far  
away — high toward the horizon. The heat disperses little by  
little — fatigue — anachronistic foreground — telephone poles  
crossing in front of the entrance to the caves —

Grenada — the forge —  
el yunque — the anvil — peaceful noise — regularity of the  
blows — hammer — sound of metal — the rhythm intense,  
powerful — dark workshop — hanging on the walls — straps  
— twisted iron bars — metal shapes — so many shapes — piles  
of chain — ploughshares — horseshoes — the giant human  
form unfurling and striking — movement of the light — the  
smell —

St. Briec — 5 a.m. in the station  
 — one of my earliest memories — on the grass, under a tree  
 — filling my clogs with apples and grass — coldness of the  
 grass — sharp smell of overripe cider apples — dampness —  
 but a lot of light — sunlight of course —  
 — they come back making more than a little noise — pass in  
 front of my table — they're going to sit by the stove that dou-  
 bles as a heater — their faces red from the cold — dark clothes  
 — back pack or sailor's duffel —  
 cold — hardly any stove heat — everything freezing here —  
 light from elongated beveled glass sconces — behind the bar —  
 light flickers — greenish —  
 — by the door — on the track the end of a black railroad car  
 — all alone on the rails — white blot of fruit crates — by the  
 barred window —  
 they're talking loudly — hoarse — pathetic — about every-  
 thing — work — they're tired already — or — I am —  
 — waiting — is long — and alone —

## 1957

### February

"...short, unlikely moment — crazy interval — shock at becom-  
 ing conscious of this obstacle that preceded everything —  
 attached to the obstacle — not an obstacle — not even a break-  
 down — real fear — of the emptiness — nothingness —  
 fear stronger than anything — I'm putting in time — just  
 putting in time — like the rest of the world"

### April Rostrenen

I hear banging in the distance — in the silence of the country-  
 side — calm — and little noises —

### June

No preoccupation with making something of my life — take  
 the moments as they come — filled by everything going on  
 around me — unclear —

to Renée—

"I'm working or at least trying but thinking at times it's not  
 worth it — so I go to sleep — wake up with a start — try to  
 make up lost time — all that leads to nothing — maybe because  
 it's too hot — because the heaviness comes in through the win-  
 dows and doors, it's crushing, immobilizing, and above all  
 because I don't want anything — just right now a slowed-down  
 life, as slowed-down as possible, but it has to go on forever,  
 with no goal, no future —

I'm giving in to the heat, to sleep..."

### September

It's because of the music — Behind that sensation there's a  
 shapeless distance, a strange world — I can't grasp, it escapes  
 me each time at the end of the melody — the note — Want to  
 make the images coherent — express that —

### November — Porte de Vincennes

I was afraid — along the wall — all of a sudden — afraid of  
 being closed in — not free to walk — unable to breathe the air  
 — strange —

### November

"Seven o'clock and she is alone on the beach, surrendering to

the vast sand curve, to the biting wind pearling her skin. She is walking toward the water. In its retreat, it leaves her tidepools of shells. She rolls in them, gets up lustrous with mica and pearl..."

#### December

Why write that this room is yellowish-grey — that I'm dozing through all this nonexistence — that only at moments the noise of wind in the flue...?

Alone —

Write? make sentences? still...

#### December

Death — my death — certain — but factitious attempt at representation — but fruitless — Where I get to: at most a really brutal sensation of my body — Sensation that comes back more and more often these days — Idea of death — very healthy if one can still speak of "health" at that point.

1961

#### February

Algeria<sup>1</sup> — as if this is really the beginning for me —  
Saïd

<sup>1</sup>At this time D.C. became a part of a network supporting the F.L.N. (National Liberation Front).

#### September

Tonight I'm starting over — after these parenthetical months — for them — go real slow — like the first time going out after being locked up for ages —

tonight calm at last — window open — a little wind — gentle — feeling my bathrobe — music below — I just picked up K.'s journal — always the way to get back to work when it's not happening — Kafka or Beckett — to start up again —

nothing is finished — the problem hasn't been resolved — but I'm at the end of my rope — still struggling with it — because it would be easier to keep going with them than pick up my life where it left off —

these months speak years — many new things — to be completely current with present events — living the news as it happens — with no time lag — now it's difficult to become nothing but a spectator again —

what counted was the immediate — objective justification was impossible — for what I was doing — theoretical questions useless — when I make theory for others — I end up not believing it — immediate action justified immediately in its entirety — uncomfortable position but real —

for months no writing — impossible to reconcile the two —

walk paying attention — I've lost sensation — closeness of the outside world around me — I'm not connecting with things any more — could be irreparable loss — trying now to recover sensations — objects for instance — the table's smoothness — its color — my hand on the paper —

it's raining — that helps me — I feel better — more differentiated from things — from the outside —  
blur already —

#### October

continuing — I'm alone in the gallery space — no options — walls — I touch the walls — I press myself against them — I'll lean from one to the other — I stayed in the corner

opposite for ten minutes — now I'm in the middle of the room  
on a chair — writing on my lap — the empty space all around  
— spinning —

what to do — yell — call out — for someone to come —  
wait — slow death —  
explosion inside my head — words — invent words —  
fast — absence — non-sense of words —  
I can't —

---

#### *December*

waiting — days — time passes filled with little things  
— cling to the slightest incident — the most expected event —  
the most foreseeable with hope for some hidden thing concealed inside the opacity of stillness — I can't because I know  
what the end of waiting is — the possibility of radical change  
— definitive — there are lots of examples of such possibilities  
but they crumble before any obstacle — the real presence of  
people — of objects — the world — the margin between the  
image of suicide and reality's uncertainty is too great —

---

story limited in time — will end on a specific date —  
with departure of a train — wonderful impression of clean —  
retreat — irreparable — it's there in a presence already dissolved — almost weightless — if he knew —

1962

#### *January*

stay in the nothing  
this story — not even writing — not even speaking —  
blow up — choking on it — smothering — blocked —  
nothing to do — days  
someone says something and suddenly — like a scream  
— in knots —  
how to  
revisiting very old impressions —  
do I see?  
change of day into next day  
disabled — stay in the imaginary  
imagine acts to the point of realization — not to get  
there

#### *February*

torment — screams — for a long time — for days —  
content to live a muted life not to get hooked — be utterly  
smooth offering nothing to hang onto —  
for protection

#### *February*

today — same place — time's weight — despair —  
maybe faked — to replace — impossibility of working — boredom — cold — waiting without object —  
the stories I'm writing —  
the story arrives complete — sometimes while I'm  
walking, mostly — I write it afterwards — always the whole  
story at once — in its totality —  
caught up in problems of form — obviously —  
telling the slowness — beyond appearance — impres-

sion of interior time, what to do, for solitude — isolation rendered by the crowd maybe — or what — another isolated character —

---

start over at the beginning — start — no — go back a little earlier — how did it happen this distancing of things — myself from them little by little — indifference — until I find I'm settled in —

dead — like a finger that's fallen asleep — same sensation — no more feeling — don't see any more — don't feel anything any more — at the empty center — nothing to see — empty life — definitive rupture — anger hate revolt — only flashes — no duration —

no more anxiety — mush — at the moment — pathetic

—  
pretending to write — to resolve little problems — of form — that's all bullshit — not even any real pleasure writing — more like gasping —

tangled in knots —

still a need to work in my spot — nothing else — not even any real idea about publishing — at bottom — little solitary act of writing — nothing more — never any chance to do any other kind of work —

cold —

the Algeria story is all over — foresee the downfall already — too many personal problems — among them — finally return to solitude — lived now as before —

without becoming caught up in anything —

immediate sensation of the world empty all around — bonding with someone

habit of being alone

it's night — crashing — get lost in something anything — can't bear this right now —

yell —

quick do anything — go out —

5/1 Sfakia

only body comes back  
rain — storm —  
energy comes back—  
walking

28/1 Sfakia

calmed down

30/1 Athens

fever

6/4 Echaudé

lassitude  
something broken — inside

---

New York —

(June)

Chelsea 106  
morning 6-7 o'clock  
down Broadway  
visions

Sandolino<sup>2</sup>  
daybreak  
not bad here  
beginning to have a little less pain — for the moment

N.Y.

decoding of the situation — reading the tension between  
myself and others —  
impossibility of getting to the point of speaking  
— absence —  
look —  
speaking constantly cut by tension —  
desire — flooding desire — and ebb —  
passes in voices gestures looks

all these bodies never for a minute stopping talking speaking — how the body talks — its depth —

time cut up — light — day — night —  
 which — asking people in the street —  
 strange  
 nothing to do — my head  
 attention to people — to space  
 at moment wrecked —  
 my head — battleground — after battle  
 cut off from reading — books — (July)  
 for a long time —  
 reading body  
 emotion  
 way of life — crazy  
 space — time — liberated —  
 outside the waiting —  
 last weeks  
 good here — in this room —  
 20 years of writing  
 gravity  
 gravitate — around one's self — art

23

return to "Crete state"  
chelsea 607  
window on street roofs *buildings* — a skyscraper  
opposite  
heavy heat Holbein  
Erasmus — on the wall — writes his praise of folly —  
doesn't look hot

Van Gogh's last paintings — toward light  
Rothko's last paintings — toward darkness

wanted to repeat trip along the coast of Palenque  
Bonanpak — Topazlan (running away)

here — like Echaudé —  
Pavese — reassuring "anche donnette l'hanno  
fatto"<sup>3</sup> —  
a tiny point in the body calling mother  
physical distress — everywhere visible — from one end of the  
world to the other —

come and go — from revolt — to lamentations —

finally only<sup>4</sup> music in the screams —  
enough

---

<sup>3</sup>"Anche donnette l'hanno fatto" — "Even women have done it" — suicide, that is. This sentence is from one of Pavese's last journal entries.

<sup>4</sup>Beckett, *Cascando*.

hum of life all around  
palpitation

I open  
and I close<sup>5</sup>

animal  
animal — tortured  
fear death —

translating into body — writing

my body in process of living its last moments  
body pulsing  
preparation pacification

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<sup>5</sup>Ibid.

## Postface

by Uccio Esposito-Torrigiani

translated by Norma Cole

Danielle Collobert killed herself on July 23, 1978 in a hotel room on the rue Dauphine in Paris. Among her personal belongings, a black file containing a large green school notebook, a little scratch pad bought in Peru, loose sheets and also a spiral bound notebook bought in New York: all of it, arranged chronologically, constitutes this journal that a brief good-bye note entrusted to the exclusive care of a friend. The text we publish here was established with no editorial cuts and respects insofar as is possible the writing and spacing in the manuscript. We publish it because it is the journal of a writer who notes, in July of 1978, "twenty years of writing" as one would announce a verdict, now and forever settled. Those twenty years of friendship linking me to her do not leave me in the best condition to speak about this. I would rather have restricted myself to the simple revision, ridiculous and trivial, of punctuation and spelling. But at least some context needs to be provided. I met her in a cafe on the boulevard Saint-Germain in March or April 1958, at which time she was not yet eighteen. We immediately spoke of the essentials: writing, death. These two things — or is it one single thing — seemed to occupy her exclusively and with such rigor that one felt from the outset she would proceed in this single and unique direction, that no one could divert her or deceive her as to its end. At most, out of love for her, one could hope, idiotically of course, that sooner or later she would lose track, that her resolve would weaken. At that time, she had just left her studies, was writing very short poems, strangely haiku-like. Of course she was reading a great deal, but beyond everything she had discovered her own utter nakedness: that owned by nights of relentless attention to the other, or reflected in mirrors of all-night cafes where you can look, listen or simply wait, attending the blank page, from which the lassitude of daybreak will rescue you, overwhelm you. When she spoke of her Breton childhood, of her family, it sounded both clear and distant: news from another planet or a dead star but communicating the smells and sounds from a real land



Soirée Action Poétique, in a Paris gallery, 1960's: Jean-Claude Montel, Franck Venaille, Danielle Collobert. (Une <<Action Poétique>> de 1950 à aujourd'hui, Pascal Boulanger, Paris: Flammarion, 1998.)

scape (the one in the texts of *Meurtre*<sup>6</sup>). This setting constructed of unnamed spots was profoundly placed, located. Her parents belonged to the Communist Party, one of her aunts was in the Resistance and had been deported. And we were in the middle of police surveillance of Algerians and other dark-skinned people. There was no mistaking whose side you would take. At first, she worked at some little jobs, research, baby-sitting, then later found a position in a gallery that exhibited painting, in the rue Hautefeuille, where, surrounded by white walls and geometric works (the style featured there) she began slowly to compose the texts that would become *Meurtre*. One change of scene: her stay in Tunisia during the spring of 1960. In April of the following year, she published a collection of first poems, titled *Chant de guerres*. This chapbook published at her expense by P.J. Oswald consists of twenty short poems, and is, to my knowledge, quite unavailable, since Danielle had, a few years later, retrieved the whole run, more or less, and destroyed it, just like that. For several months she had belonged to a group supporting the F.L.N. From time to time, she disappeared in

<sup>6</sup>One of the untitled texts from *Meurtre*, translated by N.C., appears in *Série d'écriture 4* (Providence, RI, 1990).

order to carry out missions she never spoke to me about. What I do know is that for over a year, absorbed in her clandestine daily life, she stopped writing but came out of this period apparently unchanged, as though nothing real could reach her apart from writing. The Algerian experience wound up of necessity with a sort of enforced stay in Italy (between May and August 1962 she was in Rome, then in Venice) that would permit her to reconnect with her writing and complete the composition of *Meurtre*. First she offered the manuscript to Minuit, who refused it. Then, represented enthusiastically by Raymond Queneau at Gallimard, *Meurtre* was finally accepted and came out in April 1964. Meanwhile she had joined the staff of *Révolution Africaine*, an Algerian magazine begun after the war but which would disappear, I believe, soon after Ben Bella. The years between '64 and '67 are somewhat fuzzy in my memory. I have the impression that our lives were static, as if in suspension: the Algerian war was over, her first book was out. You're published, you write, and then what? That her writing could receive praise — her book had received some very positive response — was, according to her, only the result of some misunderstanding. When she presented her second manuscript, *Parler seul* (which became *Dire I*) to Gallimard, it was rejected. The following year, she composed a new text, *Film*, originally conceived as a screenplay, whose stripped-down narrative, no doubt an outcome of writing the visual, represents a major step in her formal evolution. It was also then that her desire to travel asserted itself, little by little becoming a kind of aggravated impulse to wander, an almost perpetual motion in which contradictory motives fused: the need to escape, the attraction of distant, "exotic" countries as bearers of nameless signs guaranteeing silence, solitude; and simultaneously a sort of proof by geographic exhaustion that she would not be content anywhere, that places were but names, and that, wherever she went, she would "not [be] going towards anything." This, however, did not stop her from being, at times, very present in the world: in May '68 she joined the Writers' Union, and a few months later she turned up in Czechoslovakia as Soviet tanks rolled across the country. Finally in 1970 she could undertake her first major voyage: Indonesia, Bali, Borneo, etc. During this period she wrote *Dire II*, took notes for other projects, collaborated on a radio play, *Bataille* (broadcast in Germany in 1971), and partici-

pated in translating an Italian novel. Meanwhile she had met Jean-Pierre Faye<sup>7</sup>, who would spare no effort seeing her work into print. *Dire I-II* appeared in 1972 from Collection Change (Seghers-Laffont). The following year she rewrote *Film* into a radio play, *Polyphonie*, broadcast by France Culture. And she traveled. Between '74 and '75 she visited, in turn, Italy, South America, Mexico, the United States, Greece. She also worked on a new book and collaborated on another radio play, *Discours* (broadcast in Germany in 1976). And then she traveled. Again to the United States, to Crete, Formentera, Italy, Egypt. *Il donc*<sup>8</sup> appeared in October 1976 from Change. Her trips abroad proliferated, continuous: Egypt again, Africa, New York, and Crete. When she returned from the island I caught up with her again in Paris, at the end of March or beginning of April 1978. She had just completed a short text, *Survie*<sup>9</sup>, wanted to see it published as quickly as possible and wanted it translated into Italian and English. A strange and uncharacteristic sense of urgency. I translated it into Italian. *Survie* came out at the end of April, a chapbook in an edition of 60 copies, from Orange Export Ltd<sup>10</sup>. One night she came to say good-bye to me, she was leaving the next day for New York. I left Paris at the end of the month. By mid-July she was back in Paris. She chose to die on her birthday: she had been born in Rostrenen (Côtes-du-Nord) 24 July 1940<sup>11</sup>.

<sup>7</sup>Director of "Collection Change" series, published by Seghers/Laffont.

<sup>8</sup>*Il Then*, N.C.'s translation, was published by O Books, Oakland, CA, 1989.

<sup>9</sup>"Survival," N.C.'s translation, appears in *Tyuumy* (Santa Fe, NM, 1991).

<sup>10</sup>Orange Export Ltd., an important independent small press, active from 1969 to 1986, edited by writer Emmanuel Hocquard and painter Raquel.

<sup>11</sup>Note that Uccio Esposito-Torrigiani begins this Postface with the words "Danielle Collobert killed herself on July 23, 1978..." and concludes by stating "She chose to die on her birthday," July 24.

[translator's note: footnotes 1-5 are editor Uccio Esposito-Torrigiani's; footnotes 6-11 are my own additions.]

*from Partisans*

VI.

Then —

postcards, phone-calls, e-mail

or chats in the still shocking flesh

in "leisure-time"

or between labor-time

wedged in

Exchanges

World's worlds

transacting

Breakdowns

or build-ups

Of means

(procured specifically)

Towards ends

(reached variously)

Theoretical accounts

emotional balances

Cliches, exhaustions, quasi-innovations

Approaches to The Concrete

at times

less than viable

Yet at times

historically-soluble

ways

of going

on...

of joining

with...

for...

Social-volition (then) as currency (then)

(to barter)

Fettered-life (then) as the exchange-rate (then)

(leveling)

WHAT WILL CAPITAL'S CULTURE BE TIMING (then)?

he'll or she'll

meet up with you

at twos *only*

by threes ending

*only* on tuesdays

the second one of each month

during the fall

but *call* twice or thrice

to confirm...

WHAT WILL MANUFACTURED SPACE BE DEFINING (then)?

static subtexts

to a resigned poetics?

But to dream *now*

of something

that isn't that...

Ambling, listlessly

say around a city square

when suddenly

a stranger approaches

unpredictably

begins to weave

an evening

of pasts, presents and futures

of institutions

along a sidewalk of history

startles you

to act

sounding

*summerwordworkerwares*

wrought cheaply, traded fairly...

WHAT WILL HIGHLY-PROCESSED SUBJECTIVITIES

— AS PART OF A SOCIAL SURPLUS

— NEWLY INVESTED

BE SAYING

ABOUT DOING

BE DOING

ABOUT BEING

(then)?

When all we might have

might be less than *we*

to begin with

VIII.

And she said *rout'em*

*or call'em*

*as they are*

*can you*

such an excess

of allurements

were suffusing

as intended to

him

a body

desiring objects

representative of...

Complicit continuum of inattention

To other bodies

deaf

in relation —

Objects?

often cloaked —

Subjects?

barely thrive —

By breaths per hour

per mass-work units

Through years

Through shelffulls

of impulses

that came to...

So that archivists of scarcity

were amending

mutuality

Consciousness

of mutuality

"Literature"?

in a country

that came to...

Were alerting

the over-alerted

Were assuaging

the over-assuaged

Pock-marked face

of purpose

cock-eyed glare

drunk

with allurements

— wanna look?

— wanna fuck?

— wanna buy?

(wanna

wanna?)

Transnational Imagery — creeps

1000 dollars per second

urging

*...or shut it out altogether, she said*

to him

him deafened

by it

and to it too

in part

"it"

unbinding

a sequence

of signs

these

*Those objects, she said, subjectify one*

*in part, scatter you*

A...was -ing

Per hour, per...

were -ing, down (ward)

-ists of 1, 1, 1,

one more

is too much

now

XII.

Inversed

as was known to be

Whenever uttered

it appealed

As a whole

had sight

However permanent-seeming

was tenuous

Or remnants

that were found

Or loadstone

that was sought

Or self

that was lost

Came

this timed-speech

not by clock-ticks

but wellings up of...

The effects of numerous rebellions

at different levels

compounding

Shockwaves

Inversed understanding

Inversed platitudes

(The rumblings or schemes of "heart"

or of "sun" or "blades of grass"

if you want

need that language

partisan)

It was back when

foul air drawn in

gave life

was as yet "ineffable"

some me

adjudged it

*speakable*

though it wasn't —

though in some way

remained ready?

Peruser

Analyst

Erotic

Ideologic

Projecting

Claimer

Reckless

Specific

Ventriloquy

Qualmless

Renamer

Surveying

Stumbling

Hopewardly to sight

Chanceably to gain

World

That had it not been for

Outright Coercion

where would've

"imagination"

gone

if not how could've

it

had been

Gathering

Legitimacy

as a cloud

It was back when

it was raining

acridest negation

Of a paralytic set up:

producers vs. producers

Had it been heading there

all along?

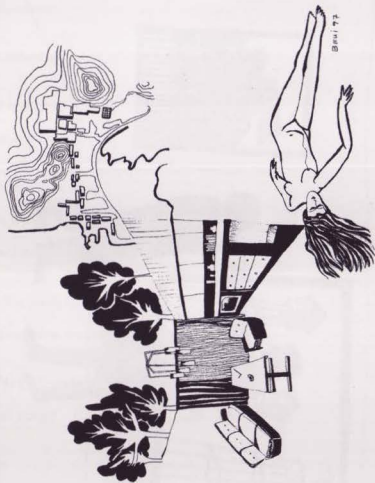
It

could've been

otherwise

can be





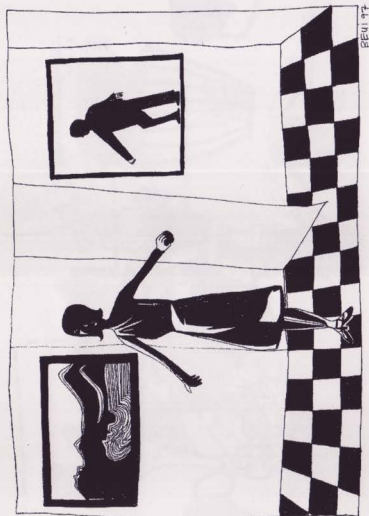
# Baal, or the Technicolor Polo Shirt

essay on Identity and Invention

"In order for liberty to be complete it has to be offered the choice... of being infinitely wrong."  
Sartre

"Power not only *acts* on a subject but, in a transitive sense, *enacts* the subject into being."  
Butler

"Somewhere," "Everywhere": an estimation. | And my white castle. | And the barbed ears of corn, of greasy formalist neckties—occupational sexual choices. | And these sitters, knees in their teeth, green yes. | Approaching a new virginity. | Arouse their penises. | But I'm Gust. | But the seats are good to them: colored brown, the straw weaves yield to your kids—to "finger fuck their pets," their neglected hinds. | But what is it? | Can't stand a hairy eclipse. | Catching your eyes from all his jelly, down corridors. | Close to prose as you can! | Cosmic dithering washes me out. | David! | Don't tam-bourine under their seats! | Done with hacking, I need backing. | Esoterica in the Laundromat. | Every pronoun is a flub, forgotten chairs, their feet to the rachitic crossings of *soon enough*. | Every pronoun is an acne. | Flowers of ink spit their pollen in commas, and comfort them. | Gnarled with pocks, scabby, the world is an authoring tool. | Grainily insensate. | Green jaws, pallid tongue, place me on the rug and photograph. | Guys like Jobs and Gates go up against each other—to create incomparable manichean demi-dualisms, a sort of drive-by gladioli. | Have you appreciated the robustness yet? | David! | He hadn't changed his collar in weeks. | He went back and fixed Star Wars, morning's auroras to evenings. | Howl. | I am nothing but a cipher, a colon, a cheek. | I was a kid fraught with preterperfect verbs. | I was born cross-haired. | Insanely great. | It is a shipwreck. | It is a wisdom. | My blood and shit flooded the breakfast bowls, nearly burst with agitations! | Oh the seats to be born! |



One word, their seats made fecund, one word, their little lovers waiting in highways that lead out to droves. | Or, of the chairs. | Places a call to her and expects her to respond. | *Put it on a zip disk, baby.* | Reaches that error—have it print sleep, solemn, lowering their eyelids. | Reticulated interpenetrations of the absurd crowd the realm, write “fly” on the fly. | Settled, their fists surprise in one odor. | She enters with an ashtay full of spermicide and back issues of Internet Warrior. | Stock market Jesuits, their drown in their coarse cuffs. | Takes his circled eyes with green bags, his gray stakes for facts. | Ten little toes in a box... that make them get up. | The length of crouched calyxes, or the flight of dragonfly’s data. | The social is created when you recognize it, and disappears when you enter. | The spirit of old suns, swaddled in tresses of the corn, and all the ablative absolutes of the fascist designer spheres would crumble at the portable potentate talents—the refinery. | The trousers puff around their bloated thighs. | Their buttons are the eyes of Huck, making ick fault. | Then they dream of *out*, the truth. | Then they have that invisible hand which murders: coming back, their presence filters black poisons, charging the suffering eye of the tortured dog, so you sweat. | There they were—open slowly your shoulder blades! | They are abiding in different closets. | They are asking you to speak. | They are asking you to speak. | They are entwined there mornings and nights! | They cannot imagine what, playing hooky with your life—leave me alone! | They have grafted themselves into epileptic loves, their fantastic ossatures fixed to the black skeletons of the *pronoun*. | They stamp their torqued feet again! | They waver to the sad feel, feed the pariahs, get it as barcaroles, their severed caputs float in these rollings of love. | They will justify deserts of revelation. | Turning and turning in pianists, ten fingers knocking an emasculated gyre, the soda cannot hear the soda man. | Two claws on a typewriter, tonsils bunched in their small chins. | Vehement em-dashes kept him from the crowd. | When a. | When it. | Yes, which once fermented, lights for them. | *Yes, yes.* | *Yes, yes.* | Yip! | You are clamped in atrocious funnels. |

*This piece was originally written for the Identity and Invention Conference at St. Mark’s Poetry Project in May 1998.*

## NOAH DE LISSOVOY

### *Notes for the Imagination II*

Language is the purest fact of our sociality as humans. In our society, however, it is generally appropriated and beaten into rigid and univocal forms as the most direct means of policing the collective imagination. On the other hand, when it is reified in poetry into an *arena* for the play of signification, and permitted a meaningless “freedom” within that perimeter, it risks losing the potential agency inherent in its capacity to *represent*.

