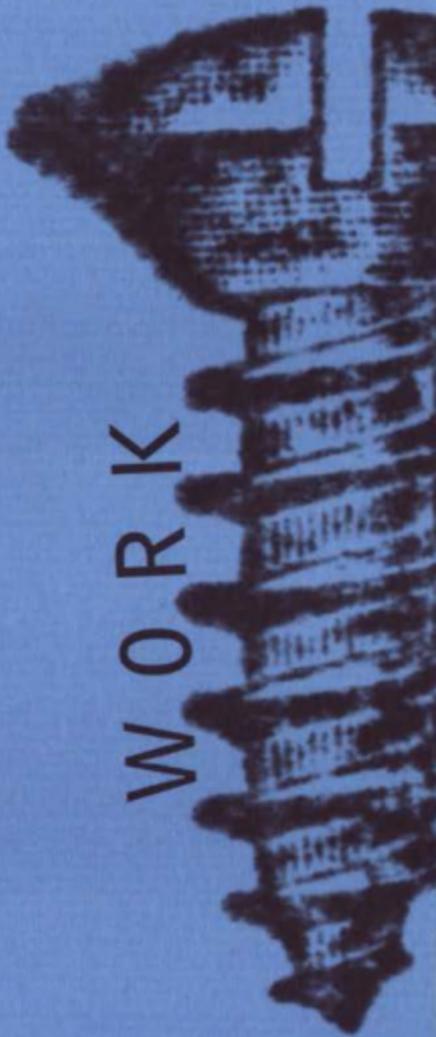


tripwire
a journal of poetics

W O R K



4

Issue number four

tripwire
a journal of poetics

4

Work

edited by Yedda Morrison & David Buuck

Winter 2000-01

tripwire: a journal of poetics

issue 4 — Work — Winter 2000-01

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Editors' Notes

tripwire 4: Work

Material vs. intellectual labor. Class, production, productivity, economy. Practice, handwork, wordwork, work ethic, workplace, co-worker. What is the significance of one's work in relation to writing? Or the significance of one's writing as work? Labor, capital, use value, industry. How does one participate within and against local and global economies/cultures? Work force, workbook, workshop. In a small-press economy, what are the standards for "just compensation," for exploitation? Knowledge industries. Cultural workers. Appropriation. "Model post-industrial employees?" Exploitation, task, effort. Mission, service, vocation, career(ism). End-product, by-product, opus, oeuvre.

tripwire 5: Expanding the Repertoire: Innovation and Change in African-American Writing

Documenting the recent Small Press Traffic conference. With essays, poetry, and prose by Will Alexander, Wanda Coleman, C.S. Giscombe, Renee Gladman, Erica Hunt, Nate Mackey, Mark Morris, Harryette Mullen, Julie Patton, Giovanni Singleton, and Lorenzo Thomas. Artwork by Arnold J. Kemp. See endpages for ordering information.

Forthcoming Spring 2001

tripwire 6: (open issue)

Tripwire invites submissions on contemporary and emergent poetics for its next issue. Essays, translations, interviews, art & book reviews, bulletins, letters responding to previous issues, visual art. Visual art submissions should be reproducible in black & white; visual artists are encouraged to include a statement about their work. At this time, we are not accepting unsolicited poetry for publication. All submissions should include a hard copy. Deadline for submissions to issue 6 is September 1, 2001.

Percent humanitarian

[hmm FLATTER

bar-graph

tits

“what a glorious

drill-bit

that [hmm

Hunger888Hunger888Hunger888

and whose well
proportioned

and whose swell
to do

Rudy's house [square feet] Rudy

“beds are for sleeping streets are for

CLICK (as in pistol cock)

"listen ahngonna be honest wichu

[another translation from the ffff-

RENT
FOOD
HEAT
WATER
DOCTOR

click

The vestibule...] Evictions not notably e-labor's

Omit888Affinity sector

[per

techno-nationalist hubris of nouveau entrepreneurial

benefaction

[per (beepbeep)

a peer (apparel?) appears

[puh

[puh

Webbie

Flash-er

Wakes

Headlong into the micro-swamp of what who didn't intend

to

which Seattle?

Not is that Not a Not that Not is is that a real question?