\*

Language is power. Or: it might be, could be, would be, power. But actually lived situations and conditions exhort, require, and cajole particular responses. In these circumstances, the answer is not to call for an unfettered poetry, free to proliferate infinite possibility. That is precisely what language is not. Rather we can hope to turn the grip that the social has on us through language into our grip on the social.

\*

As writers, what do we want to take on? Normative communication in general? This or that other poet? This or that spare doldrum? What looms in front, rather, and in opposition, to any creative work in writing is the same thing that opposes productive struggle throughout all social spaces: a form of privilege which is identified with the control of the congealed product of the appropriated surplus labor of the majority of people.

\*

The word *poetry* comes from *poiein*—to make or produce. This is different from *rattle on*. Poetry is an action, with an effect. The question is to what extent much poetry amounts to simple *re-*production. Not of forms, or of contents, but of conditions. Call it: *re-*poetry. We need to make poetry, not *re-poetry*.

\*

We need something that's not alternative. Something that's central. No point in *exclaiming* over the improprieties of the rulers, or in parodying received ideologies. We need to think the problem through thoroughly. Either history comprises a human logic that admits of a possibility, or it doesn't.

\*

The task is not to define one's generation, like making a big splash at the party. Rather: to determine those struggles that are objectively motivated in society and to be taken by them. What is to be done?

\*

Some writers have had disdain for regular language as false consciousness. But regular language makes regular lives, which are the ones that weigh in the balance. Everything depends upon how the language, as it is predominantly practiced, makes use of what is given to it.

\*

We depend too much on experts. The truth is not professionally administered. The subjective and objective are a dialectic. This means that the truth depends partly (and only partly) on you. Not on "how you see it." But on how it is seen in you.

\*

Capitalism is not just a *method*. It's bigger than that. Our response must be too. It's a question of more than *tactics*.

\*

Writing needs to get away from a conception of itself that has become inadequate. The theater of the *postmodern* begins to fail now to do the work of representation, even on its own terms.

\*

Some want an immediate efficacy for poetry in the world, or on the other hand various far-fetched interventions into one field of contention or another. But we overlook the fact that the imaginative is an aspect of social life also. Creating it is a worthwhile constitution. But it's not sole—the imagination is popular; art too must negotiate that domain.

\*

"Visualize world peace" means: ride the backs of the workers into the market. But to *envision* is different. It means create the conditions, in consciousness, that will permit the enactment. What will we do *that* to . . .

\*  
Each line in a poem does prop something up. Its own private burden. For every force there's an equal and opposing force. But the poem is not conscious of its implication? So what proportion of it is thereby exonerated?

\*  
The celebrated Saussurean arbitrariness of the signifier is not the trapdoor into the heart of the empire. That's a smokescreen. We have to quit falling for that one. By the same token, setting up transparency of language as a straw man is beside the point: a false and *visual* metaphor. Communication is neither a purely differential process, nor a pointing out, but rather an *impinging* of social content onto subjects.

\*  
People complain about political demonstrations: "That won't convince anyone." That's not the point. It's a *demonstration*: a show of force.

\*  
The selves that are possessed of us are not ruses. Though they do not exhaust the possibilities of what we might be—that's the whole point—they are nevertheless persistently real. They are also what footholds there are from which to begin to climb out of what has produced them.

The onslaught is felt also as the *inability* to support an integrated subjectivity. Person needs to be defined in relation to the realities that actually do confront it. When these are made invisible, it is caught off guard, and reaches out into empty space for a support that eludes it.

\*  
The critique of the unified "I" is an advance. But beyond that we still tend necessarily toward a wholeness that is not monadological. To be able to glimpse that perspective, and grasp it—to begin to work toward an entirety that is not psychological and which, while shot through with what is its outside, remains nevertheless imaginable as viable.

\*  
What this means at the level of method is that what there is to do now for a radical literature and criticism in relation to the subject is to get a dialectics back into it, including (and especially so) into the materialist tendencies of these practices.

\*  
A bit of freedom begins to be accomplished in the struggling for it. It can't simply be sought for, declared, or exemplified. Literature can't be a *model* of it. Readers can't be individually liberated by any daring utopic text when the collective is in fact chained up in bonds that are much more than semiological.

Let writing get to the real topography that we are taped to. Instead of serenading the landscape with gentle reprimands and sly innuendo, poetry could help with the labor of dislodging some of those boulders. Enough bodies lie already under them. Let the imagination use its power to see what pathway could lead up and into the terrain of a habitable possibility.

## KRISTIN PREVALLET

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### *Sampling out of this World*

In *Tripwire 1* Sherry Brennan wrote, "The poetry of the twentieth century ... is not simply concerned with being new, but in the tensions between the new and the contexts out of which it writes." Context: the convergence and presentation of circumstances, facts, or evidence that surrounds a particular event, situation, or reality.

Context-based poetry includes a variety of influences, and the points of contradiction only make the points of contact more deliberate and intense. This is not political—it is poetical, and follows suit in a lineage that extends from Blake, Rimbaud and Whitman, through to Stein, H.D., Duncan and Olson, not excluding the lyric address, surrealism, ballads, folk music, and Greek tragedy; derivation, projective verse, appropriation, and collage. (This is my skeletal list—other poets will have different priorities).

The world is not some abstract exterior we maneuver through from life to death and back again—it is not a thing which some people are in "real" contact with and others are not. Evidence, information, unique convergences—all which feed poems—are at every corner. This evidence is gathered up by artists and writers of all different traditions, and changes depending on the space, time and locale of the seekers. It is not thanks to leisure time that the world and the evidence with which it is filled comes into the creation of a poem or art work. It is the sustained chaos of the visible world—between jobs, on public transportation, reading the paper, dreaming, listening to music, to children—that becomes the poem. With the time-old attention to all-that-is-out-of-place, or within-place, but extraordinary, radical contexts are created making tangible Noah de Lissovoy's statement, "Revolution means imagination." (*Tripwire 1*)

Many poets sample, although they might not refer to their methods as such. The transmission of energy, objects, words,

vocabulary, rhythms and sounds are picked up from the poet's maneuvering through his/her days. Evidence drives the poem forward and creates its context. Through sampling, the poem becomes a project that is continually changing, or that can continue with no end in sight. Unlike collage which de-contextualizes and removes the reference from the object by forcing a cohesion with other objects, sampling preserves the reference by presenting it as a chunk of information, rather than as a fragmented cut-up. Both re-contextualize the original reference—but while collage consumes the reference, sampling allows the seams, and the points of convergence with other references, to show.

Words that become poetry are mixed with all the information I've deciphered through the day, whether it be fictional, real, or dreamed: toxic waste makes lobster livers soupy; a turkey vulture spread its wings and completed a high voltage circuit; the big bang shattered space like glass.

### *from Chronicles of the Heart*

So blessed was the gunpowder  
in wafers and water  
I trained my tears for the deluge  
spread my feathers  
and singed my eye  
wept with the martyrs  
and rhymed with the skunk  
rowed in the power line  
and electrocuted the boat  
the blast was an attack of winter  
the planet was reeling through space  
the clouds passed swiftly  
through my yellow room  
the day was atomic  
and filled with fright.

---

A turkey vulture spread its wings and touched two hot wires,  
completing a 69 million volt circuit.<sup>1</sup>  
A man's face caught fire while he was being executed.<sup>2</sup>  
The reverse spin of Venus was possibly caused by collision with  
another planet.<sup>3</sup>  
"Blue jets" are beams of blue light that appear to extend  
upwards from the tops of thunderclouds.<sup>4</sup>

1. "The Year in Review," *Key West Citizen*, 1-1-98.

2. Source lost.

3. Catastrophists' Theory.

4. "Blue Jets Emitted Upward From Tops of Thunderclouds,"  
*Science Frontiers*, Jan.-Feb., 1997.

## *Culture and Struggle*

*This essay was originally written for the National Organizing Committee in 1995, toward that group's becoming the League of Revolutionaries for a New America, of which the author is a member.*

*Dumpsters, alleys littered with what's been discarded, including human crumples, panhandlers at corners or along walls scribbled with graffiti, hungry men and women on foodlines, public suffering misery waste shame dregs garbage of porn and drugs and drink, the lost job, broken home, can't sell soul, one big hole, feel like a mole down in the depths or on the lam standing still in the Tenderloin of an innercity everywhere now.*

Such images increasing in replication represent the fate of more and more people in this land, in a time when technological advancement on a global scale is creating merciless conditions wherein millions and millions of people will be, if they are not already, economically and then physically, holocausted, while the profound truth uttered by the Native American, Wassaja—"We are hoodwinked, duped more and more each year; we are made to feel that we are free and we are not"—throbs in our being.

Everything's being driven backwards to the wrong Right, not to right the wrongs but deeper into a corporate state whose media-evil snares and traps are thick with decay, infoterrorism, more doubletalk than hands could shake ten fingers at; and bodies and souls everywhere are lowered into vats of diminishing wages, all watched over by massively growing police-brutal state apparatus.

It's a system of corporate profiteers, haywire Stockmarket-mongers and thugs of all sorts feeding on us poor people, and we want that system brought down once and for all.

We know it's in the deep shit of its own decay and has been rotting amid its desperate half-assed triumphs for more than two generations. We want to help, as cultural consciences, finish off its carcass, which has been stinking up humanity for

as long as most of us remember,  
and transform it into something authentically new and young and fresh and appealing;  
we want the way money is amassed and distributed and thought-about changed,  
and the way the poor, the homeless and immigrants are dealt with changed,  
and we want rule by private property and the lie of "free enterprise" changed.

The "We" I've been talking from are really These States, composed of all those who daily feel the bite and bark of a dogging capitalist/imperialist system, including those who are not only aware that genocide, economic or otherwise, is at its core, but who are actively engaged in the fight against that genocide, who either must fight or physically die; that is, must break into buildings or die in the cold, must answer every charge of welfare fraud with a rally for peoples' justice, must straighten the twisted information that immigrants are the enemies of workers here, or that the young rather than the banks and the corporations are the thieves and addicted monsters,

must broadcast over airwaves liberated by takeovers (just as with abandoned buildings) because only corporate wealth has claim to widespread kilowatt power, must graffiti because there's no unbought place where writing, drawing and the protest-cry weigh the same and, by their very existence, attack private property.

And underlying all these "musts" are the will and desire to change history, and the belief that the people of this new class can do precisely that.

*We don't see a difference between poetry, prose, graphic arts, song, music etc., on this terrain horizonizing with the construction of tomorrows. Separating the genres is another kind of division the ruling-class enslavers have washed many a brain with.*

We know their intelligentsia is all bullshit fake aesthetic segregations.

We know because, at the heart of this seminal and budding poor-people's struggle is a propaganda inclusive of all

the arts.

Moreover, and despite the attempts on the part of the cowardly ruling-class intelligentsia to pawn off the revolutionary story as nothing but a "humanistic" one accommodatable by the corporate academy,

we know that we are all in possession of a modern classical tradition, including everything from the Internationale to Native chants, as well as union and slave songs en route to collective affirmations and liberation, respectively;

a revolutionary tradition including the poems of Blake, Whitman's great majesties, abolitionist narratives and the writings of Frederick Douglass, the poems of Hopkins ("I look forward to nothing more than the communist revolution"—1871), the great active meditations and strategies on the end of war and hunger that are the center of the writings of Marx and Engels;

and then, in our own century, the works of Mayakovsky, London, Lorca, Brecht, Sinclair, Neruda, Hill, Vallejo, Roumain, Hughes, Parker, Dalton, Monk, Castillo, Pasolini, Eluard, Hikmet, Aragon, Laraque, Darwish, Baraka, Adnan, Gramsci, Benet, Scotellaro, Heartfield;

and Robeson, Luxemburg, Rivera, Lenin, Siquieros, Orozco, Pollock, Lowenfelds, Benjamin, Lorde, Ho Chi Minh, Rugama, Quemain, Stephen-Alexis;

and the hundreds, no, thousands of poets—man, woman and child—as well as artists, musicians, dancers, in collectives or theater companies, or struggling forward in their creative solitudes, believing in and fighting for the total liberation of humanity from its chains, over and above the walls of the narrow one-celled alienation, isolation and imprisonment which the capitalist world visits upon us all.

It's with this revolutionary and progressive cultural tradition, which all poets and artists intuitively recognize as related to the working class, the working poor, and the new class of the permanently unemployed, the homeless, the criminalized, and the economically abused by the whiplash of electronic means of production in the hands of the capitalists,

that my own work has specifically united itself for more than twenty years. It's a tradition that's engaged the energies of my poems (because in fact it *creates* the energies of my poems), as well as my translations of revolutionaries from other lands;

my verbo-visual "talking leaves;" my painted books and larger paintings; agitprop journalistic articles; the editing of different anthologies relative to the struggle; the "printing" of poems "in the journal between the ears" on the streets, in the name of revolutionary communication; and the works done for the cultural brigades like the Roque Dalton Cultural Brigade, the Jacques Roumain Cultural Brigade; in addition to the Union of Left Writers, the Coalition of Writers' Organizations, the Communist Labor Party and the National Organizing Committee.

This revolutionary tradition, which came into existence about 150 years ago—a young tradition! a vibrant tradition!—continues to expose the rats of capitalism for the garbage they are, and the system itself for the nullandvoid it is, while affirming, re-affirming and ever-affirming the struggles and victories (however small, however large) of the poor and exploited.

And it's because we especially defend and affirm the poorest sectors of society, those who are most vulnerable, the good and beautiful Truth of revolutionary potential cuts through the current habits and trends of intellectual adherences to Nothingness.

We are never decorators of Nothing. Nor do we pretend we are the avant-garde while actually engaging in backbiting competition—a mirror of capitalist relations—for what comes down to: Bux.

Our rage, a rage for change, is, in part, yes, because we are poor; but it mainly is because others are, and in misery and oppression.

At the heart of it all, why else does a poet write?

We furthermore say that we *know* the enemy and it is not ourselves. It is rather a system of daily and grinding economic and social squalors, commodifications, degradations and losses of dignity.

That's why poem, painting, music, etc. all are so very necessary. And why we remember, in the immediate now and for the future, the resonating affirmations of, say, Whitman, those expanses of generosity and mimpathy which he dreamed for us and which we know the system we live in the trap of has fogged and trashed, via the profit-murder it executes us with at every living moment;

but whose expanses, of inner feeling, and whose vision of These States not as a corporate monstrosity and prison of

prisons, but as a mass process of compassion collectivity unfolding as a people of diverse ingenuities and loves we continue to recognize and revere, because in fact it's in its budding form, that revolutionary flowering, even amid the general and specific rots of the day,

and we aim to help it blossom forth.

Our society is already luminously informed by a diversity of expressions come from Native, African-American, Latino, Caribbean, Asian, Middle-Eastern, African, Pacific Island and European cultures, all compromising the multinational working class.

Many of these cultural expressions emerged in the wake of the important Civil Rights movement, which spread nationally from the South during the '60's. Because of the African-American struggle for freedom from slavery, the sense of liberty—its ironies, bitteresses and failures in the midst of achievements—is very fresh, very raw with us all, one of the reasons why its musics (from slave-song to gospel to scat; from jazz to bop to R&B to Rock and Roll, and progressive and experimental music extending from jazz, and Rap), because they arise out of the direct struggles for survivals and “dreams deferred,” are the sounds and melodies of a living and continually oppressed and vulnerable people, the measures of *all* the people; because African-Americans are the ones the system of capitalism most derogates and uses to terrorize and control the rest of the population.

And it's precisely because the other poor peoples know that—even if unconsciously—that the Black struggles have been able to galvanize struggles for cultural autonomy on the part of others within the “Rainbow” of the States.

And also because, long before the fight against slavery in the South (go back to the riots in New York City in 1642), Blacks refused to accept the system—in essence, capitalism—knowing its roots lay in human slavery and the turning of people into things, we have been witnesses to an ever manifesting resistance that has inspired cultural and social motions throughout our century.

For example, jazz has been a popular expression on an international level since WWI—this nation's most distinctive and enduring popular art form. Its influence, say, on the Beat

movement (see the works of Kerouac, the poems of Bob Kaufman, the opening lines of both “Howl” and “Kaddish” of Ginsberg) has been central. And in response to a question relating to his important Projective Verse essay, Charles Olson remarked that the new experimental field-prosody he was espousing was “all Charlie Parker.” Such words actually mimic those of Robert Creeley, who had written them in a letter to Olson years earlier; but, in fact, Parker, and especially Thelonius Monk, *did* have to do with Olson's Projective suggestion to poets to use a typewriter as a piano (Monk is perhaps the most literary and dialectical of modern jazz composers). And it is a fact that the “opening of the field” of the page of poetry, which came to full fruition in the '50's and '60's and continues today as among the most exciting aspects of poetic composition, is rooted in jazz experiments emerging from the Harlem Renaissance as they merged with other cultural forms—abstract expressionist painting for example—that served as explosive preludes to the monumental composition that was the Civil Rights movement itself.

And today, spoken writing like gangsta and other Rap, manifesting out of authentic situations of poverty, exclusion and institutionalized racism, present the protest of a constructive nihilism, and beat on the drum of and for Youth-Youth, as if a rhythmic, oral, African or Haitian voodoo communications system were passing important signals through the computerized night.

In the United States of poetry today, certain Rap lyrics contain the most vivid attacks on the private-property system by revealing and satirizing the nihilism inherent in the money-madness and the hatred of everything—self, other, and world—that is the plight of so many young people in this land.

In Rap, moreover, such intricate rhyming—often spontaneously composed—has not appeared in serious poetry since the Russian poems of Vladimir Mayakovsky, the great poet of the Bolshevik Revolution, and the first street poet of the Twentieth Century.

And don't think the powers-that-be want Mayakovsky's lyrics out there any more than they do those of Rap. In fact, in the recent Penguin edition of 20th Century Russian literature, get this—Mayakovsky is excluded, as if the greatest poet of the Soviet period simply no longer existed (indeed, to date,

only about half of his collected works have been translated into American-English!]

And it's precisely that kind of annihilating exclusion—meant to deny the very existence of an important historical phenomenon—that Rap artists are experiencing as well, (not simply as censorship, but as if Rap didn't really exist at all (a condition African-Americans well know on the ontological plane);

and that would be an incredible loss because, if really seen and understood in motion on the streets and in the parks of this land (not simply as something "star-studded" in a one or two-man teevee gig), Rap represents a genuine breakthrough in oral co-operation and collectivity,

one rapper "passing" meaning and rhythm to another; the other, to another, with variations in lyric and rhythm both; until the dove-tailing and ricocheting raps and built-up strophes of meaning given out by each rapper after a while assume the anonymity of real process, genuine social statement and authentic communal participation.

Precisely, of course, what the system has to control or destroy, lest it grow as a model of organized culture in action, that is, Revolutionary Culture!

Graffiti (which the system also detests and outlaws, just as it detests and outlaws any cultural form whose social rage and ingenuity are difficult to commodify completely), like Rap, also has its toilet-door, scatological dimension,

but also and likewise: revolutionary slogans; sheer ergetic ecstasies of code-tagging and letteral shape; and, above and within all, a dynamic "possessing" (in the sense of taking-over) of private property and making it public through an act of alphabetic or logographic affirmative/defacement.

Something of the same elements go on in Rap, which gives the illusion—if it doesn't present itself as the fact—that it is "written" spontaneously and off the top of one's head, with a drummy, possessive and grabbing beat, and a social message included within it.

Both Rap and Graffiti are part of the contemporary Projective arts involoving youthful participation in a growing—sporadically and seminally but very definitely—new-class consciousness.

Both are victims of censorship and whitewash. Both are textured as outlaw and guerrilla art forms. And both are

cultural weapons in the development of the poor people's movement.

A third important and courageous weapon is exercised by a small but growing brigade of airwave liberators, those who set up micro-transmitters and fight the corporate state and its FCC apparatus by freeing airwaves for the people. They might be broadcasting about police terror and brutality from and to a poor housing project in Springfield, Illinois; reading an attack on San Francisco's Mayor for his Matrix program's criminalizing of the poor; reading a communiqué from the Mayan guerrillas fighting the N.A.F.T.A. governments of Mexico and Washington, D.C.; or they might be calling for—and not simply announcing the results of—a demonstration or protest march.

These techno-guerrillas are on the cutting edge of the cultural front at a time when there's been a deepening of police-state tactics with respect to the poor; when the ruling class and its media jackals are everywhere broadcasting crime-terror-mayhem-rape in order to keep sowing divisiveness and terror among the people.

As such the radio liberators are taking back technological space/time, the relativity robbed by the capitalists, and putting it back into the hands and ears of those to whom it really belongs.

I've mentioned the importance of the poor people's struggles as they extend from the Civil Rights Movement. But there is an equally important resistance that the poor can always make contact with in this land, and that is the resistance of the Native peoples.

We know the names, like Geronimo and Crazy Horse, Wounded Knee, Sequoyah and Sarah Winnemucca. We know likewise of a continuous colonization that has been staked out by the imperialists across the Native territories.

But what is most important, culturally, as far as the Native dimension is concerned, is that the revolutionary future we foresee when the poor and exploited and oppressed peoples of this land come together and organize to finally have done with the thieving system that is currently and viciously in place—that revolutionary future will be one in which the new means of production, the computers and media and other technological advancements, will not serve as profit-frankensteins but as instruments to further a non-mercenary progress for all

the people so that they no longer are hungry or homeless or divided one-from-another.

It will be a co-operative society, with authentic sharing and reciprocity, reverberant to the historically recent and still existing peoples of this continent who exploited neither each other nor the living creatures around them.

Toward that future, our responsibility as poets and painters and musicians and dancers, all interfacing and opening out, ought to be to "present the present" irrefutably a part of the revolutionary process, and beacon toward that time—with new poems, songs, dreams, yearnings and inspirations—when all our individual selves are massed to finally spring humanity from its prison.

## LAWLESS CROW

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*Interviewed by John Lowther & Randy Prunty*

In the fall of 1997 Randy and I both saw several pieces of Lawless Crow's "art" posted around Atlanta. Time passed and occasionally one or the other of us saw another piece here or there which seemed to be the product of the same artist. We talked about it and asked around to see if anyone knew who put these flyers up. No one did. More time passed, then Randy called to tell me of a new piece he'd seen. The next day I went to look at it with him. It was on an 11x17 piece of paper which was covered in typewritten text and stenciled over with the line "SENSE RISKS CENSORSHIP." This poster had been put up with some sort of adhesive and we were unable to take it down. The typewritten text in the background was comprised of a large number of statements, seemingly reported speech. The only one that I now remember clearly read "my life has gone by while I was smiling, I could've been so much more, but when it was my turn I smiled." The range of content was impressive, everything from thoughts of suicide to confessions of guilt, but the context of the poster made it hard to read any of these statements as confessional. Randy and I talked about how to find this artist and I ended up printing out a question WHO ARE YOU? followed by my address & phone number. Each of us then kept an eye out for these pieces and when we saw new ones appear we taped my question to them. A couple of months later, late on a Thursday evening, Lawless Crow called me. He was suspicious, but curious, and after I managed to convince him that I liked the pieces he posted and was not trying to find him in order to prosecute, he warmed up to the idea of talking about his work. I asked if there was a time we could meet him, but he suggested that he call me back when Randy could be present. When confronted with question after question Lawless said "What are you, Barbara Walters? Am I being interviewed? Are you taping this?" "Should we be taping it?" I asked him. After some discussion we agreed it was an interview, set up the tape, and started.

## 1st Interview

**John Lowther:** so like we were saying a few moments ago, both Randy and I had seen your work around, in the bathroom of Cafe Diem, on telephone poles and in Little Five Points. and we saw those two recent ones, or at least recent for us, that one "Sense Risks Censorship" and "What Wipes Out Your Voice With Its Values." so I think what struck both of us about the things we'd seen was that ... I mean you've got these statements and then what seem like collaged non-sequitors, and then some have a visual element and a slogan or something that makes them work. each part plays a role even though they may not relate so directly to one another ...

**Randy Prunty:** they were sincere without being ... sentimental.

**Lawless Crow:** aw shucks now ...

**R:** no really. even respect, both because of their appearance and the content ...

**J:** right. it's the aesthetic that interests me, that you seem to be...

**LC:** look, it's not really about what the speaks look like, but that they're said, that they're voices let out of bondage.

**R:** "speaks" ?

**LC:** that's what they are. those posters and flyers... all that.

**J:** that's what you call your work ... speaks?

**LC:** yeah.

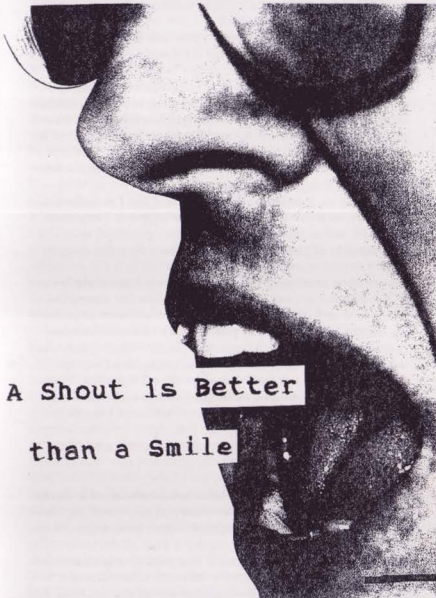
**J:** you spell it the same and everything?

**LC:** yeah, how else am I gonna spell it?

**J:** so, both the one liners and the ones with all the different statements are all speaks?

**LC:** yeah sort of, the ones with all the voices are speaks and they got all kinda voices, they're almost a choir, you know, but when it's just a line it's mine. my voice. now when I put it on them pieces bigger, like a headline, I'm not trying to say it's *better* or anything like that. I'm just trying to give someone the balls to rise up against all the silencing that's always pushing on us, you know. all the big voices, all the fake voices, the voices that aren't any human being at all but the voice of all the lies telling you lots of shit that ain't true but you know, at root, telling you, *shut up!* what you say can't mean nothing. *you don't count.*

**J:** so these one line statements of ...



A Shout is Better  
than a smile

LC: no wait a second ... I don't like *statement*. it sounds like some final thing that sums it all up, and really it's no different from "I missed the bus," it's just as much a call for your and anyone else's voice to be raised.

J: so you're saying that if I say ... "I ran out of toothpaste this morning" it's just as significant as if I'd said ... "Do unto others ... " or "Your house is on fire?"

LC: yeah. if you're thinking it ... but if you're thinking to yourself "I ran out of toothpaste" and what you say is nothing or something that's the same as nothing, something that passes as a voice ... like when they say "thank you come again" at the QT, you may as well be ... tearing out your tongue. it's not real. raising your voice means keeping it real. you got to say yes to every thought or be a slave.

J: but wait, so, if your house is on fire and like I'm distracted, or so surprised that I yell ... "what's for supper ..." or something like that, completely inappropriate in a critical situation, well, wouldn't "your house is on fire" have been the thing to yell?

LC: no. you're missing it. what I'm saying's that if my house ... if I had a house ... if my house was on fire and you're like downstairs and I'm upstairs and you see the flames and all crying out the kitchen and you yell "*what's for supper?*" because that is what went through your mind ... *that's fine*. It don't help me none upstairs, but rather than you sitting there saying "Gosh, why did I yell that? I wonder what I'll yell now?" you followed it up right quick with "**the goddamn kitchen is on fire Lawless get your ass down here!**" well, *then* I would be coming down and everything'd be fine, right? I mean as long as you didn't *sit* there ruminating on it and so forth while I'm dying.

J: do you mean that ...

LC: and ... well look. I think that ... what I also want to say is that I think, I really believe that when you say something like that, you know, "what's for supper?" when there is this life or death thing in front of your eyes, that's from all the years in the prison of ... or, uh, that's from holding your tongue when what you had to say didn't fit in polite talk with whoever, your mother's churchy friend, the barber or something. so what you were doing I think, yelling "what's for supper" was trying. I mean *you were aware, right? you were aware* that smoke and

flames were spouting out the kitchen, but you said something stupid, something that was acceptable, trying to hold onto that "everything is OK" kinda vibe when everything is **not OK!** **look around!** ain't no way that you can drive down Bankhead Highway and think that everything's OK! and if you can, *try walking!*

R: you're saying that we've internalized a control ... as in Foucault's discussion of the Panopticon.

LC: the *pan what?*

R: well ... it's this sort of prison, where, because of the design the inmates were always visible. and because they really might be watching them, they always felt like they were being watched. so the prisoners would always be controlling ...

J: ... policing their own actions.

LC: yeah.

J: so to apply this to what you're saying, our voices ...

LC: ... are prisoners. yeah ... as long as they're silent they're prisoners. I see what you got there, and prison is, or slavery, or whatever, is a way to think about it. **big brother is watching you.** yeah I read that in high school or something, so that's in there I guess. but well ... I dunno what exactly. I have to think it through you know, to see if that all works for me.

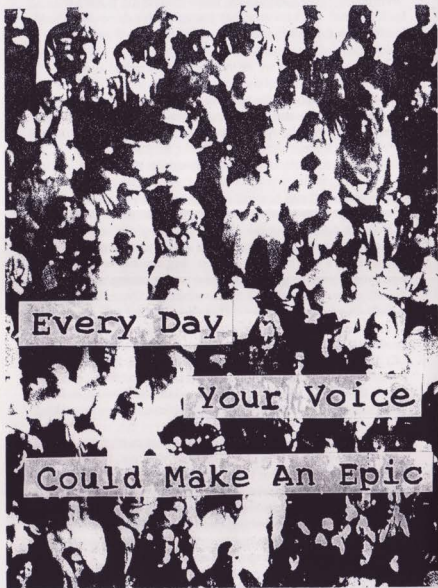
J: to circle back, if that's ok ... to the aesthetics of your work, I know that you don't think that aspect is as important ...

LC: it's not the point at all.

J: right. but what I'm trying to articulate is that the ... um, the flyers, the speaks as you call them *have* an aesthetic appeal. it's what attracted me to them. it's why, ultimately, we are talking about all of this.

LC: well look, everything that anybody makes is gonna have some look, even a bad look, like ugly or whatnot, but that isn't why I do this stuff. what I want to do is be a drop in the bucket instead of in this desert we're living in. if everybody would raise their voice ... if my work encourages anybody, hopefully lots of people to do something like it, like on the internet or radio or whatever, with a sprycan even, that's fine, no, **great!** the thing we got to do is stop toeing the line and not even whispering to ourselves even, what we *really* think, what we *really* feel about things. a simple thing like "I missed the bus," I mean, that's *profound* if spoken free.

R: doesn't all this talk of raising one's voice, or collective voices



imply a need to listen that is just as profound?

LC: sure, but if you just sit there listening now, all you'll hear is bullshit cuz there are so few voices to be heard that's real.

R: what do you mean by "real"?

LC: not dressed up like something that it's not, like, you wouldn't really voice a thing like saying, "waiter, I need a new fork please." that's fake. that's straight up BS. what your voice wanted ... or what *my* voice wants is "**what the hell is this stuff stuck on my fork?!**"

J: do you think of your work as having a specific political, or ahh ... psychological agenda? ... even philosophical, because I can't help but reading the work that way.

LC: I hear what your saying but I don't want to use those labels, cuz they're lies, they don't come from you, they come from some fake thing you picked up in the newspaper or school or 60 Minutes. if I say "**I'm starving to death**" is that political? it means **I must have food! or I'm gonna die!** it means something is keeping me from getting the food I need. now, I'm not saying that everything you might think about what the *political* part of that is **wrong**. but it's about a human being who needs something, that's what it's about, not some *political agenda* thing. it's the same thing as before with the *what's for dinner* thing, *political agenda* equals *what's for dinner* when you oughta be screaming **fire fire or get this brother some food! now! the man is starving!**

J: that's beautiful.

LC: well thanks man, I appreciate it. hey, can you guys hold on for a minute?

R/J: sure. *[It sounds as if Lawless covers the phone with his palm to yell something. we hear the cadence and tone of his voice—like a greeting—but can't make out any of the words. then he apparently drops the phone and we hear sounds of traffic and people speaking Spanish. maybe a minute passes. he reappears on the line only to say, "one more minute ok?" then he covers the phone again and we hear nothing for a minute or more.]*

LC: ok, I'm back. what's happening?

R: are you ok to talk some more?

LC: oh yeah. I'm fine. I just saw one of my *amigos* you know.

J: so you speak Spanish?

LC: I picked some up you know, just to say stuff hanging out with folks.

R: did you study it in school?

LC: naw. in school I ... well, I really didn't do much of anything in school, I was supposed to take Spanish or French and I kinda skated on that stuff ya know?

J: ahh ... a question?

R: how did the idea to do these speaks come to you? has it developed over time?

LC: yeah, over time. couple years, I guess. I did some stuff a while back, that ... uh ... it didn't work out. for me anyway. I guess they were, poster-like and um, trying to get people to get into the idea of letting their voices be heard.

J: how was that different from what you do now?

LC: they were too forced, too set-up. I set things up for people to write down their thoughts, like you know, passing out big pieces of paper in a crowd and giving them crayons. but what happened was just about everybody did some fake shit. they didn't record *their* voices. somebody even wrote *just do it* and drew a little nike swoosh. I mean, just, I thought, *just fuck that*, that's not what I'm after. but I kept trying it and trying it, but I'd just end up preaching at 'em. and then I realized I was doing the *exact damn thing* that's the problem I'm trying to get at.

R: so what is the method *now* that you use for the speaks?

LC: I try to capture what's already there. not just ... so, instead of getting people to write things, I ask them things. then I write...

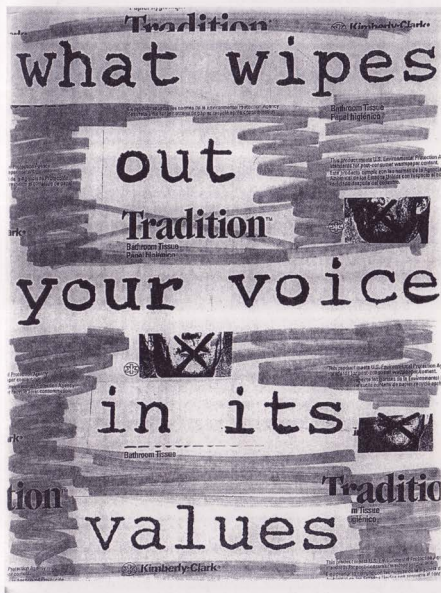
J: what do you ask them?

LC: whatever. that's not important. but usually a thing like *what's on your mind?* or *is there anything you'd like to say to the world?* try to keep it open. and I don't let myself judge whether the voice is real or fake. the person reading it can hopefully tell if that person is being real or just faking it. *styling*. I mean like *just do it*?

J: do you think it's really possible not to be your own censor, at some level?

LC: ... hold on. [Lawless puts down the phone. we hear traffic again and we can hear him talking to someone, but we can't hear the voice of the other person. he comes back on the line laughing] you guys still there? lookit. I gotta scoot. this friend of mine came by and I ain't seen him in a long time so I gotta wrap this up, ok?

R: well ... uh ...



LC: how bout I call you next week?

R: yeah. I can make it. John?

J: sure. so 12:30 next Sunday?

LC: ok, catch ya.

The following Sunday things failed to materialize (Lawless forgot). The following week he called me (JL) and we talked about the interview that had taken place. I pushed the idea of getting together for some beers or dinner or something but he still wasn't willing for reasons that never became clear to me. Setting up another phone interview was also problematic as he said he was looking for another place to "crash" and until he found something stable he wasn't sure when he'd have time. For a time he disappeared. Eventually he made contact & we were able to do another interview to complement our first abbreviated attempt.

## 2nd interview

J: hello, Lawless?

LC: yeah man.

J: look, there's this magazine that is doing an issue on activism and we'd like to send these interviews and some of your work to them. what do you think?

LC: what do you mean?

J: that I think that this magazine that Randy and I've seen might find these interviews of some interest, and that they might be into publishing them along with some of your speaks.

LC: oh, well, ok. naw, well, I don't know. who would publish this? you mean like in a magazine? you're not talkin' *creative loafing* or some shit are you?

R: yeah, no. no. a poetics magazine.

LC: *poetics*?!

R: yeah, to us, it's interesting as poetics.

LC: weird. but speaks ain't poetry. but, well...sure. I don't care. one more place for voices to be heard I s'pose.

J: we'd like more of your work, all the stuff we have is ripped up. you know, to send with.

LC: you mean you pulled them speaks off the wall?!

R: um...

J: well, I mean, there were lots of them ...

LC: (*laughing*) forget it man, I'm just fucking with ya. I could probably get some to you. what have you seen? you seen the two new ones?

J: I'm not sure what's new. which are you talking about?

LC: have you seen anything, like in Little Five, in the last two days?

R/J: no.

LC: well, I just put up some new stuff there. two new ones. and they're also up at Auburn, do you know Sweet Auburn?

J: yeah.

R: we'll check them out ... hey Lawless, can we talk more about what you're trying to go after with your work? I mean, this is activism, right? you want people to take your example. to see its relevance to their own situation. that they need to raise their voice over every issue.

LC: well sure. but, it's kinda hard to see how, or if that actually happens with them. all you can do is raise your voice and hope that it ... that other people hear it and see it's real. not fake.

J: since you brought up the notion of fake voices, what I'm thinking of as inauthentic voices, what about received knowledge? all the things you learn in school, or just learn growing up, things that you haven't got the time to verify in every instance. like, is my conviction that the earth revolves around the sun an example of buying into the authority of a fake voice?

LC: well hey, like let me ask you, when was the last time you needed, I mean *really* needed to know that the earth went round the sun? does it like hit you every day? I don't worry about that too much. like if it didn't, what would be different for me right here, today?

J: well, no. I don't think about it every day but the point is that we take in lots of information that we have no personal experience of the truth of, and yet we operate, we operate *as if* it were true.

LC: now *what's* this got to do with my stuff?

J: well, the relation of the earth to the sun, maybe nothing. but if you hear on the news that people got shot downtown would that have an effect on you? that is, if you hear that on the news or whatever wherever do you assume, that it's true without having seen it yourself?

LC: well like if I hear damn fox 5 saying that somebody shot

up 10th street and that people got killed I'd want to know who and why and as I know lots of people I'd go and see for myself, cuz the people I know wouldn't get mentioned on the news.

J: so then you *would* want to verify, you wouldn't assume that there really was a shooting?

LC: well I would suspect something happened, or they wouldn't be reporting on it. but maybe I'd never know what went down or maybe I'd never be able to find anybody who knew shit about it so it might be BS. but *how'd* we get on *this* exactly?

R: well, we're trying to get at what seems to me a poetics of witness, that's how I see your speaks.

LC: witness? hmm... *can I get a witness?* I got witness I suppose ... I'm still swimmin' with poetics though, I mean I'm out here trying to get people to think about the truth that they could be saying, but that they hold back and ... that's *poetics*?

J: touché. well look at it like this, your speaks are texts, right? ... and you post them around town in hopes that people will be effected by seeing them, reading them, right? ... well, if you answer yes to those two questions then calling the whole complex of ideas you have about how they might work or what you are attempting to do in them a poetic is just a way of getting a grip on that drive, that intention. somebody might come at it from another perspective and say it was propaganda or rhetoric or something but for me it seems like a poetic.

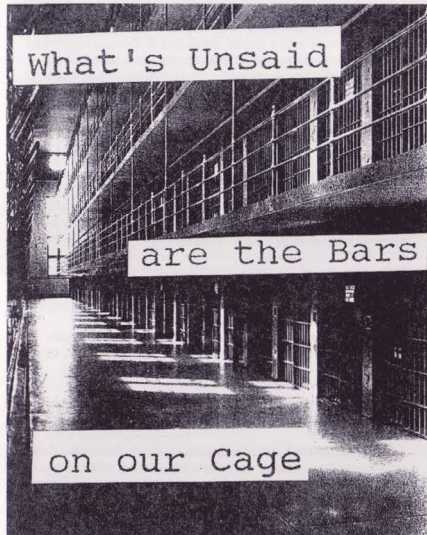
LC: awright but I just want to know that it's what it really truly *feels* like to you and not what somebody taught you to use on anything & everything.

R: I also think about this idea of witness because of your name. I'm guessing that Lawless Crow is not your real name, that it's a way for you to be anonymous so that the others voices can be heard more ... ?

LC: the name ain't important. I mean like nobody in the speaks gets *their name* on the page and I don't put mine on there either. what we have to *say* is important.

J: wait a minute, I'm not following Randy very well here, why, if the name isn't important but only message, why call yourself Lawless Crow? I mean I think immediately of "Jim Crow." and that echo has impact. but if you don't sign the piece ... the speaks ... then, well ... what's the deal with the *name*?

LC: well yeah, that's what I was thinking when I took it on, you know Jim Crow and all that. that I would take over a name



& put a spin on it. but the name is like, not *really* a part of the work but more just a thing *I* use, what people call me. hell since a long time ago people called me Lawless, I kinda put the Crow on there myself.

J: so, what do you think the name does or rather, why have it?

LC: *why* you guys pushing this?

J: well ... it's what *came to me* as a question.

R: it came to us so we should speak it, right?

LC: (*laughs*) yeah, awright that works but look here, no wait hold on (*muffles phone a minute ... comes back on the line*) *I have here an answer to your question my friends, excuse me sir, what does the name Lawless Crow mean to you? (we hear more street noise and then an older man's voice)*

Older Man: hello?

J: umm ...

LC: (*in the background*) *could you tell these gentlemen what the name Lawless Crow means to you?*

OM: is this the news? (*Lawless says something we can't catch*) ... well, sounds like some sorta rapper or something, maybe the name of some group.

LC: that's what it means to you then?

OM: naw, it don't mean nothing to me, here boy *take this phone*.

LC: (*laughing*) there you have it!

J: o ... k ... so ... Lawless ... have what exactly? you want to get his name for the interview?

LC: nah. just as long as he gets in there saying just what he said. and like about that, how you gonna put all this shit on paper?

J: well I've not transcribed the last interview, I've listened to it a bunch of times. I figured I'd just give our initials and then, like in a play script and then what we said after. standard interview format.

LC: **but no editing!** I mean if you are gonna publish this, then *nothing* can be cut out of it, that would blow the whole deal. you gotta put in everything every *umm* and *but* and *ahh I dunno*. the whole thing.

J: what are *you*, Allen Ginsberg?

LC: huh?

J: what about punctuation and capitalization and when you start yelling like "no editing" should that be in all caps or big bold letters?

LC: all caps? oh capital letters, yeah sure, whatever. I don't care too much about capital letters, just do what feels like a good recording of what's said. I trust ya. I mean, just *write it down*.

J: sure, but ...

LC: wait though, this ain't no script. ain't nobody gonna do this shit on stage. so what you need the initials before the stuff for? I ain't saying L C before everything I say.

R: but we want to be able to tell who said what.

LC: you don't know?

R: ok smartass (*laughing*) but we want the reader to know.

LC: (*laughing*) awright if you *have to* but I get to see this before you send it someplace right?

J: of course, we'd like to ...

LC: nah.

J: what?

LC: forget it—I don't need to see it.

J: you don't want to see it?

LC: nah. I trust ya. do whatever.

J: we could print it up with each of our comments in a different font instead of doing the initials thing, whattaya think?

LC: different kinds of letters for everybody? that would be cool! I thought of doing that with the speaks once but all I got is this stencil set and a typewriter that I can use so I never did it.

R: what other kinds of works do you do? and do you have plans for other speaks?

LC: well I mean, like I was just saying, I'd like to do more complicated stuff with different lettering and big stuff. I'd love to cover walls with speaks, like a mural or something. but I got no way to do that just yet.

R: what about the internet?

LC: well, I mean it *sounds* good don't it, but lets *be real*, the internet and all that shit is for the rich. I ain't got a computer. I only know one guy who has a computer and it's set up so that once you start doing that you just keep paying and paying for it. I'd rather do radio stuff ya know, cuz like you can get a radio for ten bucks and you can always find somebody who's got one and wouldn't that be great like if I could record all the speaks' voices and then play them on the radio? *that* would be cool. I also thought it would be cool to do a little newspaper

thing, where it was like a speaks every time it came out, have it be with all real voices and free to anyone who wanted it, but again you getting into money I don't have, so I'll stick with the photocopier thing for now.

J: you sound pretty dedicated to your art, or to the message of your art.

LC: yeah well, it's on my mind.

J: and do you think that there would be an improvement in the world if we all spoke without any fake inauthentic voices?

LC: yes I do. don't *you*?

R: well, yeah, but ...

J: yeah *in the main*, but I wonder about those in power, or those with power over others.

LC: wouldn't you rather have Ted Turner say that little folks like us don't mean **shit** than have him *pretend* otherwise? wouldn't that *change all kinds of stuff* if those people just said what they thought too?

J: it *might*, and yeah having it out in the open might really make people get up and do something, but what they'd need to do would be a lot more than raise their voices I think.

LC: yeah. sure. but if you can't even *say* what you gotta do then *how you gonna do it*?

R: sounds like you're summing up.

LC: well, what else is there to say? it's weird talking so much about the speaks. I never meant them to need explaining to people. I mean didn't you guys *get it already*?

J: well, I'm kinda slow on the uptake.

LC: *shit*.

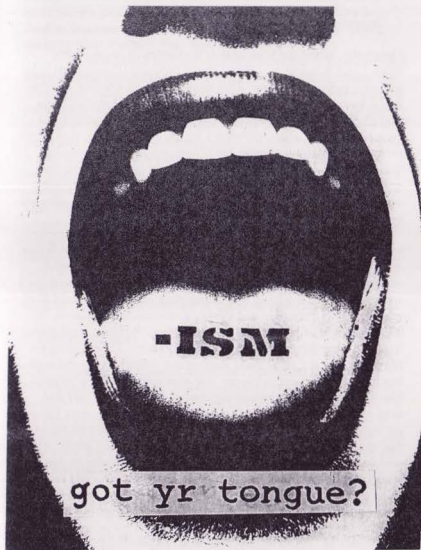
R: (*laughs*)

J: um ...

LC: awright. that's it. I'm soon to be a motion picture, correct?

R: (*more laughter*) who's gonna play you?

LC: not Denzel ... maybe Chuck D? but look, I'm outta here.



*Grammatica*

1. *Statement: Sarah*

Originally, when the idea of the “aesthetics of engagement” arose I had thought of writing about how experimentation is by nature a political gesture. This came about by reading *My Emily Dickinson* and the question posed by Susan Howe re: Stein and Dickinson, “Whose order is shut inside the structure of a sentence?” And also a statement by the author of the first European grammar book (Spain 1492) Antonio de Nebrija saying that language has always been the partner of empire. So this argument and this molding is as old as the hills. And to subvert language is by nature a challenge to what we have allowed ourselves to say and allowed the other to say.

So I was thinking, this is a good thing but it’s preaching to the converted because everyone more or less agrees with this. And the accusation that usually gets lobbed at experimental writing is not that it’s not political but that it is elitist. So there I was thinking in my head that subverting language is good like messing with grammar and syntax and meaning of words. It all sheds light on ways that we are trained to think. And then I had this experience with the man on the bike. I was sitting on the grass dirt at Crissy Field rigging my sail when a wind surfing friend pulled up in his car. He was followed by a bicyclist. The man on the bike was really mad at Igor (guy in car) and said you cut me off that was a hostile act. And Igor said I didn’t mean to make you brake I didn’t know you were going so fast etc. And the man on the bike said, “that was a hostile act,” and so on and so forth. Meanwhile I am a bystander to this scene and have already all my own prejudices involved here (for example, Igor is my friend) but I am thinking about this man on the bike, “Does he know what a hostile act is?”

Surely, the man on the bike knows what a hostile act is and surely he would agree (if he was not personally involved) that this was more an act of ignorance than an act of hostility as Igor claimed he was not trying to make him crash or brake or dominate him in any other fashion. Given that Igor’s claims are

true. So as this idiotic fight progresses and threatens to get violent I am saying to myself, “You know, you can’t just say an act of ignorance is an act of hostility just to serve your own ends, buddy. You are simply wrong, words have meaning and you can’t just go around saying black is white if black isn’t white.” And in this case there is a question of intent and Igor didn’t mean to scare the bicyclist. Igor erred.

Hours later I was still thinking how much it irritates me when people abuse language like that and refuse to follow the recognized rules and the world would be a much better place if people just tried to think a little more critically. But how can we say on the one hand that subverting language in poetry is good and right but subverting language in the everyday world is not. It seems to me that there isn’t any difference between my man on the bike saying “that was a hostile act,” and Gertrude Stein saying, “only a yellow and a green are blue.” They are taking language and making meaning new. If we want to say that we control the meanings of words and that dictionaries are subjective things written by people then we have to allow for the man on the bike. Because he like Gertrude Stein is presenting a world where for example a yellow and a green might be blue or an act of ignorance might be an act of hostility. And any argument to the contrary sounds fascist.

2. *Position: Elizabeth*

This is making me think of the constitution and free speech. Which includes, doesn’t it, free (critical) listening. Argument. Because one is always going to be USING language, the one on the bike or Miss Stein. I feel like a patriot loving free speech, and how English is so mobile and changing. Now I sound colonial, but I don’t mean it that way. I mean it is useful, used, all over the place.

I had a professor in college, a lawyer/scholar/Blackfoot Indian, who was researching all the documents, from the first proclamation set down at anchor, in order to—make these treaty promises be kept? But they are not kept, of course. It is a powerful tool.

My questions are: when is language *static* and when is it *plastic*? At what spots does it allow or create magic or beau-

ty or freedom (all of these things being different)? In what ways does it, when static—I assume, but also, when plastic—pressurize, suppress, disallow experience to be said or made (or had)? I remember Kathleen Fraser's husband talking, at a celebration of *Il Cuore*, about how her poems made his memories (his experience) of events in them MORE REAL.