"I mean for
the sake of

efficiency

doesn't it
make sense"

that planned obsolescence drop dot.coms on transatlantically liquidated
infrastructures

that hyper-tiered indies jostle for globs of managerial diffusion to wield
over perma-temps

Megahertz sprinkle the dawn—script

Funnels acute to one quadrant

WHY

(World Hunger Year)

attack888root cause of hung888er by pro-mo888ing self

reliance?

one quarter of one day fer sleeping, one third of one day fer working,
one quarter of one quarter of one day fer commuting, one eighth of one
third of one day fer cooking, one twelfth of one quarter of one day fer
fucking, then set avoid minimize manage conquer plan

two

Tig o' Bitties

fer yr couplin wit

DAY MIND

covered by

NEWS MAW

to

look like888this:

Global Shoes, Local Things,
Relations of Production Masks,
and Architect Enemies

Nike Whitey

—Brian Kim Stefans

With the reach and flexibility of capital, the local and the global are in a constitutive relationship: "The global becomes a product of the local as much as the local is remade by the global" (Smith, 188). If the local is disarticulated from the national and articulated to the global, relationally, its meaning as local will come in terms of the global: they are linked in a signifying chain. Let me put it this way: that run-away capital shirt you may be wearing was sewn in some local, a local which is now articulated in a different way than it once was to the global due to these relations of production. The global/local computer I am typing this on was made in different locals: the laptop "assembled in the U.S." from components likely from Asia, while the keyboard is "assembled" in a local made global, Mexico, via NAFTA. Yet, "things" (as Will Straw points out) come from "elsewhere," and always have, so why is the local now thought in relation to the global? Changes in the flows or *scapes* of globalism account for part of this, the more dense interconnectivity of sites, economies and cultures as well accounts for part. This interconnectivity has to be seen as more than a space/time condensing; it is a metalepsis, where effect is taken as cause. While material and tangible technological changes have added to this condensation and connectivity, it is the realignment of trade laws and regulations for the movement of capital which are an additional cause. NAFTA connects Canada and Mexico in a way that they were not previously connected; the cultural is slid into the economic. Mexico is no longer predominantly another country with its specific histories and geography, but it a competing market for profits. This is the homogenizing effect of the cultural logic of globalization; the world is transformed into more highly competitive zones through uneven development and mobile (flexible) capital. That kids wear Nikes in Vancouver and Mexico City is effect, not cause. This antagonistic connectivity is sparked as Canadian workers lose their jobs through run-away capital when factories relocate in the maquiladora zone and those workers labour under the lack of regulation that neo-liberal globalism brings. As history shows, nothing quite causes a connection better than antagonism.

Am I connected to Mexico, somehow, more closely due to the keyboard I type on? This implies a decrease in the fetishism of the commodity, yet the ideological effect of globalization is to obscure relationships rather than revealing them—that is the ideological work of the mediascape and ideoscape (Appadurai). The local "emerges" from within the new relations of production—in which commodities and culture are produced. The local is then a site of overlap and contradiction, of antagonisms, of mediation and determinism, of "authenticity" and history as well as "the fleeting moment." The local oscillates within the discourses which (partially) constitute it, materializing in one as it fades in another. Christian Hoeller summarizes the pluralization of meaning for the local:

What this multiple shrouding amounts to is a perspective in which local settings suddenly appear as crossovers of that which is generated with that which is generating, of repressive with liberating, of stable with subversive moments. And [...] just as context elements seep into local conglomerates, local specifics run continually through the context layers surrounding them (191).

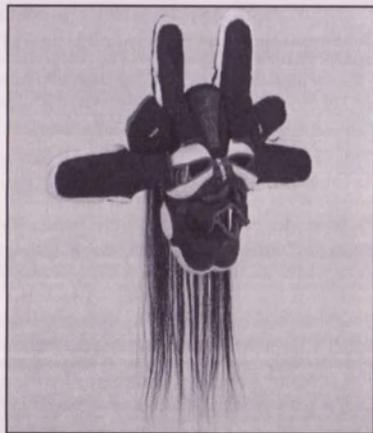
Pluralized in this way, the local emerges as the effective site of agency, for applying specific meanings (which take in the global flows through the mediascape). It is (theoretically and methodologically) sensible then to find culture as "a whole way of life" (Raymond Williams) with access to the interconnectivity of globalism within the local.

But what would local cultural articulations look like? And if the local is the site of resistance as well as the site of overlap and materialization of globalization, could there be progressive and retrograde localisms—and to downscale Balibar's designation regarding nationalisms—"localisms of liberation" and "localisms of dominance?"