My original thought was more toward words and their positioning. Why does it strike so much more profoundly, truly, in poems sometimes when something is said 'the wrong' or 'weird' way? Why can some things only be said this way? It is something about the magic of language, and that is not a one-way street. I mean the author is not in charge any more than the reader. In poems language is marred or changed and this gives it meaning, this makes it pretty, this is in revolt to standard practice; this lets Beauty or Truth have its place. Poetically, because of course this can happen in regular conversation, even in some legal briefs, I'm sure. Why do the marred places stick in one's head?

Another question: is standard practice an oxymoron?

What might concern me is more the elitism of it ('innovative poetry,' 'poetry') & why we cannot find a way to live more literarily—here you (or I) might even say religiously—why does the daily seem so dry and commercial nowadays? But there is truth to the marketplace, I can't help but think, and if not beauty (but yes beauty), humanity. I remember in another Native American Studies course, on film, a student asked how 'the tribes' had seen 'women' as 'beautiful' 'before' [whitey's films]. The teacher said that information was lost.

I don't know if I like having things (forms, Literature, History, movie ads) to break against, but the breaking itself seems necessary and vivid. Not to mention the (re)combining. What I mean by like is, I think being revolutionary ties you so to the thing(s) you are revolting against. I would prefer to move beyond that. Language is the guide. I am interested in the fact that grammar, when you trace it back, relates both to (MEANS BOTH) glamour and magic. For me, this indicates that I am not a fool to think that, using/abusing grammar/syntax, studying etymology, I can pull out ancient/futuristic knowledge, especially women's knowledge, and I think of the 'witches' burned for their spell(ing)(s). And I think of this tor-

ture/misunderstanding zooming across the ocean toward the mothers of these 'American' tribes.

I can make it how I want it to be. Or: 'can' 'I'? Intuit? But it is not all just a matter of opinion, because of, shared language. That might go back again, pop-psychologically, to the bicyclist.

Anonymous asks why I read so much, says 90% of his/her information comes from the street.

### 3. Telegram RE: *Revolutions & Grammars* (Sarah & Elizabeth)

"I pulled a Lead out of the Sleeve of my Gown and Wrapping it up in this Paper to give it Weight made a shift to hurl it to the Place where he could reach it." —Eliza Haywood, *The British Recluse*, 1722, quoted from *Popular Fiction By Women 1660-1730*, ed. Paula Backscheider & John Richetti, Oxford UP, 1996.

I pulled the lead out of my dress and hurled it to the place where it might hit him.

There is something called transformational grammar made up by Chomsky. Something about being "generative."

Why do they send linguistics outbound from the institute of technology?

There is also categorical/catagorial (?) grammar which looks at nouns and how they relate to each other.

[(Like Gert hey! *Arthur A Grammar.*)]

The point being we put rules on something that has no rules. Grammar is like a frame on language. There is one that we have agreed to use, the one with the eight parts of speech but we could make up endless amounts of frames for language each one making you think about something new and also missing something. Because it seems to me that language is not static but grammar is so grammar will never account for some of the more mysterious things about speaking, writing and meaning. And it will never account for its evolving nature.

yes plasticine language. the kids at school certainly are working with it like silly putty in their hands facing the school wall practicing english.

speaker reads from a scroll-like: blank faced  
wall eyed  
hot wired hussy

sections of piles of data; loose information—trope  
speaking by rote who is not using these things but using

dressed like the blue heart of definitely

dressed like a male sitcom character

this other other other

\*\*

it is a terrible theme

what does it mean disposable seeing all over the place what  
does it mean imagining a parkway over commons over trash by  
the bayshore

it is or is not shocking and confusing that DEFACED

old information in piles on the forthright and inside  
the hollowed out book (cf. S. Gevirtz)

posed under hidden  
and/or

She was more Estab. & I reattaching these hands felt strangely  
also  
gin & tonic

photographs of the bomb threat or local resort

\*\*\*\*

speaker 1: Census!

who is here and who is speaking for you?

I have copied one or another of the specific symbols laid out

here was what I meant when I said.  
empty or remnant or faded domestic or art(ifact)  
How many of us are here?

(they fell how the hair fell. learn to tie your apron. wear it  
upon heavy shoulders. for nine years old. learn to dust carefully these strange ornate shelves of glass figurine and container. listen carefully to how it is you must now speak if speak at all. see out the window. see your top sheet. shall not speak again that dirty filthy. saved, the lady mouths with small bits of marmalade in her tea)

\*\*\*\*\*For instance there is no connection here in your response and I get to say this because there are rules. If you refuse to answer the question are you refusing the meaning? parallel text and talking without listening cause maybe it's revolutionary or maybe it just is how she is one stuck in history having been brainwashed against the speech of her childhood and tribal linguistic. thots unsaid or even formed.

maybe.

and how many of them.

where did you learn that

by rote here is what I meant, repeating over and over.

I meant the book store or I meant the german parliament

something kingly conceded in speaking

Are we all agreeing here?

(Speaker 2, interrupting:  
as everyone knows i don't speak to my father.  
or if you have another sadness. hostility)

this is to be read as a dialogue but someone is putting words  
into your mouth.

whose mouths made, a contract, the space of the wall and one's  
hands on it.

i know this chiefly from the Mouths of whom

what does it mean when you stick your tongue out?

I am hungry and the curved spine stands for bread and cheese

still with a kind of order so still this kind of understanding.  
The wish was to unravel.

that flat spine stands for money and caliber.

we have no spine at all except crying and crying was so said  
and put.

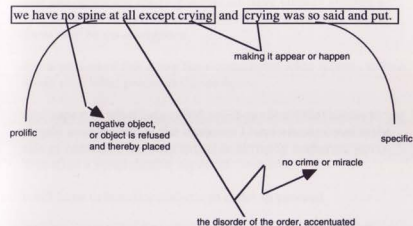
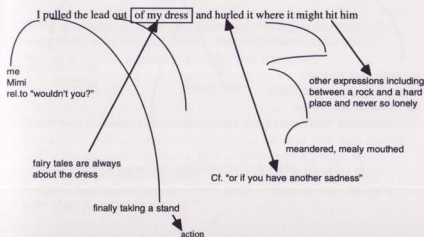
can we switch what you say for what I say and interchange  
them. create a new person where you are not you and I am not  
and vice versa.

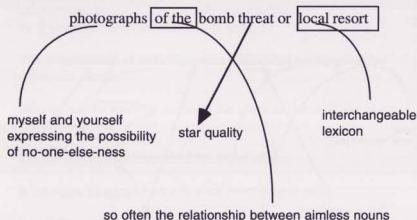
4. Telegram: diagrammed

### temporary grammar

8 parts of speech

words meant to arouse pity  
words with star quality  
words which meander  
words which invite/invoke  
words which take a stand  
words which look like they are about you but really are about me  
words which cloister or cluster  
words which bind





Remember this is only a toy grammar  
now you try.

## ROD SMITH

### A Tract

*Being an attempt to set out the dialectic of history as an erotics of exaggerated attention and to assay the implications of this view relative to poetics, politics, philosophy, and astronomy.*

We are reduced.

Some will choose to abandon poetry for a mindless "prosperity," others will withdraw into silence (a kind of writing), others will write in small circles. A few will attempt a public resistance, however such resistance is well characterized by Pete Seeger's recent statement—"they used to have to beat us back, now they just drown us out."

It is difficult at this time to see what is happening as "a swinging of the political pendulum." The optimistic reading of the current political situation makes the analogy to the Europe of the 1820s and 1830s—a hiatus before the ruling classes come to recognize, largely by being made to recognize, that it is in their interest to treat people as though they have a right to exist. The analogy asserts that this is now taking place on a global scale. The less optimistic reading is that we have already entered a new dark age (television as the Catholic Church) from which there may be no emergence.

Some readers of this essay have considered what follows to be a break with what precedes this sentence.

One aspect of what gets called avant-garde art that seems to me largely unexamined in the literature I have encountered is the role of nonsense, the acontextual or abruptly acoherent (excoherent) as a generalizable aspect of these arts.

I will have to invent a dialectic in order to proceed.

As I am not a trained (perhaps not even an untrained) philosopher I am a bit reticent about my ability to articulate nonsense

as a convincing paradigm, but as I have chosen it as a paradigm I will have recourse to a certain amount of it, & so remain untroubled as to how to proceed. Stop.

Perhaps when both are present, sense & nonsense, that is what we call poetry.

Of course, both sense & nonsense are always present. & so it is a matter of taking a context & revealing both its sense & its lack of sense. The sense may be common or not, the nonsense may be boring or not. Here is a dialogue written three years ago, aspects of which I then had, & still have reservations about. The genesis of the dialogue, which was delivered as a paper at the American Popular Culture Conference in Las Vegas in 1995 and, partially, at the NYC Poetry Talks Conference, also in 1995, was in Paul Mann's "The Nine Grounds of Intellectual Warfare," Ted Berrigan's fake interview with John Cage, & the issues of sense & nonsense as they relate to avant-garde artistic practice which this essay purports to address. It is composed of misattributed appropriation, properly attributed appropriation, and inappropriately unappropriated material.

### "The Cide of the West": John Cage, Ted Berrigan, & the Unpopular Artist as Outlaw

—*cide*, a learned borrowing from the latin meaning "killer,"  
"the act of killing," used in the formation of compound words.

"The theoretical abandonment of the absolute is rarely accompanied by its disappearance: the absolute returns in a ghostly form, haunting precisely those discourses that claim to have left it behind, and that continue to orient themselves around its evacuation. Nevertheless, this half-waking from the half-dream of absolute reason returns us to a primal dialectical scene, to a war for recognition now without stakes. In the farcical relativism that results, dominance is ever more explicitly a matter not of truth but of force. And if we discover that we have never gone further, that force is all that ever mattered, can we say that the dialectic ever occurred at all?" —Paul Mann

"Both belief and denial throw existence into question."

—Carla Harryman

From an interview with Ted Berrigan at the 2nd Ave Deli:

Rod Smith: Ted, how might the decision of a judge be just?

Ted Berrigan: To be just, the decision of a judge must not only follow a rule of law or a general law but must also assume it, approve it, confirm its value, by a reinstituting act of interpretation, as if ultimately nothing previously existed of the law, as if the judge himself invented the law in every case. [ Transcriber's note: A creative act is also declaritive in this sense. ]

John Cage: Art is criminal action.

Jacques Derrida: We need first of all a music, a society, in which not only are sounds just sounds but in which people are just people, not subject, that is, to laws established by any one of them, even if one is "the composer" or "the conductor" or "the computer."

Berrigan: Perhaps then the first violence is the formal and ideal

reduction of the complexity of conflict to a dialectical system. If history is what hurts perhaps heresy is what heals.

Derrida: Or perhaps a conversing violence, excuse me, I mean mischief, not violence. But as soon as one leaves a or this order, perhaps mythological, perhaps not—but as soon as one leaves, history begins.

Berrigan: 'Tis strange the mind, that fiery particle  
Should let itself be snuffed out by an Article.

Cage: But what did we possibly mean when we say "history begins."

Thich Nhat Hanh: It depends on the state of one's finances.

(longish pause in conversation)

Berrigan: "Go now  
and get me a vast band-aid"

Robert Duncan: This is the greivous impatience and the ecstatic patience we are fired by as we apprehend in all the disorders of our personal and social life the living desire and intent at work towards new orders.

Derrida: That's nice. (pause) John, Do you believe all good art is unengaging?

Cage: Yes I do.

Derrida: But I know several police officers that find art engaging.

Cage: The problem is that the police are unloved. The police in New York are all paranoid. . . they were so hateful for so long that everybody got to hate them, and that just accumulated and built up. The only answer to viciousness is kindness. The trouble is that kids just haven't realized that you've got to make love to the police in order to solve the problem.

Derrida: But how do you force love on the police?

Cage: Make love to them. We need highly trained squads of lovemakers to go everywhere & make love. I think this is important because it is the basis of everything, and no one talks about it.

Berrigan (with tears in his eyes): That was beautiful John, I'm sorry about those things I said about your mother.

Cage: O, that's sweet of you Ted. & you know I've always said one should start from zero, so please continue your apology.

Berrigan: Well John, it's just that, at the time I wrote that fake interview I was really bombed—I'd been taking Ginseng for about two weeks. I know there's problematic stuff there—a kind of juvenile heterosexed territorialism. Do you think I was threatened by your homosexuality?

Bob Perelman: My new book of essays is due out any day now.

Cage: That may have been part of it, Ted, but don't you think you were also convinced of the badness of human nature.

Woody Allen: I liked your early funny films best, Bob.

Berrigan: There seems to be a fair amount of evidence to support that assumption, John.

Kathy Acker (quoting Shaw): "Duty is the primal curse from which we must redeem ourselves."

Berrigan: God I love that.

Cage: Kathy, do you think the artist is an outlaw?

Acker: The citizen is an outlaw. Sometime around 1970 the role of the avant-garde began to change from that of being ahead of the pack to that of laughing at anybody who thought they knew what they were talking about, or who thought it mattered if they did. As of 1995 the Fortune 500 controlled 63% of retail

business in the U.S.—I wld guess that figure would be much higher in other countries. We don't have a civil society, therefore our work must be read with irrelevance in mind. Irrelevance, not particularly of the artist, but of the individual member of society.

Marcel Duchamp: I recently picked up a free postcard of Marcel Duchamp holding a box upon which was emblazoned the message "I Am Not A Role Model"—it is unclear whether this message was added to the photograph or whether it was in fact Duchamp's message. So, immediately, and in several ways with regard to this photograph—"the sense is larger than one can say." Not only is Duchamp not a role model, but the person or persons that may have placed the message on the postcard are not a role model—& more importantly, or at least, most explicitly, representation itself is not a role model.

Morton Feldman: Let's take some drugs & drive around.

Tom Brokaw: Neither negativity nor optimism are in the end satisfying, useful, effective, or accurate. The farce of perception's elided masking reverberates like a lost or stolen nucleus of conscious paucity. Similarly, the ordained electro-chemical book of modern post-modern incision-dissonance is sub-unconsciously impelled toward a backward looking impediment in a field of lumpy evening line-ups.

John Cage: Let's take some drugs & drive around.

Tom Brokaw: What someone says on a particular occasion may be said to be nonsense if it is obviously false.

Morton Feldman: Anything anyone says is false.

Tom Brokaw: So everything is nonsense? Including what you just said?

Feldman: Obviously.

Lyn Hejinian: Argument demonstrates that truth cannot end.

Tom Brokaw: I'm not arguing.

Lyn Hejinian: I know, & that's the problem.

Terence McKenna: Use of psychedelics demonstrates that our cognitive limits are undefineable. There's no limit to what we know or can know.

Thich Nhat Hanh: But that don't pay the bills, Terence. I mean, I know it does for you, since you get paid for saying such things.

George Oppen: We are not the mystery, the mystery is that there is anything for us to stand on.

Kathy Acker: Maya as alienation.

Disembodied voice speaking as if through a tube: A position must not only be held, but advanced. The surrounding territory must come under its influence and control.

Jonathan Kozol: The end of war is the end of knowledge, if ya know what I don't mean.

Nicholson Baker: The demand that one be on one's own side, that one stand by one's word, is so standard a feature of intellectual ethics and politics that it has been taken completely for granted.

The Illinois State Legislature, in unison: It is necessary to comprehend the force of extremely difficult ideas.

Gabe Kotter: d'ya hear abt the 500 lb. parrot—says Polly wants a cracker, NOW.

Colin Powell: Discourse as 500 lb. parrot.

The in unison Illinois State Legislature, again: Alienation is maya.

Mark Wallace: Arbitrary repression is the most likely course of

events,

Buck Downs, cutting him off: Avant-gored.

John Cage: Yes, or I often use the word "useful" then, because it has attained the level of high artifice.

Ted Berrigan: What do you mean by "high" there John? The emotions?

John Cage: No, well, a kind of imbalance (pronounced by Cage "im-bay-lance").

Ted: Yes, or I often use the word "useful" then.

G.W.F.: The infinite divisibility of matter simply means that matter is external to itself.

Bob Weir: The Spirit is also infinitely divisible. Maya is a compliment to & counter-force to Power in Foucault's sense. It is quite true however that the categories are not contained in the sensation as it is given. No one has a clue.

Carla Harryman: There is, I believe, a way to regain consciousness. . .

John Cage: It's fun to do things by hand.

Carla Harryman: . . . You have to move around as if you were part of something else.

Morton Feldman: O wow.

Perhaps most notable in this dialogue is a kind of hysterical relation to what Bourdieu has called the field of cultural production (see *The Field of Cultural Production* by Pierre Bourdieu). This hysteria seems to me an entirely accurate and justifiable response. The piece partakes of the fine tradition of hysterical overstatement. Well, I don't know if it's "fine," but it is a tradition. There's nothing in it quite as good as Kevin Davies' line:

"Will fuck for books, no weirdos" but the general tenor is comparable.

This hysteria, admittedly micro-political & schizo-typical, has its roots in the inescapability & simultaneous (supposed?) non-existence of the dialectic (as suggested by Paul Mann in the envoi). To clarify, the existence of the force of the dialectic is cause for hysteria, & as a generalized force reduces the dialectic to non-existence. The dialectic used to have to beat us back, now it just drowns us out. Anchored in finitude, the provocative overdetermination of our utterance designs experience *back at us*. Our only recourse feels photographic, eyes closed, the camera speaks—its no-mind vanishing before, during, & after the click snap.

Steve Evans, in the first *Impercipient Lecture Series*, cites the Hegelian Adornism "abstraction as lack of articulation." I am conflating that with Michel Serres' "when we close our eyes we lose the power of abstraction." This is our vision of history. The abstraction of history is inescapably inscribed on the things around us.

When we close our eyes, history becomes parody (if alone), or desire (if not), or *was it the other way round*. In any case, it is in poetry that these internal states are externalized.

& so Paul Mann is wrong, the dialectic quite clearly exists, it is between history & not-history. Its syntheses is poetry.

The gap between the signifier & signified is just one of many such gaps. Icarus is falling everywhere (Joan Retallack).

& so Wittgenstein's skeptical paradox extends to our thinking about history. The skeptical paradox is: "This was our paradox: no course of action could be determined by a rule, because every course of action can be made to accord with the rule." This in a sentence summarizes why Hegel could do what he did, & why Wittgenstein found him of no interest, & would not even consider addressing his work.

The dialectic is just nonsense. However, we cannot escape non-

sense, so we must pay attention to it.

Because one can view Hegel as a, perhaps the, grand demonstration of the skeptical paradox he is incredibly useful. He is the ultimate argument for the micro-political. The dialectic between history & not-history is an individual matter, those that understand this are the poets. To err is statemental (Bruce Andrews). History, what did the rose do? (Bernadette Mayer).

I am clearly arguing for a privileging of the cite of cognition, for an emphasis upon internality relative to these philosophical issues. A location of/as process which is areal (rather than surreal). Areal because no context is finite, whether internal or external. It seems to me that when one places such an emphasis, the contingency, & constructedness of the thought process becomes, well, "clear."

Or say any context is finite due only to our own limitations, our cognitive limits—inherently however, any context is infinite. All logic depends on a lie (Nietzsche). The contradictions are the knots we use to climb the rope (Ben Friedlander). Or even to make the rope.

If, as I have stated, poetry is the external manifestation of these internal processes we are obviously not speaking of poetry as a genre but as an event. A manner of thinking which is not easily characterized because it is precisely in its unrecoverable fluidity that the dialectic of history & not-history, becoming unrecoverable, exceeds or intends the sentence that would attempt to capture it.

Definitions are like law. And art is not concerned with law (John Cage).

As Chomsky has pointed out, the concept of cognitive limits leads to the understanding "that what can be understood can be understood by most people." As a result any elitist claims to "expertise" must be, um, how do you say, *vigorously questioned*.

It is because art is an act of individuated cognition (even when the art is collaborative) that Adorno's statement "Art, no matter

how tragic it may appear, tends toward the affirmative" is true.

Art's function is to create new circular definitions. The new is an eternal (though not everlasting) return of the open (which is closed). Time is ajar, even if it weren't, art, like a gas, would come in over the transom. Yet the pressure is such.

or, as Davies writes, again, the dialectic of history & not-history apparent:

For years  
a kind of conceptual art too ephemeral to be documented

This inability to document *even in the face of the paper trail* is what art has to say to law. It is a refusal of the primacy of codification via demonstration of perception's impenetrable fluidity. This is neither simple nor complex.

At the end of "One-Way Street" in a section called "To the Planetarium" Walter Benjamin writes:

Nothing distinguishes the ancient from the modern man [sic] so much as the former's absorption in a cosmic experience scarcely known to later periods. Its waning is marked by the flowering of astronomy at the beginning of the modern age. Kepler, Copernicus, and Tycho Brahe were certainly not driven by scientific impulses alone. All the same, the exclusive emphasis on an optical connection to the universe, to which astronomy very quickly led, contained a portent of what was to come. The ancients' intercourse with the cosmos had been different: the ecstatic trance. For it is in this experience alone that we gain certain knowledge of what is nearest to us and what is remotest from us, and never of one without the other. This means, however, that man can be in ecstatic contact with the cosmos only communally. It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable, and to consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights.

The operative dichotomy between the optical & the ecstatic trance is not entirely convincing yet I am attracted to the emphasis on the trance, an internal state, as having a significance

which has been lost. This, of course, would not be the trance of the spellbinding political orator. But then, what would it be? mushrooms? poetry? It would have to be a trance both active & passive, both individual & multiple. But don't we already have that. It would have to be available, surrounding, like music, & yet a choice, an active place, like Duchamp, like a Duchamp. The trance is material. The material is changing.

"It is quite true however that the categories are not contained in the sensation as it is given."

The spatial, unimpeded persistence of the playfully plagiarized trance-state (a good-natured ribbing)—can remark if not remake detail's clever wordplay (the emptiness of emptiness!) into a discovery of highly peculiar presence. Activity as pertinent decay, the posit of the erotic cognitive clutching incomprehensibility, gently, signlessness of a mere thing, gently, as lifting *into* life a moot logic of the exact, circling, behavior of be.

How's your foot?

The dichotomy between the spiritual and the political is also false, resulting from an incomplete attention to our erotic knowledge. (Audre Lorde)

In the erotic we measure, are measured, but do not *take* the measure—rather it is given by the power of our attention, exaggerated, *over* us.

But then back to Kevin. "If you have decks, clear them."

The crush of Only Capitalism throws us back on ourselves, meaning each other. The horror of what it has created us & the possibility of a being other than it, rest within our attentions multiplied—the measures escaped into "harmony," unlistened (im)penetrant amaterial sense mechanism of the seveled sharing cores, forwarded or lent-out. The person as temporal overstructure—

& we do not need, but rather already have, a poetics which is a constellatory & innate reflection of the intervention, the LIFE,

we embody. Affirmation of this is fact & political act. Our posture is good, the United States is not.

Joan Retallack: Do you think artists can change the grammar of the way we are together?

John Cage: (pause, & then laughing) We don't know, but we can try.

There's no way out by my death or consciousness. (Kathy Acker)

Wittgenstein said that philosophical conclusions should not be surprising.

Music was abstract before we were.

Sources for the dialogue:

Ted Berrigan, "Interview with John Cage," *Mother magazine* (1966)

*So Going Around Cities*

*Talking in Tranquility: Interviews*

John Cage, *Themes & Variations*

Robert Duncan, *Fictive Certainties*

Drucilla Cornell, *Deconstruction & the Possibility of Justice*

Lyn Hejinian, "The Rejection of Closure"

Paul Mann, "The Nine Grounds of Intellectual Warfare," *Postmodern*

*Culture*, v. 6, n. 2 (January, 1996)

George Oppen, *Collected Poems*

Joan Retallack, *Musicage: John Cage on words.art.music.*

*Collective Fauxetics*

*a.k.a. wHoSE pRoPeRtY iS tHiS anYWaY?*

*As a human being he may have moods and a will and personal aims, but as an artist he is "collective"—one who carries and shapes the unconscious, psychic life of mankind... the weal and the woes of the single human being does not count, but only human existence.*

*Karl Jung*

When the permissive becomes dismissive, the position becomes necrophilic.

To be absolutely sure is to be stagnant—the world has already changed while I was constructing my opinion. And so the language is in constant flux, as are the language arts. To embrace this is to embrace the social world we live in; to reject this is to retreat to a classical model where the relationship of poet to reader is already established.

Language seems to require less certainty.

There is no common currency in language, no normal language or speech—instead, each piece of language is a kind of door that opens into the present moment by a collective but “uncommon” experience.

Genuine experimentation or exploration always has a foot in the unknown—as such, how can it be prescriptive?

The man on the plane snores loudly, inclusively.

If a poetry is to document or even change the present world we live in, it can't rely on old forms. Though our age has shown that it can borrow old forms and bring new relevance to/from the past.

In a collective poetics, one poet is not responsible for communicating to one or many readers; instead, the community provides the context. The *voice* of a generation does not, then, come from one source or become the responsibility of one poet. This changes the question of accessibility.

To dismiss movements in art as trendy is risky—trends do not arrive out of a vacuum. The opposite of the trend would suggest a set of traditional guidelines put forth by the powers that be/were.

Of course, most readers hope to avoid distortion and discontinuity—who wants his or her world made unfamiliar—but isn't this a remake of Plato's allegory?

The past links us to an incomplete picture of what we are not; however, it gives us intelligence and technique to engage our experience in what we presently are.

The risk of synthesis:

To be interested in, say, the lyric form *and* its limitations, mutations, distant fragmented cousins—this too is inclusion.

Poetic forms can be transfigured on all levels (e.g. advertising) and used in all traditions, but they don't come alive until the language is engaged *and composed* in the present. This might be something akin to “music.”

Change and doubt make good bedfellows, but the ego has to open with the first move.

Both the hero-poet and the anti-hero poet sit on the mount and speak their experiences to the reader. But the hand of the artist, the *makar*, the executor, is down here.

If all choices are randomly and/or equally decided, is that inclusive enough? Inclusion might say: *And*

Not new, but relevant. Each age requires forms, not necessarily new, to echo or relate to the conditions of that age. I call this relevance.

A disregard for relevance is like a disregard for history which is, for me, like a disregard for Auschwitz, Hiroshima and Hanoi.

Relevance in, say, Guatemala speaks to another history and another poetics.

Using language to directly communicate ideas and emotions is one option, but there are many others—both poets and readers of poetry have a harder time accepting this inclusion than they might in other genres.

Part of the problem and profit of alignment with a tradition is to communicate with a particular audience.

One problem with accessibility is that change takes time to absorb... responsibility to communicate with the future?

The poetry we have arrived at *is* our shared history—we haven't arrived here out of an arbitrary Modernist's invention.

*New York City, 1995 & 1998*

Sung to Son House's song "Am I Right Or Wrong."

110

A del-i-cate dit-to closed	Marble robe no-body knows-s-s	It's beg-or-be-nev-o-lent
Restless Indies wil-low trees	Index, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?	
Good night shift in-de-cen-cy-y-y	Hate to bead you on like that	Trip downtown meant car-o-s-
e-e-n Orphan lobby aquarium	Rol-ling lawnbugs let me in	Wasted, was-that-right-or-
wrong-g-g?		
Red dawn pain relievers	Os-ten-ta-tious Spanish-sh plaid	Nothing said leaves this room

111

Gobs of time to disappear	Axis of midtown tumbleweed	Maryland bucket griddle theme
Is that supposed to be 1-800-HOT-DUCK?	Russel Stover my Russell Stover	Innocent
dealership landed in my lap	Gleaming edgiest tool of conceit	Har-rem-m-m, was-that-right-
or-wrong-g-g?		
Tedious ripchord bakery trick	Ordering-off-the-aspic	Righted sixteen wheel hickor-y-y-y
Where are those drinks, gorgoeous!	Rubric-of-leftovers	On top of that you want my word
Not <i>your</i> representation to make	Glass-guppy-lovers	A trope, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?
Marimba-gliders	In-s-in-cere fish handlers	Rancid-depth-of-well-spring-ensemble
jamboree-ee-ee	Goat-parts scotch envy-y-y	Hardly noticed did they give it back?
ti-n-i-est moral clip-on	Or-bit-al read-i-ness spillage tray-ay-s	Rear back and treadmill

What is that you're doing with your hands?      Re-distributed same ol' seed packs      Open wide,  
was-that-right-or-wrong?

No-need-to-think because      Glue sticks I'm gon-na      Apply in a fix-x-x      Move-it, was-that-  
right-or-wrong-g-g?

112

I'm-too-shy-to-cook-for-lent      Rural haberdash dressing rooms      In the end you'll have my boat  
Go buy yourself a new pair for crying outloud      He doubted even his own account dude      Touted  
during the dancing mushroom sequence      On Christmas Day they said it best      Repeat that ornate  
unexamined bit      Where the other hides from the other other      Run-d-o-w-n-n-n, was-that-right-  
or-wrong-g-g?

Orange-suburban-apple-dip      Norbert's forgery stamp de-tec-tor      Getty-up tablecloth foldings  
Agreed to a corner flowershop      Make the time to en-tre-pren-eur      I just got signed to an onion  
peel      Rayon blend in Mason's cape      Idiomatic five string leverage      Guitar strum-min-n-n  
an empathy spree      Help-les-s-s sh-shoulder strapless stampede      Totem aft-er-thought you still  
wanted that?      O-o-o brother-r-r, was-that-right-or-wrong?

113

Round-the-clubhouse-crippled-pie      Wearing a soft culprit's grin      Really lonesome without you  
there      Opus county poet's crop      Nix that, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?  
Get on the good-time-municipal      A-l-l-l-l the fish in      Make-believe pond      Indecent Ellis I-  
s-land de-bu-tante      Reluctant, was-that-right-or-wrong?

I-got-a-logo-it's-real-sweet      Greased-my-ankles-with-a      Heaven-ly-oint-ment-treat      Tell  
me, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

Or-din-a-r-y pithy-y-y      Rancor among the core group      Weasel medication lost on beavers  
Rations, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

114

On a snowcone m-o-u-n-tain top      Numbers of banquets I've had to miss      Gown-and-pup-tent  
balladeers      A red roof inn polaroid      Mar-vel-o-u-s mid-thigh underwear      I-took-my-  
medallion-to-a-midwest-fair      Ran-my-ass-right-out-of-there-re-re      It's a pod you find humor in  
that?      Guess again, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

Hurry up with those judgements please      The other upper leather shoe drops      Old time army

choir flare up      Redwoods to go before we sleep-p-p...      Wayward believers beef bureau  
Rest of the night in the shed jack      Orders of books before we sleep-p-p...      No backlog?, was-  
that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

Grieve-masters-s-s      An-other-day-has-passed-for-plot      Mayflower morass-s-s tassel-l-l-s-s-s  
In-ter-na-t-i-o-nal farmhouse spa espousal-l-l      Rewards in the quarrelsome cake-drop      In my  
sundek tavern snack      Ginseng, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

115

Half-a-lecture parka tone      Tribulations for test-tube love      Open thugs-s-s & sultry nuns-s-s  
Roundhouser borderline-host      Wired my life for my smokehouse friends      Ratings for the cattle  
calls      Oxen games and house of falls      Nova Scotia penmanship      Gore soft-en-er bullet  
stopper      A vegetarian hell-raiser-r-r      Mock trailer of groans & sighs      Instantly warmly

disoriented in            River-deet, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

116  
Idle-tower days & nights            Gosh so there's only *one* way to communicate            He's going right on up  
to those pigeons, man            The pleats are way off again            Office shower another spongy cliff  
Rushing past the secretary pool            Weath-er-ing a read-y-wear in-ter-ro-ga-tion            Re-gion-al par-  
a-legal legends sold my            Old-Saab-to-the-son-of-a-Tuc-son-Ute            Nope, was-that-right-or-  
wrong-g-g?

Garish facts of musketeers            A dusty DNA exercise bike            Miles to go on the stationary trial  
Icognito mill control            Rumpled-tobacco-philanthropy            Inner Berlin now-you-tell-us storage  
patties            Gyrate, was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

Have-it-later mom feeling            Those theoretical flannel outposts            Overtly ersatz see-saw  
Reebok a pop-up compound vid-e-o-o            White stucco-o-o nobody knows            Rapture tarzan bathing  
trunks            Om-i-n-o-u-s daisy iced tea gone            Natural as Gaza stagnates the twitching            Gaslit  
hour, tell me was-that-right-or-wrong-g-g?

117  
  
NOTE:            As a constraint to echo the form of a traditional blues song, each phrase in this poem—signalled by the long caesura followed by capitalization—begins with the first letter from the title of the song AM I RIGHT OR WRONG.

## DODIE BELLAMY

### Reading Tour

NEW YORK, ST. MARK'S POETRY PROJECT, APRIL 29, 1998

The Bronx, Kevin and I are in St. Raymond's, the church where the Lindbergh baby's ransom money was dropped off. Kevin's showing me the different crannies, the baptismal, the organ loft, the altar, the reliquary, and then we get to the candles you can light for the dead, several rows of clear red tubes on tiers. The "candles" are inside. Kevin puts a dollar in the collection box and presses a button. Up comes a flame. I ask him who the candle is for. "All the people who died of AIDS." That evening at a wedding reception we dance alone to "My Funny Valentine." The lights of the hall are dimmed, and high above us the ceiling glows the same red as the candles, helium balloons snuggle against it, metallic hearts left over from another party. "Your looks are laughable, unphotographable, yet you're my favorite work of art ..." Kevin and I twirl clockwise until I grow dizzy. I'm resistant to taking this scene anywhere, to nudging it into meaning: Tragic Mortality. The red rhymes, this is what matters. And, I guess, the human connection.

In Chelsea we buy sandwiches and lunch on the docks with Joe Westmoreland. Decaying concrete and no shelter from the sun, a yacht shaped like a bullet slips by. Joe tells us how Charlie used amateurs in his porn video and the amateurs couldn't keep hard. A few feet away an aging man wearing headphones and a white string bikini throws his arms over his head and dances. After three years Joe's having his Hickman catheter removed, he's excited. His e-mails detail the effects of his medications, lead runs through his veins one week, then his energy increases and he gets lots of writing done, then his vision blurs and he has to stop. During the final chase scene in *The Peacemaker*, when the Bosnian tries to blow up Manhattan with the nuclear bomb he carries in a blue backpack, an aerial camera zooms over these docks. "Look!" exclaims Kevin. "That's where we were, with Joe."

Travel poetry is the worst, at more than one reading about Italy or South America I've whispered cattily s/he never should have left San Francisco.

WASHINGTON, D.C., RUTHLESS GRIP, MAY 2, 1998

At the Vietnam Memorial we see ourselves reflected in the shiny black marble, ghosts among the wreaths. With a pencil and a sheet of notebook paper a woman makes a rubbing of a name. Kevin cries.

Mark Wallace says to me, "Dismemberment and disembodiment ... they're the same thing!" It's been a long time since I've felt this understood. We're at Stetson's, which, they say, is Monica Lewinsky's favorite saloon.

CHICAGO, COLUMBIA COLLEGE, MAY 5, 1998

O'Hare, 2:30 in the afternoon, sitting at the regional bus terminal across from the Hilton. A woman walks out of the hotel in a black strapless evening gown with a floor-length skirt that puffs out from her hips. Around her naked arms is draped a black shawl, a string of jewels sparkles around her neck. She looks like a black princess. On the other side of a plate glass window in my immovable seat and wrinkled travel clothes, I watch her with the awe of a child. A limo arrives, and a man in a tuxedo takes her black gloved hand. My mother got to ride inside a stretch limo and she said it was fabulous, couch, TV, bar, phone, everything. She was across the street sitting with Anita on her front steps when a limo pulled up. The driver was a friend of Anita's husband, just stopping by. Anita winked at my mother and said, "How about giving us a ride around the block." "Sure." Anita's husband was appalled, but the two women laughed and climbed on in.

I'm resistant to ideas here, I just want to create analogues. Analogues can be very powerful, can make the body spurt juices.

My mother's house, a two bedroom green-shingled house with a third bedroom added when it was deemed Joey and I were

too old to share a room. It's raining hard so I step out on the front porch to experience the fullness of it, but protected. Across the street a couple of houses down I see a dark figure, a man near the curb, leaning against an elm. There's such a stillness about him, he looks like a silhouette cut out of the down-pour. He has one leg bent at the knee, the sole of his foot pressed against the tree trunk. I think I see him move, dart back inside, peek from the door—a figure so wooden, so dark, so ominous *noir invades suburbia* a stranger who could lock children in trunks, an anybody who could rip out hearts while they're still beating. I call my mother, "Look." "Oh that thing!" She rolls her eyes. "I hate that thing, it smokes a pipe, it's so stupid." She says you buy them at lawn stores. I don't admit I thought it was a real person. Lawn figures are popular in Hammond, particularly lawn geese, three-foot high concrete geese which housewives dress up for holidays—lawn goose with Pilgrim outfit for Thanksgiving, pumpkin outfit for Halloween, Santa-suited lawn goose. The lawn goose on her front porch is wearing a gray hooded sweatshirt. "For the winter?" I joke. She tells me of a neighbor's lawn frog that was stolen. A week later the owners received the first of many photos mailed to them anonymously, photos which ultimately documented their frog's cross-country vacation, the lawn frog at the Grand Canyon, the lawn frog in San Francisco with the Golden Gate Bridge in the background. Her favorite was the frog on a plane, framed by the faces of two smiling pilots. The pictures were published in the local paper. When the frog's vacation was over it reappeared in its yard. The next night my mom invites me to "go to the boat" with her, one of the casinos floating on Lake Michigan. Her favorite, with a Mardi Gras theme, is docked in East Chicago across the road from Inland Steel. She seems unmoved by the mill, a megalithic monster sprawling for blocks, spewing out smoke and pollution into the night sky, while I in the passenger seat grunt, "Wow." She points to a building. "See that smoke stack that's spitting fire ... that's where your brother works." Joey, who is a crane operator, sits in a compartment that hovers above molten vats. The compartment is refrigerated, so he's considered lucky. He got bladder cancer in his thirties, a disease usually limited to elderly men. He blames it on the poisonous fumes. As our four-door pulls up to the casino parking garage, above us, 400 feet in

the air, looms a huge oval sign glittering with flashing lights. SHOWBOAT. Behind it, in the background, industrial hell. My mother still has my late father's handicapped sticker, so we get to park right by the door. (He died last summer, but it's good to the year 2000.) For these people, I think, there can never be too much gilt on the lily—clothing on a lawn goose, slot machines with skulls that double your winnings.

TUCSON, P.O.G., MAY 9, 1998

During our final descent into the Tucson airport, Kevin points to a tumbleweed and starts singing, "I've got spurs that jingle-jangle-jingle." I can't stop laughing.

We get to spend the night in the Poet's Cottage, the University of Arizona's adorable adobe guest house for visiting poets. On the bookcase in the living room is a guestbook with poets' signatures dating back to 1992—some are dead, most I've never heard of. Susan Howe stayed for a month. Tom Centolella hailed from the Bay Area. Many poets have added ecstatic compliments about the cottage. In the living room is a couch, two easy chairs, a coffee table holding coffee table books, a large gas heater poking out of the fireplace. The mantle is loaded with religious icons, Christian and Native American—Virgin Mary candles, little brightly-painted human-shaped things. Two walls are lined with framed broadsides of dreadful poems, things like "when I grow older my words will come from a distant place deeper inside myself." Lots of useless line-breaks. References to saguaro. Being forced to live with these broadsides, I conclude, constitutes Poetic Ritual Abuse. No wonder there's so many empty wine bottles in the utility room. From the coffee table I pick up a small clay animal bank, not any animal you'd recognize from nature, but the bank reads as animal nevertheless. The bank rattles as I turn it upside down. No cork on the bottom, I guess you have to break it to get the coins. *How poetic* I think, unkindly.

The Poet's Cottage is better stocked than a bomb shelter—hammered metal mirrors and lamps, candleholders, sunscreen. The Holy Bible. Clock radio, TV at the foot of the bed (no cable), 4 clear channels, lots of ghosts. Southwestern tchotchkes galore.

Screen door, front porch, patio in back. Shelves of poetry books in dining room and study, in the living room a case of books on Arizona history, nature, and culture. Three boxes of Kleenex. A barbecue grill, bag of charcoal and a typewriter on the closet floor. Central air conditioning. Refrigerator containing peanut butter, bottled water, coffee (decaf and regular) and two jars of premium fruit preserves. It's as if the poetry fairy godmother has anticipated all the poet's needs—toaster oven, Mr. Coffee, coffee grinder, assorted black and herbal teas, spice rack, two boxes of crackers, honey, olive oil, assorted utensils including a vintage egg beater, wire whisk, barbecue fork, cork screw, pots and pans, plates and bowls, lots of coffee cups. Wine glasses. Herbal shampoo and conditioner, Curél Therapeutic Moisturizing Lotion, three packages of dental floss, toothpaste, typing paper, drawerful of University of Arizona envelopes, lawn recliner, dining room table, double bed, dresser, tea kettle. There was no dingo saliva on the bloody, tattered baby clothes, no dingo fur either. Cat hairs. Because of this the dingo baby's mother goes to jail. The traces are so minute. My mother saw a TV show that examined the dirt and debris in a "clean" hotel room. Under ultraviolet microscopic sensors, traces of shit were everywhere, on the phone receiver, the door knob. Sperm was sprayed on the wall. "Yuck!" she shook her head and stuck out her tongue. In the Poet's Cottage, Kevin and I are sure that sperm is sprayed on the walls. This gives us a good chuckle. There's something creepy, zoolike about the idea of a poet's cottage. In the morning we're awakened by animals hooting and howling. Coyotes? Mockingbirds mocking coyotes? Mocking me?

Everywhere I turn in the Poet's Cottage, poetry closes in. I'm desperate for prose that isn't about Arizona. Finally on the coffee table I find the Afro-American poetry and prose anthology from Penn, turn to an excerpt from Jean Toomer's *Cane*. I haven't looked at Toomer since the 70s—it's a description of a woman he's in love with, a lazy trashy woman whose name starts with A, but Toomer seems more interested in describing the landscape than her. I'm intrigued by this woman and the way Toomer's subjectivity obscures her. More of a perfume than a footprint. I feel so Laura Mulvey *male gaze* until I remember a poem I wrote in my 20s, a scathing poem about my

Vietnam vet boyfriend. He tossed it back at me, "This poem isn't about me it's about you." He was brutal, but he was right. Around that same time, for a date with a poet I wanted to fuck I bought a flowing white blouse woven with thin metallic threads, the fabric was rather sheer and I was aware my naked breasts were visible beneath it. Sitting across from me in the Universal Cafe he said, "That's a perfect poet's blouse." Later that evening he took it off. Life was good. Now coyotes are mocking me.

The condiment bar at the Tucson McDonald's offers jalapenos and salsa. Walking over there I bump into a cactus, the kind with flat, paddle-shaped pads. Instantly my right forearm and elbow are loaded with short red prickles, thin as threads. Kevin pulls some out with his well-developed nails and I want to lick him like a grateful German Shepherd. Since the hair on my arm is also red, I have to put on glasses and lightly brush my arm with a finger to locate the remaining prickles ... prickle ... a coarser, stinging analogue of my own hair ... oh no, I'm feeling a poetic moment welling up ... the metaphors start festering, the lines start breaking I want to write a poem about riding on the back of Daddy's Harley whizzing past saguaro though I know not what a saguaro is.

On the way home at an airport giftshop I buy a refrigerator magnet, a howling coyote carved out of some lightweight stone, with TUCSON etched in its tail. A charcoal-colored crescent moon is attached to its body with white cord, three colorful plastic beads are strung on either side of the moon. A fetish(y) object. Kevin, who's of the opinion that refrigerator magnets should be tacky, says this one isn't tacky enough. I tell him he needs to broaden his definition of tackiness. The head looks more like a long-eared pig than a coyote, a howling long-eared pig, hole poked in the stone for an eyeball, it's on my refrigerator right now holding up a recipe for Tomato Butternut Soup.

*Subjectivity as an enfant terrible ... ravenous* a different kind of poetry reigns among San Francisco's avant garde: deepness has been replaced by smarts. The experimental poet who proclaimed, "I just had an exciting intellectual exchange!" What happened to "conversation" I wondered. It's such a burden to have to pull off smart, it certainly silences me at cocktail parties. "Secret dinners are held in the East Bay when important poets come to visit." I stare vacantly out my bedroom window at the overcast sunset. Dark gray mass edged with pink, and then the gray dissipates and I watch a salmon-colored lamb float upward, turn into a dog. The frog beside it turns into a centaur. In the Poet's Cottage I'd wrestle out a symbol; in postmodern San Francisco I'd refer to Wittgenstein. Now the pink has all gone and I follow a faint gray bird skeleton, the higher it rises the whiter it grows, the bluer the sky. I think of the time we went out to dinner with Arthur Suits, a research chemist at UC Berkeley. Kevin asked him, "Arthur, what makes the sky blue?" And I asked him, "Why isn't the sky blue all the way down?" Passing the Kung Pao Chicken, Arthur recalled the "old classroom exercise" where you place a drop of milk in a glass of water and the water looks blue, it's about reflection and density. Something, I can't remember what, isn't dense enough close to the ground, that's why it's not blue down here. I looked at Kevin and he looked at me, our looks said that neither of us had ever seen or heard of anybody dropping bits of milk into blue water.

Beneath me in the doorway of the Euro car shop a homeless man sits on a pale blue blanket, writing on a sheet of notebook paper. Above his head is painted NO PARKING ANY TIME. He's very intent on what he's doing, doesn't look up at me like most people sitting on the street do, like they can sense my stare. He's a regular—a tall, thin, attractive, black man who wears a gray cloth wrapped around his head in a low turban. He's propped a large section of corrugated cardboard on its side in an L-shape as a shield against the wind. His office. His legs are outstretched, with a *Bay Guardian* on his lap, the notebook paper on top of the newspaper. His desk. His dark blue pants have sharp creases but are too short revealing his ankles.

His black running shoes are untied, never any socks. Once I saw him eating Cheerios out of a plastic bag. At night his cardboard office, flattened and laid on the sidewalk, becomes a bed. Sometimes, he places it on top of his outstretched body. A roof. He stops writing and studies a small publication that is printed in two columns. Then he begins writing again. I could get rid of him if I wanted to, all I have to do is dial 553-0123 and utter the words, "Homeless encampment." But I never call the cops, even when his shouting wakes me at night, I peek around the window shade, he's alone down there, pacing in circles, his mouth going a mile a minute.

"So what's this piece about," Kevin asks me. "Just that you feel out of it?" In *Mimic* an autistic boy embodies the romantic notion of the artist, the lone soul outside of society wrestling with beauty. The boy sits by the window, watches insect men stalking humans. As he rocks and clicks soup spoons together his face remains impassive. He calls them "Funny shoes." Not "insect men." Because he can name the brands of everybody's shoes. He points to famed entomologist Mira Sorvino's feet. "Nine West." "He's good at this," she exclaims. Details open to him, he makes delicate wire sculptures of the insect men, and when he's captured they don't eat him. He wanders among them, a terrified mascot, clicking those spoons. I can relate to him so, yes, I guess I do feel out of it. When Johanna Drucker read here she talked about the self-censorship she inherited from the San Francisco avant garde, the squelching of her narrative impulses, and I could relate to that too. *Life is so enormous, thin-skinned, thick-skinned, sometimes, but not always, gleaming.* In bell hooks' *Wounds of Passion* the biggest crime is not being able to speak her mind. I was struck by hooks' unflinching belief that whatever's on her mind is of urgent importance. Speaking one's mind, that's what an essay is supposed to be about, right? My mind spoken. What happens to a mind that is spoken? Does it become a ghost? Do you lose a speck of mind when you speak it? Does it spout wings and flap off like the evil stepmother's raven in *Snow White*? Does an irrevocably changed trace remain? White letters on black T-shirt I pass on Castro Street:

Respond  
Release  
Regret  
Repeat.

#### SAN FRANCISCO, BOOK PARTY, JUNE 7, 1998

After ten years of writing it and three hard years of finding a publisher, *The Letters of Mina Harker* is finally out. I'm standing in Norma and Rob's dining room in my wedding reception outfit, a severely simple black dress and a vintage choker, a wide garland of multi-colored rhinestones that sparkle beneath the spotlights, I'm holding a bouquet of roses, my smile bursts from ear to ear like crimson popcorn, and everyone is applauding *slow motion hands float through the air like bubbles* for me, Dodie Bellamy—it's the ecstasy and wish fulfillment of Carrie at the prom, sans the pig blood. That was my fantasy. But in actuality, and at the same time, it's like being submerged in a giant fish tank, with fish after fish swimming past me, a whole highway of fish bumping shoulders and wriggling, their round lips mouthing "congratulations" or "great necklace," and I need to thank and engage every fish, to make each and every fish feel welcome, special, appreciated Doug Sam Nicole Sonia Laura Nick Yedda David David David Rodrigo Bill Mara Barbara Leslie Hung Suzi Brian zoom zoom Garrett zoom zoom Jeff Aaron Dale Steven Alvin Jack Cole Stephen the room feels bright despite the overcast day Colleen Jonathan Michael Nathan Pam Lauren Matthew Fran Spencer Nick Peter Eric Mac Lew Rob Rob zoom Wayne Elliot Cliff Scott Jocelyn Mary Glen Molly Travis Susan Steve Susan Myung Terry George and on and zoom zoom and on. Of course I miss half of them. And the dumb ass things I write in the books they hand me.

Jacqueline Rose: "Once a piece of writing has been put into circulation, it ceases—except in the most material sense—to be the property of its author." Yes.

My dream of becoming the Queen of the Avant Garde—was this some inflated vision of fate—or did I merely fall in with the wrong crowd? In 1982 when I entered Bob Glück's writing workshop I had reached the end of my 70s feminist rope, had

fled from my women's workshop, where my writing was seen as the product of a sick mind. "Look at all this sex and violence! Have you considered *therapy*?" When I found the gay New Narrative perverts ("More sex! More violence!") I dove in headfirst. I was non-discriminating, would attempt any fashionable technique—without question or even sympathy, wildly changing persons, tenses, collaging stuff, making lists in the middle of a narrative. I was insanely jealous of the praise Bob gave to a schizophrenic poet named Magda. Magda's syntactic leaps came to her as easily as breathing while I struggled so painfully for mine. My mind was this logocentric street grid *stop signs, right angles* while Magda's was wavy gravy. Disjunction was cool, and my whole life I wanted to be cool. Like Sylvia Plath I've always been a conformist.

In biographies a writer comes in contact with a certain group or person and his or her work clicks into the *right* direction and destiny is fulfilled. In high school I worshipped Gertrude Stein, the surrealists, my fantasy of Joyce. Also Robert Kelly's *Controversy of Poets* anthology, which I devoured with almost zero comprehension. How such attractions grew in a working class girl in Indiana, an isolated and miserable girl, is a mystery to me. At sixteen I wrote in my diary, "Sex, religion, literature—these are all that matter," and clearly I was predisposed to become a trippy sex writer—but what if I'd fallen under the spell of others during my formative years? Would I now be down-home as Dorothy Allison, epiphanous as Jorie Graham? If I'd been a petty thief in L.A. would I have become hard-boiled as James Ellroy? If I'd spent one more night in Tucson would I wake up the Poet of the Saguaro? "I know what you mean," says Kevin. "People go to Naropa and they become Naropa writers, people go to Bard and become Bard writers ... who knows ... what would have happened if we didn't end up in San Francisco ... it's creepy to think about." He's sitting on the edge of the bed, I'm slouched against the wall, over my head hangs our "Barbara Steele diptych." Kevin grabs the side of his head and silently screams in mock horror at the randomness of it all.

While I believe—really believe—that formal innovation opens new vistas of expression, better allows me to track a psyche's

collisions with a fucked-up misogynistic culture, I'm still plagued with self-doubt. Am I an elitist, I ask myself, am I like one of those social climbing neighbors my mother scorned, the ones who traipsed around with shopping bags from Marshall Field when Sears and J.C. Penney have everything a reasonable person would need? Is my mother right about me, have I become too big for my britches? Or is it merely a matter of context? I'm thinking of the young poet visiting from New York, who when asked, "Would you like some Chardonnay or Sauvignon Blanc," quipped defensively, "I don't know anything about wine." A response that surprised and charmed me. It's just part of the culture here, I reassured her—wine is everywhere, they grow the grapes here, bottle it. Sauvignon Blanc versus Chardonnay—it's like asking if you'd like a Diet Coke or a Diet Pepsi. "There's a big difference," she said, "between Diet Coke and Diet Pepsi."

PATRICK F. DURGIN

### *Speculations with a View to a Synaesthetic Poetics*

*This looks so; this feels so. "This" and "so" must be differently explained.* —Ludwig Wittgenstein

Supposedly engaged in equally as speculative an art, even poets become impatient with philosophy consummate with the degree of their material privation.

Since language is a construct of a system with which polity attempts to identify, one's specific identity in social reality aspires to systems with which the world as much as the text may be construed. The will to be honest enacts a breach with originality. Since material origins prove as problematic as spiritual origins, this breach with originality should be welcomed. In poetics as well as activism we are placing ourselves in situation, not situating ourselves in place of one. Reading is inherently interpretive; activism is interpretation; "Writing develops subjects that mean the words we have for them" (Lyn Hejinian).

As semiotics can be said to represent a phantom of what it is we sense, the realm of the sensual is definitely bound to the materiality of language, and thus to living. The demise of any will-to-literature may then be the seeming incapacity of traditional, western literary practice to be responsible to its implications. In the spirit of Barrett Watten's call for a "specific poetics of difference" instead of general possibilities, which inevitably adhere to a tradition which excludes or exploits the material "facts" of the individual, this individual brings us to basic questions surrounding subjectivity and the creative expression of this subject ("The Bride of the Assembly Line"). The context of the subject is other subjects; the social is characterized by ideological struggle; this struggle has a material basis and a material end. The vanity of much of the poetics in the western canon is based in an epistemological model which affords a spiritual domain to contextualize the difficult responsibility which the subject entails. This spiritual realm is of no material use to us; it is consoling, mysterious, and disappointing. Poetry does not owe

itself to such a divine intervention, for it can not only be imagined, but it is practiced. Jed Rasula, in his complaint against "the subordination of poetry to the development of subjectivity," addresses this situation of the subject in just such a spiritual context, tracing the primitive tales of "inspiration," from Hesiod to Orpheus ("Poetry's Voice-Over"). According to Rasula, "the confidentiality of the voice-over . . . is effaced by the universality of the voice-over function [situating the subject as a bullhorn for the divine]." Thus, "we are cocooned in a surrogate multiplicity" which fails to satisfy the aspiration of self-expression as well as to refer to anything successfully enough to differentiate a description of x object from y object. Our voices are "without accent, rendering neutrality enticing, even exemplary." The trouble with Rasula's account is that subjectivity can only be considered as an essential, specific materiality and not as something comparable with an aesthetic practice in development, such as poetry. In lieu of the fantastic world of spiritual recourse, we must situate the literary project as faithful, critical aspiration and not as original inspiration. Spiritual and ideological recourse give way to material sensation. So, as in the infinitely mutable hypertextual writing environments afforded (some of) us by information technologies, obvious, materialist dissensus replaces theoretical consensus; in Witt-genstein's phrase, "nobody knows whether other people have *this* or something else."

As Wittgenstein found, expressions of intent as well as expressions of interpretation cannot make good in themselves the sort of "claims for the possibility" as "agency" of difference which Watten pits his specificity against. Both, it seems, articulate a desire for a poetics which would surmount the paucity of representative nomination as a mediator of difference and identity and reach some situation such as Deleuze and Guattari consider the "point where the copy ceases to be a copy in order to become the Real and its artifice." From Aristotle to Todorov, this has been the dominant task of poetics. And if, following Todorov, poetics resides between theory and interpretation, it is (engulfing systems of nationality, gender, class, and aesthetic preference) a sort of subjective grounding as a prelude to social, and thus political, behavior. All social behavior is simultaneously political activism.

Is it possible to differentiate between a synaesthetic (resolutely unfixed, particularly instantaneous) interpretive process (as opposed to an interpretive regime) and an aesthetic act? If not, writing would not simply appear or be (strictly speaking) disseminated; it would be absorbed, not asystematically, but according to the seemingly indeterminate systems of its sensual potential.

Thus one sees as opportune the reclamation of the subject by means of Cagean "non-intention" (aside from this one aspiration) in a socially efficacious experiential field. Cage's highly-sought "anonymity" must be read as a call for a specificity which can only be grasped in the ecumenical though exceptional realm of synaesthetic exchange. When Cage insists that he is after something other than "self-expression," he appears to be exaggerating his terms if not his claim itself—perhaps in order to counter the prevalent confessionalism of that era which ironically led to mystical (etymologically linked to "silence"), bourgeois interpretive encounter. Or is Cage simply failing, as with the confessionalists, to participate in his own contradiction? The proletariat correlative to such authorial anonymity would have to be the phenomenon of "tagging," although a preferable alternative consummate with the work of Ben Vautier. Self-expression is not a private matter.

It is Rasula's contention that contemporary poets have largely "lost sight" of an essential "archaic" source of the inaccuracy of poetic self-expression. This is his excuse of the spiritual construction of subjectivity which, for us, is an all too damaging and persistent remnant of the Platonic ideal, wherein the seeds of coercive social technologies are laid. If we are at least as optimistic as the Language poets, we should prefer to do better than the fatalist account disguised as history which Rasula's mythology comprises. We should have no recourse, no excuse, to such a spurious hindsight as would displace contexts with something like Blake's "Eternals" which have impeded the present and impeached the future. One needn't be coerced into subjectivity, nor should we allow our selves to be colonized by metaphysics. I have a sense of myself. That is all I have.

It seems we're after a new brand of naturalism which is not a

metaliterary street-smarts or a commonality of form. It appears as though we find ourselves orphaned and seeking to reclaim a commonality of forum. Against Todorov's assertion that a naturalism entails "the reduction of all genres to only one," we may cite the intra-literary project of the avant-garde from Milton's critique of the western hermeneutic model, to Blake's "Milton," to Ginsberg, MacLow, and Cage, all as hallmarks of genre; all thus are profoundly poetic (in Todorov's sense) as well as vitally political. From Milton to Cage, we also observe a turn from a baffled sense-impression to a specific response, from acceptance of forms of discourse to refusal of these forms in favor of a self-conscious method. "If there is indeed language, it is on the side of the response, not the stimulus" (Deleuze and Guattari). A reading-through is a poem. A contingency of this reading (interpretive process), which we have already located as the social, is the poetics which I offer to call synaesthetic.

Synaesthesia in psychology refers to displaced sense-impression, in linguistics to the more or less discordant syntheses, or modes of representing and ascertaining, sensation and spectacle. Now, impression and ascertaining are not distinct and dis-sociable; they are linked facets in a process which we may apply to semiotics and beyond.

A synaesthetic poetics pertains to writing-as-theory's relation to living-as-interpretation. It would follow from Eileen Myles' "proprioceptive" poetics whereas "a poem has always been an imagined body of a sort," where the assortment is the hallmark of specificity. It would follow from Nathaniel Mackey's complementary notions of the "creaking of the word" and "the phantom limb"; it would emphasize play over program. There can be no such regime of inclusive gestures, especially at the extremes of Todorov's syntactic scientifics and Charles Bernstein's syntactic askance, both of which depend upon a monolithic, supernatural, and mythical notion of language. Whatever transpires as spiritual context is experienced as psychic delirium, experience becomes (through interpretation) articulated with the utmost specificity instead of under the rubrics or the disintegrating, apartite dramas of myth. Myth has no more than a (useful) semiotic function. Myth-manifest is the sign. To

generate an interpretation that would affect a material change, a synaesthetic poetics would make that crucial, inclusive leap from *langue & parole* to the sign, in any sense that it may be registered. There are no ultimate differences in the experiential field, as such, no terminal points, but only gradients of impotence. Context for poetry requires the imperative "first" material change which Ron Silliman and so many of the western avant-garde writers of this (hastily dwindling) century posit as a precursor to bringing our aesthetic activism into a socially efficacious experiential field. Poetry must finally behave, not simply be, for its context is inescapably "diatextual;" "reading a text . . . [is] an essential relationship with madness" (Deleuze & Guattari). The synaesthetics of literary exchange exists to refigure what is mad and what is sane. This is an inherently social task. A specific poetics of difference, which would be as radical as it would be political, must reconcile in new terms the polar economy of self and other through a consideration of the materially/culturally polar points of privilege and righteousness.

Synaesthetic poetics, as a literary component function of sympathy among specific individuals, champions the delirious divergence of witness and encounter over ideational authority. The spiritual gnosis can be jettisoned and the visceral rendition of a (re-)encounter substituted. There is no monolithic ganglion of experience, no converging crisis of either living or letters which any one author can present to us. Just as there is no single interpretive regime which is central to re-encoding experience. If we can shuck the Gnostic writings of any notion of "heresy" we may realize how pan-culturally pertinent they may become; "I am the voice whose sound is manifold and the word whose appearance is multiple. / I am the utterance of my name." ("The Thunder, Perfect Mind," trans. George W. MacRae).

Perhaps the self-conscious solution which contemporary poets have caught sight of is best exemplified by the sub-genre of diaristic or journalistic writings, otherwise referred to as "reportage." As far as self-consciousness can be claimed to objectify the self, evoking an often miscreant and non-sensual notion of objectivity, it is important to examine just how performative this ostensible death-of-the-author is. John Cage, for example, provides a useful prototype, in his diaristic writings,

as performative, as a nexus of the notions of the aesthetic act as activism; "We are getting / rid of ownership substituting use. / Beginning with ideas . . . // Japanese, he said: we / also hear with our feet." The multiple trajectories of the personal, specific intellections represented by the semiotic noodling on the written page, the indeterminate sequencing of phrases, and the correspondent shifting in volume and left-right channel of the sound recording betray an aspiration, if not a surface intention.

As another instance, bp nichol, in "The Martyrology," was speaking not in fact to saints or figures of myth but to "parts of myself." "[T]he part of yourself least recognized / merges with the mirror / your fingers do not know your skin // hold onto the things you love / this moment passes as the senses rise / touch ascends with vision / taste smell & sound the image test the real / world without end" (Book 2). It is equally as telling to note how, literally, illustrated his books are, a poetry that complains to itself, "no longer trusting senses / we dream up ruses / abuses make them seem more real."

Still, as always unable to trust in stereotypes, and unwilling to engage in their development, we can not rely on prototypes (such as those discussed above). When we rely on prototypes as evidence, we rely on them too much. The only prototype is one's own memory. The diary has replaced the memory. In memorial, we are indeed "hallucinating history."

Jena Osman, in her poem "Amblyopia," is succinct: "in some ways we are most interested in ourselves but only if the reflection is coherent." Since Watten, Bernstein, Hejinian, and the rest of the Language poets enthusiastically set out to demonstrate that (despite or because of this obvious lack of stable coherence) poetry still vitally participates in the process of knowing, poetry has followed the diary as a do-it-yourself enterprise which is pertinent only insofar as it simultaneously critiques its own validity as a historical text. The work of these poets still haunts us because of this collective and unabashed determination. And as Terry Eagleton reminds us, "It is because the human animal is not identical with its own determinations that it is a historical and linguistic being" ("Deconstruction and

Human Rights"). Incoherence is a link to identity; the state of the sign is delirium; the lie of the State is coherence. Every mark of the poem is a political presence born of a synaesthetic responsibility to interpret.

As Watten writes in his new poem, *Bad History*, "You have to decide, having entered a universe of possibility—this is what it means to be modern." Modernity has made it incumbent upon the reader to read character as action, in a rigorous questioning of the peculiar and multiplicitous nature of the subject. This questioning of "nature" does not construe the subject but rather the work as potential. History, as Watten's poem shows, follows a symbolic logic which is manufactured. Poetic authority, a right and not a privilege, engages and goes beyond the realm of the rhetorical to the psychologically polysemous frontier where logic breaks down. The spatial and temporal nodes where literary and social exchange occur are not intermittent, ephemeral, non-material; they are critical. Guiseppe Mininni, who first manufactured the term "diatext," in his piece "The Diatextual Construction of a Political Identity" asserts that "[t]he connection between being open to novelty coming from the future and enthusiastically welcoming it evokes a less evident coherence frame." The synaesthetic poem is aware of these nodes, this "frame," perhaps through paratactic structures which imply less of a causal recognition. Perhaps through "Concrete," visual elements, perhaps the "art of the book" or "Jazzoetry," *ad infinitum* . . . again: "You have to decide."

Concepts, Marxism as a useful instance, are only materially worth the poems which devise them by virtue of their transmission. It could be said, despite or because of language, that concept is transmission. Poetry's prevalent tropes mustn't be confounded by a poetics; they mustn't be prescribed. As Jean-Francois Bory put it, "Concrete poetry can only be defined tautologically." This self-validation as embracing the possible and confounding the specific can only be read in a synaesthetic poem. That is, embracing the possible prepares one to interpret the specific. Poetry works by metaphor; a metaphor is a claim that *x* is *y*, not that *x* is *like* *y*; this is up to the claim that capital is weaponry. Living is an interpretation that is specifically denied some. Change that.

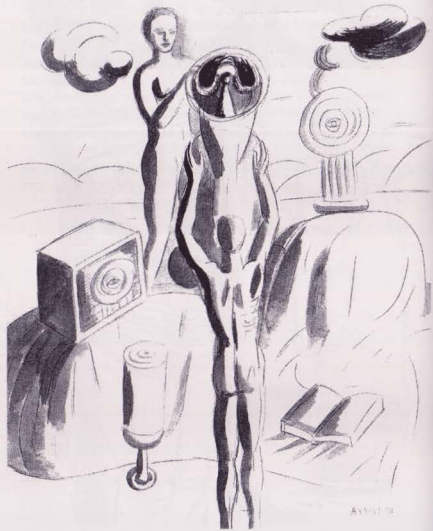
## WILLIAM T. AYTON

William T. Ayton is a British artist whose work has been exhibited widely across Europe and the United States. He and his wife, Diana Ayton-Shenker, a human rights advocate, seeking to combine their interests in visual expression and social justice, began collaborating on an illumination of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. These 30 black and white drawings led to the creation of a series of color paintings currently touring the U.S. to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. The 50th anniversary tour includes exhibits at the Chicago Peace Museum, the San Francisco Veteran's War Memorial and Performing Arts Center and the Surrogate Court Building in New York City. To view the paintings on the web go to [www.udhr50.org](http://www.udhr50.org), click on "history" and then "declaration."

ARTICLE 4 No one shall be held in slavery or servitude; slavery and the slave trade shall be prohibited in all their forms



ARTICLE 19 Everyone has the right to freedom of expression; this right includes freedom to hold opinions without interference and to seek, receive and impart information and ideas through any media and regardless of frontiers.



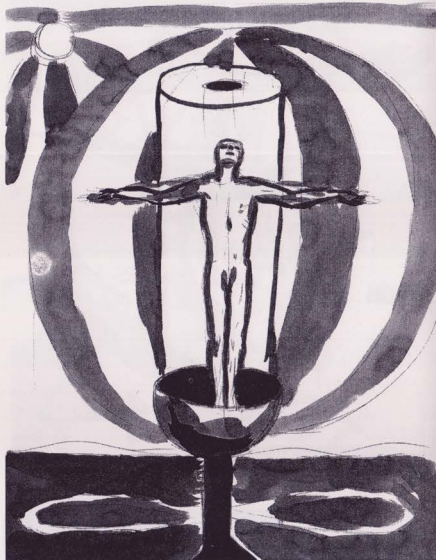
AYTON 71

ARTICLE 20 Everyone has the right to rest and leisure, including reasonable limitation of working hours and periodic holidays with pay.



AYTON 91

ARTICLE 29 Everyone is entitled to a social and international order in which his rights and freedoms set forth in this Declaration can be fully realized



### **Moving Borders:**

### **Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women**

Mary Margaret Sloan, ed.

Talisman House, 1998

reviewed by Kathy Lou Schultz

The anthology is the genre of the 90s, feeding a frenzy for identity-based works that, although serving as a necessary corrective to the traditional canon, often simply re-package the poem of the status quo, albeit with writers of color, or women writers, queer writers, "young" writers, etc. Many anthologies pretend to "represent" what writing by a particular group is or might be—raising more questions about who is *not* included, than interest in the work actually printed. What is posited, therefore, serves to further solidify hegemonic writing practices: a notion of "self expression" based upon presupposed characteristics of a writer's "identity." In what sense such anthologies can be thought of as interventionist or oppositional is, therefore, in question.

However, the argument about whether there is indeed such a category as "women's writing" and what such a category might encompass remains at the heart of feminist literary scholarship. In 1986, Alicia Suskin Ostriker believed in such an animal and set about bringing it to life in *Stealing the Language: The Emergence of Women's Poetry in America*. Subject matter, not formal innovation, is what exemplified this movement of "women's poetry" which Ostriker describes.

The subhead of *Moving Borders*, however, is simply descriptive, does not make grand claims on which it cannot deliver, and is careful in its examination of gender: *Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women*—not "women's writing"—a subtle, yet crucial difference. As Mary Margaret Sloan points out in her introduction to this 740 page tome, "The task of an anthology editor is to draw a boundary around a number of writers. This line must be seen as provisional, as arbitrary as a political boundary is to topography, in short as a border that may be moved" (3). This reflects the kind of thinking that went into creating this historical document, one which charts particular trends, understands that gender is a mutating category that

does not necessarily translate into a particular kind of writing practice, and which sees formal innovation as significant. Sloan has brought together the writing of 50 women, beginning (in chronology of publishing histories), with Lorine Niedecker. A coup for Niedecker scholars, the volume opens with a previously unpublished poem, "Progression," recently found by Burton Hatlin in Ezra Pound's papers. Section III of this work reflects the steadied attention to the relationship of humans to the "natural" world found throughout the later collection, *The Granite Pail*:

Home is on the land  
though drought be solid fact,  
though you tell by the summer sky  
how you'll pare your potatoes next winter (11)

This long poem in eight sections was written in 1934.

The writers here have lived and written, for the most part, in the United States and Canada, though several were born outside of either of these countries and immigrated. The writing communities with which these women have been associated, however, are located in the U.S. and Canada, primarily in urban centers. Their genres of choice run the gamut, pulling at the textures of language like tangible threads, focused on the materiality of language.

Their commonalities come down not to gender, or subject matter, or style. What brings these writers together is an ongoing conversation about the limits of the word, the relationship of sign to referent, and the quality of thinking that goes into "moving the borders" out past what one has received as form.

Rather than a "greatest hits" collection, Sloan's choices allow us to see the development of a writer's work over time. For example, the selections of Kathleen Fraser's work span a 15-year history, beginning with work published in 1980 and concluding with recent work from 1995. Such an arc allows the reader to trace the development of the artistic process over a lifetime of writing.

Process is also highlighted in the second section of the book entitled "Poetics and Exposition." These pieces range from examinations of one's own process, such as Leslie Scala-

pino's "Note on My Writing, 1985," to more formal-looking critical examinations of the work of others, including Cole Swenson's essay on Anne-Marie Albiach and Susan Howe. Dodie Bellamy's offering in this section takes the form of a letter to the late Kathy Acker. "Delinquent" examines the ways in which class informs constructions of femininity and sexuality; in other words, who really is a "bad girl."

The youngest writer in the collection is Canadian Lisa Robertson, born in 1961. Excerpts from *XEclouge* skim a surface which pretends to be traditional fiction, but is ready to surprise you like a sudden mouse hole in seemingly solid ground, with its verbal trapeze moves and topographical play.

*Moving Borders* contains excerpts from many works destined to be classics of these generations, including Barbara Guest's *Seeking Air*, Lyn Hejinian's *My Life*, and Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictée*, which makes it a valuable teaching aid. In addition, as a receiver of the riches of these traditions, this book is a true gift in that I can now locate so many influential texts within one volume. In the age of anthologies, I consider this to be an indispensable text, one which contributes not only to the conversation about avant-garde literature, but also to the ongoing dialogue about the relationship of writing to feminism. It opens up a field of questions with which feminist literary scholars should become well acquainted.

## Mortal City

Jocelyn Saidenberg  
Parentheses Writing Series, 1998

reviewed by Pamela Lu

In "The Southpaw," a poem in Jocelyn Saidenberg's new book *Mortal City*, a series of short "chapters" tells the story of an immigrant Russian Jewish family in America. Deadpan and scroll-like in tone, the narrative rambles through a seemingly arbitrary selection of family anecdotes, including the second-generation sons' musical careers, various marriages, births, deaths, and divorces, the fates of relatives left behind in Russia, and an apparent penchant for brushes with greatness—such as a cello audition before "Saint-Saens himself" or playing "chamber music with Albert Einstein who repeatedly entered late with the first violin." This periodic convergence of family history with (for lack of a better term) cultural history culminates in the poem's final chapter, which describes the spectacular rise of one third-generation son as a professional sports figure. That the title of the poem refers to this very son causes one to reread the previous chapters for causal connections or teleological hints: Have several generations of existence led up to the all-American Dream of producing a populist sports hero, or has the expression of survival and success simply modulated nonlinearly over time from classical music to professional baseball?

How such modulations happen, and what ultimate meaning they might contain, are issues which concern Saidenberg throughout *Mortal City*. The city here is mythical, disquieting, and remote, yet also familiar, playful, and grounded in real time: its poems perform with an oblique momentum that acknowledges the unforeseeable developments of a field populated by diverse motives, events, and characters. In "Obit," momentum rests on the expectation of a narrative conclusion that might just as easily signal the beginning of a cyclical collapse:

the world is flat they say &  
will stand on it by that  
some knowledge will be  
the same & some never again as

we approach this object  
toward the millenium  
in subterranean phases apocalypse  
is common place so told since

the beginning of the stories &  
are the stories all ending with  
(whatever rests between the tick & the tock)

A similar case of self-referential causality occurs in "Zeugma":

they cut down the trees because they, the trees in the park, were planted with their roots still bound, and, as a result, they, the still bound roots, since they were planted incorrectly by someone, over time would have grown around the tree, and, in the hypothetical future, this circular, subterranean movement could have caused the trees to fall; all of them.

For Saidenberg, this "subterranean movement," or "figure of what is / growing underhand," serves as the unseen, methodical influence governing the outcome of seen events, even if the causes and the effects have become so tangled and intertwined over time as to be indistinguishable from each other. Saidenberg's desire to discover the rules underlying the complex state of her century leads her to construct "rules" of her own, through the deployment of various language and strategy games. This is not to say that she fills her work with elaborate linguistic constraints; rather, she allows the work itself to generate its own rhetorical logic, and each "character-position" within the work to do the same. The result sometimes resembles a new form of fiction writing, in which "voiced" utterances repeatedly necessitate and realign the basis of their own narrative context. From "Obit":

The horrible thing about my wife's death was that I imparted this enormous amount of knowledge to her, she had died with this enormous amount of knowledge with her; this enormous amount of knowledge which was worse than her actual death, I thought

Well hello there  
Was it supposed to rain today?

What are we supposed to say now?  
'&'

Each bed is another page or  
2 perhaps a hoax in this story  
Or supine or How come after all  
In the end always - so & so -

Dramatically fluid, intersubjective, and personified, Saidenberg's "I" simultaneously doubts and reconsiders its ability to say things in a state of affairs that has been robbed of all meaningful reference points. The question of "What are we supposed to say now?" then also becomes the question of what we are supposed to know and how we are supposed to know it, in the wake of the "enormous amount of knowledge" that already occupies and overwhelms us. And if there is a "correct" response to this question, then it is the speaker's responsibility to articulate both the answer and its unverifiable certainty. Stability evaporates, and Saidenberg moves in with imaginative, exploratory strokes to fill and map the gap. In "On the Fifth Day," an arid, sci-fi landscape serves as the zero-setting against which a roving band of anonymous survivors attempts to redefine foundational coordinates:

she had gotten to a place where she had to decide for herself  
which was north. south. east. west.  
she had to determine with her own hands the left from the  
right. we had been eating almonds for days now and had  
come to rely on her constructions and ability to persuade us.  
yesterday had been a day of rest no more hills just some  
light reading and orienteering. certain members had to be  
bathed and it filled the air with the smell of eucalyptus.  
exercises were made up. childish music. a deck of trick  
cards.  
i put the salt shaker here and so you have to pick it up and  
put it over there just because and only because i had put it  
here.  
the pepper mill. the almighty power armed for future  
incriminations.

The arbitrary determination of navigational directions, monotonous group activities, and petty game logic speak to a luxury of time that is also a deprivation of place—where the origin is nothing more than an adjustable concept that travels and reconstructs itself to fit the situation at hand. The game of

the portable salt shaker becomes a whimsical figure for the characters' need and desire to engage in justifiable, rule-based behavior, as if such behavior might reiterate the concrete, habitual nature of being alive. In this it resembles the larger project of language construction that preoccupies *Mortal City* as a whole. With poems titled "Zeugma" and "Caesurina," Saidenberg explores the programmatic chain of grammar, with its conventional word order and semantic constraints; as well as grammar's unpredictable products, resulting from rhetorical excess, metonymic associations, and other exceptions to the linear teleology of the language "machine." Saidenberg seems deeply, even ethically, interested in a conceptual building process that fails to enclose its own initial conditions, spilling out instead as a dialogue of continuing causes and not-so-final effects. This, perhaps, marks the humility of a city that admits to its "mortal" nature and of inhabitants who proceed to survive in spite of their existential doubts, as in this later section from "On the Fifth Day":

we tried to un-dramatize the situation. rid ourselves of the  
distances and of the self-oblivion.  
the contradiction of the pain of our own smile.  
there were always added dimensions to our words of this i  
am sure but not sure where they are ...

Or in this passage from "In the Map Room":

he laughed softly. stared at the monument. there was no  
way out not through the barrier or even along the  
pontoons, the old pumping derrick. maybe that isn't what  
we want. are wanting. after this. this. this  
monument ...

In Saidenberg's surprising, varied universe, one may wander for many days without reaching or being allowed to enter the gates of the implicitly promised city. Or one may cease being a "one" altogether, and develop into a plurality dedicated to rebuilding the city from the outside, as an agglomeration of texts with their own inevitabilities and generations of outcomes. The rules of the game are still pending. Citizenship here might consist of a series of solid, unprecedented throws from left field.

## The Disparities

Rodrigo Toscano  
Sun & Moon, 1998

reviewed by Louis Cabri

"whose year? clock?":

"Retro-Reds" in the Era of Finance Capital

Rodrigo Toscano's long-awaited *The Disparities* demonstrates that it's time to get reacquainted with the social referent: complex of relations (i.e., post-eidetic imagism<sup>1</sup>) registered in an instant of time<sup>2</sup>. Fredric Jameson summarizes in an article published this year that in contrast to previous decades the "motivations behind ideology no longer seem to need an elaborate machinery of decoding and hermeneutic reinterpretation; and the guiding thread of all contemporary politics seems much easier to grasp: namely, that the rich want their taxes lowered" (137). By definition, the social referent avoids poetical tropes of "mere technical facility and hollow formalism" (in Steve Evans' phrase). Yet, of course, such a referent is prone to other, equally familiar, traps—of vulgar realism. How avoid?

With words of a Protestant theologian, for whom time would have peculiar philosophical resonance, the obvious: "Not everything is possible at every time, not everything is true at every time, nor is everything demanded at every moment" (Paul Tillich<sup>3</sup>). From this comes timeliness, that quality of subjective time of knowing when is "the right time" (and for what), *kairos*, which the ancient Greek language differentiates from *chronos* (objective, formal—clock—time that is neither "right" nor "wrong"). Qualities of subjective time combine to produce "social times" for the sociological method of Immanuel Wallerstein; and he follows Fernand Braudel who famously distinguishes their three durations: *longue duree* (e.g., capitalist mode of production), conjunctural or cyclical (e.g., supply-demand crises), and current time (opinions of the day).

For poetics, Steve Evans recently reconceptualized the *kairos* of social time as "social tense": "A grasp of the way in which artistic materials are socially tensed—storing certain potentialities, lacking others, with still others momentarily exhausted as some awaken again from dormancy—is what

keeps the artist (if it can) from sinking into mere technical facility and hollow formalism" (43). Toscano's poetry investigates the problematic of "social tense": how does one address the *longue duree* with and on the terms of what one is given to hand in the moment?

Once, various poets' structuralisms helped with this, homologizing capitalism and language. The "social" retains currency, if only because the mysterious commodity-form still conjures it as exchange-value: despite how virtually all space is now privatized, we must live in it. In the opening three poems of the book, Toscano retains aspects of what might loosely be called the west coast walking poem (for *flâneur*, Situationist, activist, townie) since, on one hand, "The bureaucrats of wills (some young) have set their snares," and on the other, at least the prospect of an alternative economy still urges images of an ideal polis.

Is it possible that the message of the *kairos* is an error?<sup>4</sup> ("McCaffery, Andrews, put down your mowers" . . .<sup>5</sup>) Tillich, again, replies: "The message is always an error; for it sees something immediately imminent which, considered in its ideal aspect, will never become a reality and which, considered in its real aspect, will be fulfilled only in long periods of time. And yet the message of the *kairos* is never an error; for where the *kairos* is proclaimed as a prophetic message, it is already present; it is impossible for it to be proclaimed in power without its having grasped those who proclaim it" (Wallerstein 282). While Wallerstein secularizes and historicizes Tillich's philosophical paradox, Toscano assumes the paradox as a given. From "Circular No. 7":

And at arms length (what keeps, who's kept) from it, this date.

Statistical gloom, chaotic (strict) exchange, lend  
To what'd speak there, swiped seconds of bardic stupor.

Roof / crew tarringtime, decades since barred from coupling  
Frame / crew nailingtime. . . .

.....

Some way within this time beyond these sands in spring  
Crash, then the posturing (rush) then the caring (crush)  
Then Consequence. . . .

The message of "the right time"—the *kairos*—is always and never an error: truth beyond the realist's truth, error beyond the formalist's error. An allegorist searches capitalism's runes. When is the right time? There is one answer to this question.

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<sup>1</sup> One of a number of fascinating exceptions is William Fuller, whose images are animate commodities; see *The Sugar Borders* (O Books), *Aether* (Gaz).

<sup>2</sup> Alan Gilbert writes of pedagogical implications for the social referent. See *PhillyTalks* newsletter #5 (4331 Pine St., #1R, Philadelphia, PA, 19104).

<sup>3</sup> Tillich is quoted by Wallerstein, p. 271.

<sup>4</sup> Tillich asks this question (Wallerstein, p. 282).

<sup>5</sup> Charles Bernstein, *The Nude Formalism*.

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## *The Letters of Mina Harker*

Dodie Bellamy  
Hard Press, 1998

reviewed by Juliana Spahr

*The Letters of Mina Harker* is all about the elusive nature of desire—its tricks, its teasings, its mediations. One of the lessons of this book is that one has to fight to keep desire and one's self respect intact. The narrator who takes on such a subject is a hydra of sorts: part author Dodie Bellamy's alter ego Dodie (throughout this review, I've used first names to refer to characters and last names to refer to real live authors) and part Dodie's alter-ego Mina Harker. Dodie, a young, female writer originally from the midwest, uses the epistle form to narrate her various affairs and to theorize art, culture, and sexuality in late twentieth century San Francisco. The characterization here is strong and specific. Dodie is neurotic and lovely; at times queer but mainly straight; and married to queer playwright and poet Kevin. Like Dodie, Mina was "this plain-Jane secretary adjunct to the great European vampire killer, Dr. Van Helsing" but now, she writes, "I dart across the moor fog condensing on my long plait of hair, my lives my deaths multiple as orgasms" (9, 10).

*The Letters* is multiply genred and this is one of its pleasures. The book draws mainly from the epistolary novel, horror in all its forms, feminist autobiography, and experimental fiction. Bellamy manages to write a book that clearly has the influences of Kathy Acker, Dennis Cooper, Bob Glück, Kevin Killian, and Lynne Tillman all over it yet still sounds unique. Here Pamela of *Pamela* meets Jennifer of *I Spit on Your Grave*. The story rambles as *Pamela* or as the last half-hour of a stalker movie does as it follows Dodie and Mina through a series of bad affairs, adjuncts to a meaningful open relationship with Kevin. The letters are written by either Dodie or Mina (it is hard to tell which often) and they are written to various lovers and confidants: the reader, Sing (a female friend), Sam (D'Allesandro—the San Francisco writer who died of AIDS in 1988), and a series of indistinctive male figures, some real, some imagined, that go by the names of Dr. Van Helsing, Quincey, Dion, and David.

What makes *The Letters* exciting is that the epistle here is feminist. And feminist in the complicated sense that the rape revenge movie might be feminist. The epistle here is gun and castrating knife. Dodie and Mina take things gendered female—intimacy, desire, women's bodies, handwriting, and stationary—and use them against the sexual politics of dominant culture. Epistolary feminism, as it is presented here, is like the horror genre in that it takes what is kept inside and turns it outside. The book dwells lovingly on detailed descriptions of things many keep from lovers, acquaintances, or strangers. As Mina writes, "I smear my dejecta on paper, a messy ambiguous space where pathology meets pleasure" (151). Similarly, this epistolary feminism takes the assaultive gaze of watching, of eavesdropping, or reading someone else's intimate mail, as its subject and turns it back so the construction of intimacy is constantly revealed as false. Dodie and Mina cannot write letters without one or the other intruding, correcting. The book takes the immediacy, the claim to the "real" that epistolary fiction once made, and loves it into falseness. Everything is metaphor here. Any intimate moment is related to the machine of the entertainment industry. Dodie writes how she is "Garbo as Camille" or how "Like Sebastian in *Suddenly Last Summer* I need to write my yearly poem" or how "I feel like Agnes Moorehead in *The Twilight Zone*" (23, 157, 197). While these moments manage to avoid narcissism through complicated ironic play (Agnes Moorehead plays a monster in this episode of *The Twilight Zone*), almost everything in this book comes mediated through the large metaphor. Nothing here is sacred. Nothing exempt from ghostly possession.

The victims of the epistolary revenge are Dodie's lovers. None of them seem worth her time. At one point Mina even whines, "DODIE, ARE YOU OUT THERE? THIS IS MINA SPEAKING. DAMN IT, GIRL, YOU'VE GOT TO DO BETTER BY ME THAN THIS" (88). All, except for Kevin, are cardboard cut-outs of the sort one might run into in coffeehouses. They are clichés of themselves in their confidence in the art, poetry, or literary criticism they produce. The book never comments on their work, never lets us see them as worthwhile, never lets us as readers get titillated by their intellect or their generosity. They even seem pale in bed, weak of body. Dion lies hopelessly and tells the plot of *Marnie* as his life. Mina calls him "a little

erotic trinket, the latest charm dangling from my bracelet" (88). When Mina claims "Quincey and I are going at it with the intensity of people in the movies" (86) things seem stuck between an R rating or tired pornography. These men never turn human and lack Dodie/Mina's constant self-reflection of themselves and their desires. Better pleasure happens when Dodie/Mina take pleasure into their own hands or when Kevin takes his turn.

Indeed, one of the ironies of this book is that while it investigates the multiplicity of desire (Dodie and Kevin are queer yet married; they are devoted yet—because of?—straying) it finally places the traditional married relationship between Dodie and Kevin as the only successful one in the book. The book begins with Kevin ("KK says all horror novels begin with the locale and a description of the weather, 'The Reader likes to feel situated'" [9]). And then it ends with this: "KK and I glide against one another, long, silky, ebullient, fading with the last dusky rays of sun into the night—cool breeze from the window, rumble of a tow truck on 11th, perfectly-timed frisson of KK's hand against my clit into my vagina *the last fingers* out of the darkness I cry out, vowels funneling across octaves from my throat to the alley below where hookers quarrel with johns and figures hunched in blankets smoke crack, lungs collapse, moist, gurgly *he's Magic and I'm History* KK comes quietly, gulping, as if the air were a mouth bit he desperately needs to grab onto—KK the highwire dancer hanging by his teeth netless—slow pan from his straining jaw-neck-torso-ecstatic-erection-legs-feet-nosediving-toes to the packed bleachers below, a thousand upturned heads, fingers sticky with cotton candy—KK wraps his arms around his chest tightens his bite and spins and spins *alas and round this center the rose of onlooking blooms and unblooms* the Big Top grows dizzy—BUT WAIT—this isn't Fellini's ending, it's *MINE Maestro, herd out the elephants!* KK crouches over me on all fours, 'I'm your house.' His chest is my ceiling, his cock and balls dangle above my belly *light switch? door knocker? skeleton key?* he nibbles my ear, whispers, 'This is what you always wanted, isn't it, a house that talks.'"

This passage presents one of the few moments where the comparison is suspect and Mina reclaims sex as something having a value similar to something that might be real or

unmediated ("—BUT WAIT—this isn't Fellini's ending, it's MINE *Maestro*, *herd out the elephants!*"). Undeniably, this passage has to be read with a grain of salt as it is Mina that is writing it and it is also hard not to read Kevin as the house, the site of the domestic, as richly ironic. But *The Letters of Mina Harker* present a faith in the epistle that is similar to the faith in sexuality. *The Letters* invite readers to see sexuality as complicated, deep, full of aspirations and politics. But it also invites readers to see the communicative possibilities of art, of horror movies, of late night television, of letters as similarly complicated, deep, and full of aspirations and politics. It is worthwhile in this context to place *The Letters* beside the other epistolary revenge novel (?) of the last couple of years: Chris Kraus's *I Love Dick*. Both books present desire's intimacies and uglinesses through the genre of letter. Both present strong women with permissive yet not emasculated husbands who are facilitators and plotters of their wife's desires. It is not that these books are imitations of each other. While Dodie writes out and around her male subjects, Chris writes directly to Dick, her reluctant subject. While *The Letters* is a tale of occult possession, *I Love Dick* is straight-up stalker. But they do seem to be involved in an elaborate dialogue about how to read feminism's difficult relationship with intimacy and narcissism. (At one point, Kraus even quotes Bellamy.) Both books suggest that decorum and don't-kiss-and-tell ideology might be misogynist plots. And they take it on as their project to take no prisoners as they delve deeply into their relationships and at the same time self-reflexively investigate the nature of exposure. One of the most interesting parts of *I Love Dick* is Kraus's long discussion and valorization of the more confessional aspects of Hannah Wilke's art. Because neither book proclaims to say much beyond the personal, it is appropriate that they go in opposite directions at the end. While *The Letters* ends with an optimistic reclaiming of sexuality with Kevin's kind, talking house, *I Love Dick* ends with Chris alone in a cab reading a photocopied letter of rejection that Dick addressed to her husband. It is this optimistic turn that makes me love *The Letters* so much (*I Love Dick* scares me as much as it fascinates me). *The Letters* might be the most romantic of novels that fiction's experimental turn has produced. It might have the most faith in the old fashioned redemptive possibilities of sex with someone you love. It might

be the most provocative investigation of the relation between feminism and postmodernism and romanticism and transformation that has yet appeared. And besides it is a good read just as gossip.

## Artificial Heart

Peter Gizzi  
Burning Deck, 1998.

reviewed by Anselm Berrigan

*Artificial Heart*, Peter Gizzi's second full-length collection of poems, is a five-section work made of lyrics that inhabit a space between weariness and wariness highlighted by a solitary celebration of the forces causing Gizzi to acknowledge who he is, where he is, and why he can't remain in any spot his mind and/or eye perceives. To clear that statement out a bit, consider Gizzi as a poet attempting to see himself in shifting physical landscapes without identifying himself as the center of any one landscape, or without placing himself as the determining force behind the existence of the natural world as it is placed in these poems. Not a draggy indeterminate sack of bones is Gizzi, mind you, but author of poems that get themselves to be gorgeous without screaming "look at me!" and carry perspectives sharp enough to know that one can be large without dominating and small without shutting out the world for the sake of self-centered crisis, i.e.: "what is this thing to say, I say?"

Gizzi likes to focus on the act of passing through a locale, a scene, a poem, a form, while acknowledging that that kind of movement inevitably leads to a larger engagement with anything that exists outside one's own self: "Looking into your eyes I see more / than I came to address..." (from "Another Day On The Pilgrimage"). Inevitable if one has an open mind, anyway. The poem these lines are quoted from takes on other concerns, not the least of which is the ongoing theme throughout *Artificial Heart* of the baffling relationship between books and the world, with books holding a particularly special place in the author's heart as material energy motionless in a supersonic general American drive-thru consciousness. But that lack of physical motion is what will stop you alive in your body if you manage to slow down a minute: "Little caskets of ventriloquism tell / our plight, explain our confusion / and generally identify our loneliness here / on the surface."

Gizzi inhabits the lyric without exploiting the false majesty that form can instill in a writer, causing him or her to

assume another's truths. Language is the material vehicle for Gizzi's trips, but not the starting point for existence, be it his or the horizon's (and horizons take on a role throughout the book that has more to do with taking comfort in, rather than feeling weighed down by, the consciousness of possibilities one's interior life can't attain, like, why bother feeling screwed by your own imagination: "Never / is also part of the greater composition, looking away / at the toy horizon," (from "A Textbook of Chivalry").

Issues of care, projection of the self as child, awareness of frailty, the constancy of thought informed by others' work, and the duplicity of what appears as innocuous surface ("These leaves are not pretty, they are camouflage" from "Fables of Critique") stride through the heart of Gizzi's poetry. And they make up only a part of how these poems can be read underneath Gizzi's seamless tone, as no review could ever possibly touch all the concerns of fully realized poetry, and rightfully so. However, Gizzi has the profound ability to find in nearly every poem, no matter the range of concerns each poem embodies, the words to create a space where "vulnerability won't reproduce cruelty" (from "Ding Repair"), despite the largely unstated (in this body of work) levels of experience that allow Gizzi the perspective of an average, damaged human being.

What prevents Gizzi's poems from veering into a kind of brittle pathos when handling general matters of kindness and kind is the sturdiness of his lines as well as the commitment to self as relative to the external world. A work such as "Ledger Domain," with its cut-off phrasings and mildly shifting indentations, allows Gizzi's lyric sensibility to roam around an open space:

Speech—be quiet!

To see you reflected in the smudged window now.  
Night reminds one of the fingerprints—

unlike a face  
— in its orbit

Tips of hair sweep by like fronds  
—"just like fronds!"—you exclaim

—show me the fronds if you please

(No good poet steers clear of the far-out-to-lunch zone for very long), while a poem like “Creeley Madrigal” shows off Gizzi’s handling in homage style of the short line in triplets:

Where is the flourish he missed  
as he became faint  
as he distilled

or where is the flourish he sought  
as he let go of  
as he believed deliverance through

then thinking’s alembic to be loose  
now he’s thin without regret  
zero place as he is

I’m tempted to say the tone of caution that creeps into Gizzi’s poetry (“It is important there be no consolation in these words,” from “The Truth & Life Of Pronouns”) is a by-product of a self-consciousness specific to poets reeling from the still largely undefined implications of “post-modernism”—a self-consciousness that seems to cause many poets under the age of forty to continually wonder aloud about what they are and are not allowed to say & do in their poems. But *Artificial Heart* is made up of poetry that has the capacity to work with an expansive sense of what is available to poetry these days in terms of style, content, language, etc., rather than rely on defensively doctrinaire aesthetic pronouncements for poetic sustenance.

LYTLE SHAW

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*Mark Shepard:*

*Information Theory and Berlin Urbanism*

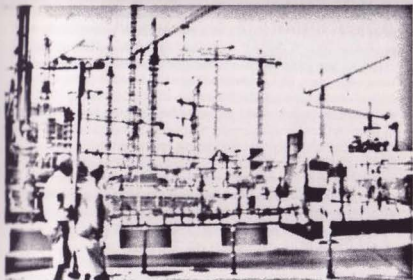
Mark Shepard’s installation at the 1998 Hunter College MFA show occupies its own room, accessible through a low ceilinged vestibule from two black cloth doorways at right angles. Between these doorways, at the scale of a bus stop or information kiosk, is a glossy and colorful map of contemporary Berlin mounted within clean metal brackets—all of which call to mind a city interested in and financially capable of carefully policing its self image. The main, horizontal section is the kind of map given to tourists. It points out museums, government buildings, parks. Vertically, however, a slightly darker map of the same scale overlaps. Though it would be easy to pass by this kiosk entirely and the vertical section within especially, what one notices upon closer inspection is a clunky beaux-arts urban plan of massive buildings and grand symmetries. The drawing is in fact Albert Speer’s infamous 1943 plan for postwar, victorious, Berlin. Thus, before one has even entered the main space, the map encodes competing versions of the temporally displaced and politically incendiary fantasies that have been Berlin’s urban planning

Inside, the relations among temporality, politics and urban planning grow far more complex. Two large screens hang from the ceiling. One small television set sits atop a stand with two chairs and headphones available. On one screen a series of young architects and painters discuss their attraction toward Berlin, their experiences of working in the city, and their disillusionment. What the architects in particular mention, then, is not the string of glamorous postwar competitions that has made Berlin a showcase for the works of famous contemporary architects, but the failed expectation of a new phase of building that would, in the wake of the Wall coming down, articulate a social vision for the new Germany that wasn’t simply the reflective, self-satisfied architectural surfaces of the most advanced stage of multinational capitalism. The speakers are edited so that a stumble in articulation institutes a new cut: thus some sections are only a word long, while others last for several

clauses, even sentences. This technique, rather than aestheticizing fragmentation for its own sake, works to overcode inarticulateness as a semantic element, an inevitability even, within the discussion of Berlin, as if, to take the connection perhaps too far, but in a direction the editing absolutely suggests, such daily aporias could be understood, first and above all, historically.

The opposite screen provides real time views of construction sites and vacant lots that might be seen as "some real estate opportunities." All of these sites have been recorded on days off and from angles that, though at times featuring impressively complicated crane configurations and formwork, create, through their averageness, a careful distance from the world of architectural promotional images or even the big kid enthusiasm for industry one finds in artists like Fischli and Weiss. What's more, the viewpoint is consistently from a static position at street level where tourists stroll, people sell hotdogs, bikers ride by and the sounds of nearby radios waft over. While on the first screen speech inarticulations index a draining of the present that one can link, through the speakers themselves, to an overwhelming past and an advertised future that is at every moment failing to live up to its promise, on the second, this "failure" gets rearticulated not as a discrepancy registered by a speaking subject but, through the anonymous view of dormant construction sites, as an ongoing present that resists incorporation into its would-be formal telos as a built entity. The almost magnetic sources that drain temporality in this context are of course also political poles: fascism and multinational capitalism.

If the two large screens can be understood primarily as oppositely coded oscillations between present and future, the television set firmly establishes a link to Berlin's past, as a scene for cinematic explorations of urbanism. The video screen alternates six classics: Walter Ruttmann's *Berlin, Symphony of a City*; Rossellini's *Germany, Year Zero*; Fassbinder's *Berlin Alexanderplatz* (epilogue); Wim Wenders' *Wings of Desire* and Godard's *Germany, Year 90 nine zero*. Though the idea of this wing of the installation may seem the most programmatic (an historical axis to anchor the two axes turned to present/future explorations), the actual effect adds several important elements: the trope of the recoded informational film within a tourist kiosk; the real time cross referencing of familiar cinematic images from



Berlin's urban past in film within discussions and images of contemporary urbanism; the ability, through the headphones, to abstract oneself from the overlapping monologues and atmospheric sounds of the other two projected videos. What periodically disrupts this absorption, however, is the loud sound, familiar to those who remember when television stations used to go off the air. This buzz is accompanied by an official looking "Unfo" logo. Thus one can see the whole installation as an imaginary intervention in Berlin's construction, at the official level of tourist information kiosks, of its own temporality and urbanism. The "un" of Shepard's new administrative office would work less simply to obliterate once and for all the quite obviously suspect category of "objective urban information" than to introduce new categories of inquiry designed to "unfocus" the city's current, slick self image, speeding seamlessly from the forgotten dystopias of fascism and internationally imposed Cold War division to the would-be already present utopia of multinational capitalism.

It is a central strength of the installation that the effects of these political poles, their registration on an elapsing now, can be experienced through an articulate study of the web of temporal and political displacements that underlie Berlin's urbanism and not through a superstructure of immediately paraphraseable "Content" one might associate with, say, Hans Haacke's less imaginative and thought provoking critiques of Germany's past, like reconstructing a Nazi statue and a new, critical context in a southern German town. Indeed for Haacke, the unwaiveringly earnest project of bringing the repressed past to bear on the always unsuspecting present depends upon both repressions and surprises that are no longer available as such. Shepard, on the other hand, by opening his frame of reference toward the city's overdetermined future, constructs a kind of urbanism that makes Berlin's political temporality available in all of its weirdness, potentiality and horror.

CHRIS CHEN

### *The Afterlife of the Poem: An Appreciation of Paul Celan*

*"A tear rolls back into its eye." Celan*

Cord Barkhausen, one of East European poet Paul Celan's schoolmates, recalls a summer walk they took together when Celan launched into a spontaneous recitation of Rilke's "Der Ölbaum-Garten." But, as Barkhausen adds, they did not walk very far because the countryside was unsafe for two Jews in 1930s Romania. I wonder how Rilke's portrait of Christ in Gethsemane must have sounded to two young men who, while savoring these lines, nevertheless marked closely the time and the distance they had traveled. In the "Meridian" speech, Celan describes this radically foreshortened experience of the poem another way: "Nobody can tell how long the pause for breath—hope and thought—will last." Which is to say that I hear a different version of "Der Ölbaum-Garten" circulating on those seasonally accessible roads where what has been committed to memory may live a second life, an "afterlife," in exile from a tradition whose exemplars must have contributed to the growing fear these two men felt along their way. How are we to distinguish between these two versions of "Der Ölbaum-Garten?"

In locating the first, "native" version

"Home for the exile in a secular and contingent world is always provisional...for those who remain strangers in their homeland and foreigners in their new homes, feeling repeatedly out of place within every familiar world, it is vital to question settlement...Home and language in such a context never become nature."  
—Trinh Minh-Ha, "When The Moon Waxes Red"

In a letter from 1954 to Parisian professor René Lang on his refusal to accept the assignment of translating Rilke's correspondence with André Gide, Celan writes, perhaps also of his own cultural displacement after the war, "As you well now, Rilke's French inhabits a realm that is determined by displacements and reductions. This language can't simply be translated, it must be *translocated* (übergesetzt)." Barkhausen's reminiscence not only hints at the plight of the lyric voice after two world

of the poem, I am perhaps initially not so concerned with the explicit anti-Semitism of any number of representative works from the first half of this century, but of the ubiquity of the "heroic ethos" in German poetry and thought at the time, prefigured by Nietzsche's "Übermensch," popularized by Ernst Jünger in the organic Futurism of "Total Mobilization," and coolly proposed by Heidegger until the end of his life as an "authentic possibility" of Dasein, as the nobility of self-sacrifice in an overarching "Greco-German mission." Specifically, I am interested in the version of "Der Ölbaum-Garten" which belongs to a tradition obsessed with the nobility of suicide, and of the poem as embodiment of Rilke's lifelong spiritual search for "an appropriate death," a conscious, authentic relation to death which an individual may subsequently "own" or "earn." The issue of one's comportment toward death, of a "freely chosen death," which grounds this first version of "Der Ölbaum-Garten," evinces a politically disastrous disregard for all deaths not freely chosen, for the death and permanent silencing of "the other," the logic of genocide, *murder*.

A risk that critic Dennis J. Schmidt describes as Celan's fear of "not simply losing his voice or never finding it at all, but of having his tongue cut off. Silence is the risk of all language in every poem, but one should not forget that, for Celan, overcoming

wars, but also suggests something of its provisional, "translocated" safety in the mouth of a fugitive. That is: a German-speaking Rumanian Jew living in exile in France.

*Translocation*: a method of translation but also of re-reading, and the possibility of my own reading of a poetic language that "never becomes nature."

Also the risk of figurative speech. Essayist and Auschwitz survivor Jean Amery: "It would be totally senseless to try and describe here the pain that was inflicted on me. Was it 'like a dull wooden stake

this risk, the very achievement of speech, bore the memory, the promise, of his own real silence: German remained always the language of his confrontation with death, the language of real annihilation." Celan's selective excavation of German Romantic poetry and German Idealist philosophy was a dangerous enterprise. How to continue to write in what could be characterized as a non-native language in *extremis*, the language of annihilation? To ask this is also to enter into the story of Barkhausen and Celan by way of a question: what can be repeated from a tradition that has turned against us?

How does one recite this other version of "Der Ölbaum-Garten?" Not so much, as in the case of Rilke, of the lyric *on the way* to the lyric, or the deconsecrated lyric *after* the lyric, that is, after the metaphysical collapse of Platonism or Nietzsche's famous proclamation of "the death of God." Instead, the lyric experienced in its immanence, wedded to breath, "*Atemwende*, a turning of our breath." A recitation on a country road that could have been cut short at any moment. In re-reading a hostile tradition, Celan folds his own harried, imperiled interpretive strategies into the poem itself. From the "Meridian" speech: "The poem holds its ground, if you will permit me another extreme formulation, the poem holds its own ground on its own margin. In order to endure, it constantly calls and pulls itself back from an

that had been driven into the back of my head?" One comparison would only stand for the other, and in the end we would be hoaxed by turn on the hopeless merry-go-round of figurative speech. The pain was what it was. Beyond that there is nothing to say. Qualities of feeling are as incomparable as they are indescribable. They mark the limit of the capacity of language to communicate. If someone wanted to impart his physical pain, he would be forced to inflict it and thereby become a torturer himself."

"Celan's poems articulate unspeakable horror by being silent; their truth content itself becomes something negative. They emulate a language that lies below the helpless prattle of human beings—even below the level of organic life as such. It is the language of dead matter, of stones and stars."

—Theodor Adorno

"This 'still-here' can only mean speaking. Not lan-

'already-no-more' into a 'still-here.'"

Before Celan orients the silence of the lyric toward history, one already senses in the early poems collected in *Mohn und Gedächtnis*, in those brisk, panicky compilations of surrealist tropes, an experience of the "translocated" poem racing against a clock that is literally reset at every line:

A fine boat is that coffin carved in the coppice of feelings.  
I too drift in it downbloodstream, younger still than your eye.  
Now you are young as a bird dropped dead in March snow,  
now it comes to you, sings you its love song from France.  
You are light: you will sleep through my spring till it's over.  
I am lighter:  
in front of strangers I sing.

The "already-no-more" growing more insistent over the course of his lifetime. Celan would reset the clock at shorter and shorter intervals—dispensing with the already sparse grammar of these early poems and leaving time enough to utter only single words or phrases in the middle period. "Nobody can tell how long the pause for breath—hope and thought—will last." Celan's lyric vocabulary cannot withstand this kind of temporal compression. The words fracture into phonemes. In the late poems, they knit together in neologistic agglutinations. The architecture of the lyric crumbles in on itself. "A tear rolls back into its eye." The poem becomes a kind of chasm or bottomless well. An aggressive nullity. "The poem is the place where all tropes and metaphors want to be led *ad absurdum*," he will

guage as such, but responding—not just verbally—'corresponding' to something...This 'still-here' of the poem can only be found in the work of poets who do not forget that they speak from an angle of reflection which is their own existence, their own physical nature." "The Meridian"

Your question—your answer.  
Your chant, what does it know?

Deep in snow,  
Epinno,  
I—I—o.

—from "Breathturn"

later tell us in the "Meridian" speech.

—Poems that somehow manage to radicalize their own withdrawal, their own political, temporal, and linguistic intransitivity. "[Celan's poems] do not name something determinate but bring the very determining ground of speaking into language," critic Werner Hamacher argues. So this acute awareness of the mortality of the poem is also an experience of its immobility, of the "trickling hour," "the impassable hour," of the clock hands encrusted with ice. Without temporal markers, one becomes increasingly aware of the physical shape of these poems, of their accelerating downward momentum (the repeated image of "digging," or in "Draft of a Landscape:" "Circular graves, below. In/four-beat time the year's pace on/ the steep steps around them") with the first and last lines of the justified left margin searching for each other, making up a kind of dismantled clock face whose hands have disappeared, or perhaps an ideogram (the poem's aspiration to be grasped all at once), whorled seashell, or wheel (each line being a spoke).

Celan remarks in the "Bremen" speech that the poem "does not stand outside time. True, it claims the infinite and tries to reach across time—but across, not above." A deceptively simple refusal to idealize human time, but "across?" Reading these poems, one is struck not by their

An attempt to imagine the beginnings of an alternative collectivity in the shadow of a nation obsessed by folk groups, by brotherhood, and by a racial purity enforced and reinforced through mass murder. To risk imagining what Jabès called a "bond where bonds are weapons."

"I do not think of myself. I think of myself in the others, in their recorded hostility. I think of myself in Sarah's love.

A bond where bonds are weapons." Edmund Jabès, "The Book Of Yudel"

"In this language I tried, during those years and the years after, to write poems ...It meant movement, you see, something happening, being *en route*, an attempt to find direction. Whenever I ask about the sense of it, I remind myself that this implies the question of which sense is clockwise." Celan, "Bremen" Speech

*Across:* "In this way, too, poems are *en route*: they are headed toward ... Toward what? Toward something open, inhabitable, an approachable you, perhaps, an approachable reality." "Bremen" Speech

expansiveness but their chronic, plunging involution, their exacerbation of the *principium individuationis* until they open onto history even in their inward or downward turn. A more precise spatial metaphor for how we must read these poems (always in the direction of "already-no-more") is not the empty circle, the ideogram, the seashell, or the wheel, but a funneled helix. The decaying orbit of the word. To give four prominent examples from the poetry:

Do not work ahead,  
do not send forth,  
stand  
into it, enter:

transfounded by nothingness,

unburdened of all  
prayer,  
microstructured in heeding  
the pre-script,  
unover takable,

I make you at home,  
instead of all  
rest.

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The strong clocks justify  
the splitting hour,  
hoarsely.

You, clamped  
into your deepest part,  
climb out of yourself  
for ever.

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"But when there is talk of art, there is often somebody who does not really listen... More precisely: somebody who hears, listens, looks...and then does not know what it was about. But who hears the speaker, 'sees him speaking,' who perceives language as a physical shape and also...breath, that is, direction and destiny." Celan, "The Meridian"

"unburdened of all/prayer:"  
The quality of God's silence changes. Or rather the quality of silence in these poems no longer refers only to absent divinity but to absent humanity. The absence of an "approachable you," whose absence is also a double absence, the absence of an approachable "I." The self called into being in its call to another. The *Du* being "an outline for existence perhaps, for projecting ourselves into the search for ourselves."

Yes,  
as one speaks to stone, as  
you  
with my hands grope into there,  
and into nothing, such  
is what is here:

this fertile  
soil too gapes,  
this  
going down  
is one of the  
crests growing wild.

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But now shrinks the place where you stand:  
Where now, stripped by shade, will you go?  
Upward. Grope your way up.  
Thinner you grow, less knowable, finer.  
Finer: a thread by which  
it wants to be lowered, the star:  
to float farther down, down below  
where it sees itself gleam: in the swell  
of wandering words.

In the "Meridian" speech, Celan refuses to employ what has become a veritable industry in our age, the rhetoric of "historicity," to characterize this inward turn, but instead describes poetic speech as "language actualized: set free under the sign of a *radical individuation*." Or perhaps we should say a "Straitening," to borrow the title of the most famous poem from the middle period. A "Straitening" that is also the terse, inflected cadence of the hunted. "Enlarge art?" he asks, "No. On the contrary, take art with you into your innermost narrowness. And set yourself free."

This fourth example is particularly interesting because the act of reading, the funneled helix, is inverted "Upward" in the direction of memory or "the star," of "already-no-more" or the steady accumulation of remembered lines as one reads further "down." This echoes the movement of departure in a passage from "The Straitening":

"Go, your hour  
has no sisters, you are—  
are at home. A wheel, slow,  
rolls out of itself, the spokes  
climb,

Why is this "Straitening" dominated by its seeming opposite, Celan's halting, intimate address to an "other, who knows, perhaps an altogether other?" Buried in what seems at first glance to be a desperate political appeal, in his insistence that the work is marked by evidence of this other, lies a mystical conception of address as its own answer. For Nietzsche, this would mean that the unfortunately named "Will-To-Power" can only preserve itself by exceeding itself. Heidegger frames it in clumsy poetic terms: the self's essence lying "outside" or "beyond" the self. Or everywhere more elegantly in Celan:

In the seminal sense  
the sea stars you out, inmostly, for ever.

So we should add Celan's "Straitening," or "radical individuation," to a peculiar strain of mysticism contained within Nietzsche's doctrine of "Eternal Recurrence" and Rilke's dictum, "Einmal und nichtmehr," "Once and no more." Both "deprivations of transcendence" that bear down on the moment, or in that furnace of creation and destruction, of "Becoming," no ontic comparison can properly render—when we imagine a "moment" in a long chain of general "moments," we have already lapsed back into Platonic antinomies. Nietzsche's embrace of "Becoming" is a hellish proposition

climb on blackish field, the night  
needs no stars, nowhere  
does anyone ask after you."

Not a confession but an excavation of the recessed (temporal, linguistic, political) vantage from which any representation of what he calls in the "Meridian" speech "the personal," is constructed "beyond what is human, stepping into a realm which is turned toward the human."

"Please note, ladies and gentlemen: 'One would like to be a Medusa's head' to ...seize the natural as natural by means of art!...Art makes for a distance from the I. Art requires that we travel a certain space in a certain direction, on a certain road...perhaps poetry, like art, moves with the oblivious self into the uncanny and strange to free itself. Though where? In which place? How? As what? This would mean art is the distance poetry must cover..." "The Meridian"

*Eternal Recurrence: "The greatest burden.—What would happen if one day or night a demon were to steal upon you in your loneliest loneliness and say to you, 'You will have to live this life—as you are living it*

that requires nothing short of absolute assent, of willing every single moment of one's life into eternity, or as he writes in a fragment entitled "Recapitulation:" "to stamp Becoming with the character of Being—that is the supreme will to power." Rilke seems to approach this issue from the opposite direction. He "stamps" the moment of "Becoming" by emphasizing its radical impermanence and absolute singularity: "Once and no more." Erich Heller reads this almost Buddhist belief in light of the ancient philosophical quandary of immance: "Now again they seek in the greatest possible intensification of immanence [sic] salvation from the inglorious prison. They also invent more and more deprivations of transcendence to heighten the pressure within the hermetic vessel. In that, Nietzsche's 'Eternal Recurrence' and Rilke's 'Einmal und nichtmehr,' 'once and no more,' are contrasts merely in verbal expression, but identical in meaning." Celan's poem holding "its own ground on its own margin" is, among other things, a new attempt to think through this doctrine of immanence.

Heller's astute commentary gets us close, but not all the way to the cusp of this inward turn—blossoming in its address to an other, or discovering the other in place of itself. This is perhaps the most fruitful intersection between Celan's poems and Heidegger's "Nietzsche" lectures (which Celan greatly admired), in

past—once again and countless times more; and there will be nothing new to it, but every pain and every pleasure, every thought and sigh, and everything unutterably petty or grand in your life will have to come back to you, all in the same sequence and order—even this spider, and that moonlight between the trees, even this moment and I myself. The eternal hourglass of existence turning over and over—and you with it, speck of dust! Would you not cast yourself down, gnash your teeth, and curse the demon who said these things? Or have you ever experienced a tremendous moment when you would reply to him, 'You are a god; never have I heard anything more godly!'" Nietzsche, "The Gay Science"

"I am not looking for a way out, I am only pushing the question farther in the same direction..."

Celan, "The Meridian"

"The transcendence that living is, and that cannot be satisfactorily expressed in life itself as sur-vival (a surpassing of life), is rather the pressing demand of an other life, the life of the other. From this life everything comes, and turned to

Heidegger's description of an individual "cast beyond himself" when he allows himself to "be bound by Being," a sense of "Being" that often appears in these lectures, along with the doctrine of "Eternal Recurrence" as simply another configuration of "Will-To-Power:" "The consequence for man of the concealment of Being is that he is overcome by *lethe*, that concealment of Being which gives rise to the illusion that there is no such thing as Being... As soon as man lets himself be bound by Being in his view upon it, he is cast beyond himself, so that he is stretched, as it were, between himself and Being and is outside himself. Such elevation beyond oneself and such being drawn toward Being itself is eros. Only to the extent that Being is able to elicit 'erotic' power in its relation to man is man capable of thinking about Being and overcoming oblivion of Being."

Or Saint Augustine by way of Meister Eckhart:

"God is closer to the soul than the soul is to itself."

Given the "grave accent of history," Celan explodes the philosophical formulation of Dasein:

Die Welt ist fort, ich muß dich tragen.

*The world is gone, I must carry you.*

After invoking Heidegger somewhat ambivalently, I will not attempt to

it, we cannot turn back." Maurice Blanchot, "The Writing Of The Disaster"

"The poem becomes conversation—almost desperate conversation. Only the space of this conversation can establish what is addressed, can gather it into a 'you' around the naming and speaking I. But this 'you,' comes about by dint of being named and addressed, brings its otherness into the present. Even in the here and now of the poem—and the poem has only this one, unique, momentary present—even in this immediacy and nearness, the otherness gives voice to what is most its own: its time."

Celan, "The Meridian"

"I know we can read it in different ways, we can give it a variety of accents: the acute of the present, the grave accent of history (literary history included), the circumflex (marking length) of eternity."

Celan, "The Meridian"

ground Celan's poems in what critics like Christopher Fynsk argue is a language that "offers itself in its historicity and as the ground of a relation that is radically finite," which is a poor substitution of two degraded critical terms that make their own claims for "the infinite" by contracting to a point of absolute linguistic certainty: "historicity," "finitude." In almost all of the secondary Celan literature, we encounter time and again the depressing spectacle of a critical lexicon predicated on a surprising amount of historical arrogance, a presumption of the genetic inevitability of "the modern."—Of the self-reflexive, non-mimetic lyric as the logical outcome of historical evolution.

By countering this assumption, literary theorist Paul de Man, in an essay entitled "Lyric And Modernity," confronts another, equally intractable dilemma. If "modernity" is defined as the moment we become aware of the eternal striving between representational and allegorical modes, then we again find ourselves at the end of history, a region where "lyrical poetry encounters this enigma ... in the ambivalence of a language that is representational and nonrepresentational at the same time." Poets like Paul Celan can only go on asserting, *ad infinitum*, the "incomprehensibility" of this "enigma." de Man replaces one brand of historical arrogance for another. To make such extravagant claims for the immutable "poetic truth" of Celan's writing

"The worst mystification is to believe that one can move from representation to allegory, or vice versa, as one moves from the old to new, from father to son, from history to modernity." Paul de Man, "Lyric And Modernity"

A striving characterized as "the uneasy and shifting border line that separates poetic truth from poetic falsehood."

"On all the pages that have been read  
On all the pages that are blank  
Blood paper stone or ash  
I write your name."

—Paul Eluard, "Liberty"

within and against a "language of annihilation" is, paradoxically, to depoliticize it, and to also risk buttressing the outrageous claim that National Socialism stands at "the end of intelligible history," as if it was the first, last, or only significant instance of internment, genocide, or mass murder in this or any other century.

A more fertile reading of Celan's drastic deformation of the lyric might begin with the painterly observation that poetic language here offers itself in its *lopsidedness*. Not simply in the formal design of Celan's oddly weighted, snow-filled pages, but in the opacity of a strict lyric vocabulary (the "variable key" of recurrent nouns such as "snow," "ice," "ash," "rose," "well," "stone," which do quadruple duty: as direct representation of natural phenomena, as mystical incantation, as immanent critique of history, and as allegorical word "trace") which effaces what Adorno called the "negative truth content" of a silence that is itself unable to fully signify the catastrophe. The scales do not balance. *Lopsidedness*: silence can no longer constitute an axis of "spiritual" symmetry for the poem, as it certainly does for Rilke and for Trakl. And for many contemporary critics as well. Celan scholarship is dominated by what Peter Gay, in his chronicle of the Weimar period, called the fatal tendency of "Men of the word ... to overestimate the power of the word." Rather, to listen to Celan's poetry one should perhaps

With a variable key  
you unlock the house in  
which  
drifts the snow of that left  
unspoken.  
Always what key you  
choose  
depends on the blood that  
spurts  
from your eye or your  
mouth or your ear.

You vary the key, you vary  
the word  
that is free to drift with the  
flakes.  
What snowball will form  
round the word  
depends on the wind that  
rebuffs you." —Celan,  
"With A Variable Key"

*Lopsidedness*: "Now I make  
an important distinction  
between music and lyric  
poetry. I feel closer to  
drawing today; in the same  
vein ... I intentionally darken  
curves for the sake of  
nuance in truth, faithful to  
my own kind of spiritual  
realism ... I attempt to, at  
least linguistically, render  
sections from the spectral  
analysis of things, to show  
them in many aspects and  
permutations simultaneously:  
their relations, sequences  
and oppositions. Unfortunately,  
I am unable to observe objects from  
*all* sides." Celan as related by  
Hugo Huppert, "(In the  
Prayer-Mill's Rattling"): A  
Visit with Paul Celan"

make use of a "topographical sketch"  
he offered for Bremen: "a landscape  
where both people and books live."

Celan offers his "counter-word," a  
word against the grain, an exemplary  
word, but one senses that his word is  
faced as much toward the past as  
toward the future, toward a mythic  
Jerusalem to come as much as toward  
a Jerusalem that has already become  
a frighteningly depopulated necropolis.

In the last poems before his suicide in  
1970, one is struck by a severe quality  
of light and an almost Apollonian  
calm—perhaps accompanying his  
arrival at an abstract future beyond  
the river Lethe, where the realities of  
Nazi Germany have seemingly been  
forgotten. Where, plagued by mental  
illness and persistent fears of persecution,  
he loses "you to you" in "the  
slit-arteries/ of my cognition."

In just a few years after Barkhausen's  
story, both of Celan's parents would  
be murdered by Nazis, and he himself  
forcibly relocated to a Rumanian  
"labor" camp. One can sense quite  
clearly Celan's resignation in these  
final poems beneath the awful strain  
of his "counter-word." A word rooted  
in the absurdly divided promise of  
the lyric voice to annul a history it  
simultaneously wishes to reclaim:

*Lopsidedness*: elusive, un-  
representable remainder of  
spectral analysis. What is  
occluded by our specific  
"angle of reflection."

A history of silence. Of the  
exterminated—. Of the  
torturers and complicitous.  
Silence in the service of  
humanity. Of any relationship  
conceived as a question.  
Even the silence of  
the beloved. "Love de-  
spaired of them: so long  
was their embrace"

—From "Backlight"

"A word—you know:  
a corpse.

Let us wash it,  
let us comb it,  
let us turn its eye  
towards heaven."

—Celan

The poles  
are inside us,  
insurmountable  
when we're awake,  
we sleep across, up to the Gate  
of Mercy,

I lose you to you, that  
is my snowy comfort,

say that Jerusalem is,

say it, as though I were this  
your whiteness  
as though you  
were mine,

as though without us we could be we

I open your leaves, for ever,

you pray, you bed  
us free.

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All those sleep shapes, crystalline,  
that you assumed  
in the language shadow,

to those  
I lead my blood,

those image lines, them  
I'm to harbour  
in the slit-arteries  
of my cognition—,

my grief, I can see,  
is deserting to you.

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**Sarah Anne Cox** is the author of *Home of Grammar*, a limited edition chapbook on Double Lucy Press, and a consulting editor for *Outlet*. She is working on a collection of poems entitled *Arche*.

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**Patrick F. Durgin** is the editor of *Kenning*. He has work in *Tool a Magazine*, *Situation*, *Nedge* and others. His chapbook, *Pundits Scribes Pupils*, is from Potes & Poets Press.

**Steven Farmer's** most recent books are *World of Shields* (w.n.f., 1993) and *Standing Water* (hic jacket, 1995). More recent work can be seen in *Lyric&*, *Crayon* (NYC), and the *Poetry Calendar for the Millenium* (Sun & Moon). He lives in the east Bay Area.

On April 19 Kim Rosenfield and **Rob Fitterman** welcomed their latest collaboration, a daughter named Coco. On March 19, Rob "completed" section 24 of his long poem *Metropolis*. *Metropolis 1-15* is forthcoming from Sun & Moon Press. Rob is also the editor/publisher of *Object*.

**Ben Friedlander** lives in Buffalo after fifteen years in the Bay Area. He recently edited *The Collected Prose of Charles Olson* with Don Allen. Meow press is about to bring out selected poems.

**Jack Hirschman** has published more than 75 books and chapbooks, including translations from eight languages. He is also a painter and exhibits widely.

**Brenda Iijima** is an artist and poet who lives in Brooklyn, New York. She is self-publishing *Person (a)*, a book of 100 plus poems and an India Ink drawing, available September 1998.

**John Lowther** edits the new press *3rdness*. He is the author of *.1*, a 1997 Potes and Poets publication.

**Pamela Lu** pursues narrative questions of a mystical nature in San Francisco, where she also co-edits the online journal *Idiom* (<http://www.idiompres.com>). Her first "novel" is forthcoming from Atelos Press.

**Kristin Prevallet's** book *Perturbation, My Sister* was published by First Intensity Press last year. She has recently completed a biography of the poet Helen Adam. She lives in Brooklyn.

**Randy Prunty** works as a therapist and social worker in Atlanta where he lives with his wife and daughter.

**Rodrigo Toscano's** forthcoming books include: *The Disparities* (Sun and Moon) and *Partisans* (O Books). Several poems of his will appear in *The Gertrude Stein Awards Anthology*. His work has appeared in a variety of American and Canadian Journals: *Chain*, *West Coast Line*, *Poetics Journal*, *New American Writing*, *Object-Torque*, *Tripwire* and others. He is currently at work on an as yet untitled book commissioned by Atelos Press. His other interests include the piano and Socialist politics. Rodrigo Toscano lives in San Francisco.

**Elizabeth Treadwell's** new book is *The Erratrix & Other Stories*, from Texture Press. *Populace*, a collection of her prose poems, is forthcoming from Avec Books. She edits *Outlet* in Berkeley, Ca.

**Kathy Lou Schultz's** essay "Talking Trash, Talking Class: What's a Working Class Poetic and Where Would I Find One?" appeared in the premiere issue of *Tripwire*. Other recent work is in *Fourteen Hills*, *Outlet*, *lyric&* and the forthcoming *Kenning*. She co-edits, with Jim Brashear and Robin Tremblay-McGaw, *Lipstick Eleven*, a magazine of experimental literature.

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