Arif Dirlik gives two problems for "the local as a strategic concept of resistance." Firstly, resistance at the local must refuse to reify the local as the site of "authenticity," for, given the overlaps and networks of determination, culture is "daily disorganized by the global forces [...] that seek to reconstitute it, to assimilate it to the global homogenization that it seeks" (41). Secondly, the local must refuse assimilation into the global (41). Dirlik's cautions themselves fall into the binary of local resistance where globalism is (despite its complexities) reduced to a singular homogenizing force and where resistance has to take shape somehow outside of the very structure it seeks to rearticulate or resist. The theoretical contradiction is that globalization is imagined to cover the planet with its complex connectivity, yet in order to resist it, sites must be outside of it. Is resistance just disarticulation?

These binaries are fruitfully discarded in the recent work of Brian Jungen. Jungen's sculptural works, *Prototype for a New Understanding*, do not try to separate the local and the global, the particular and the universal, but run them together without contradiction or disjuncture, drawing on structural similarities. The Prototypes are Nike Air Jordans (late nineties models) disassembled into their constituent pieces and then remade into sculptures remarkably like Northwest Coast First Nations ceremonial masks. The disjuncture here is not as great as it would seem, the graduated curve of the Nike trademarked swoosh and the white, black and red colour scheme fit into the existing semiotics of Northwest Coast art. And Jungen's refashioned Nike masks are recognizable as references to the historical figurative masks reproduced in anthropology textbooks: killer whale, raven, D'sonoqua (cannibal woman), frog. The Prototypes obviously evade any sense of authenticity of the local, aiming instead at representation and at spatiotemporal relations. The bad trope of anthropology (and carried over into postcolonial discourse), locates First Nations culture in the past as a culture which had its peak "precontact" and just after. Yet Jungen's Prototypes take Nike, the signifier of the most global product (and a symbol of the consumerist cultural logics of globalization), and rematerializes it as "postmodern" Northwest Coast Indian art which is shown in a gallery (present, urban) rather than a museum. The spatiotemporal management of globalism is cross-circuited by its own complex connectivity and conjuncture. The global is brought into the local, but into a local which is imagined in the past and which is part of a non-consumerist economy. From the other side, First Nation's culture is brought forward, out of a fetishized authenticity and straight into the homogenizing flow of Nike. This is not a tactic of resistance seeking the outside of globalism's ideology, rather it is a daring strategy which brings First Nation's culture into globalism on a symbolic level in order to rearticulate the discourse of globalization. Jungen breaks the autonomy of spatiotemporal relations within globalization and runs the various scapes or flows through one another in a manner which does not permit deterministic binaries of space and time, of local and global, authentic and constructed.

What of the different forms of labour materialized and dematerialized in these prototypes? Nike, famous (notorious) for its bad labour practices, makes its Air Jordans in South Korea, one of its more fixed factories (Air Jordans require more skill to assemble and thus this factory has not been relocated as others have [see Hitchcock]). Nike's relations of production are a model of complexity and mobility:



Brian Jungen, *Prototype for a New Understanding #5*
1999 Nike Air Jordans, hair, 22"x27"x5".



Brian Jungen, *Prototype for a New Understanding #8*
1999 Nike Air Jordans, hair.

Subcontractors scour emerging economies for the usual characteristics [cheap female labour, helpful national government, lack of labour organizations, etc.] ...and sufficient infrastructure to get raw materials in and the finished product out within the requisite business cycles (Hitchcock, 129).

In short, Nike maximizes its profits by using the "advantages" globalism can give it. The labour of Jungen's cultural production is obviously at the opposite end of the scale. Displayed in the armatures and in glass vitrines, the prototypes, reveal the deconstructive labour of Jungen (the cut seams, the cleaved glue joins) as well as the original labour of the South Korean workers in the number of seams and glue joins. William Wood reads these economies conjuncturally and speculatively:

As well, the masks are infused with the knowledge that production of the shoes is part of the punishing conditions of a global economy [...] in service to First World Corporate wealth. The implication is that natives like Jungen represent pockets of "Third World" identity in the so-called First World, and that the Northwest Coast traffic in museum masks and commercial art in contemporary examples are both historically rooted and contingent (19).

Wood hints at the spatiotemporal and ideological crossings embedded in Jungen's prototypes. The commodity fetishism of Nike is bluntly turned inside out as the labour involved in the production of the shoe is made visible: this aesthetic ideology of Jungen the obverse of the ideology of globalization, which cloaks its multiple connections. This ideological effect of globalization opens a role for the cultural. Remarkably, the masks materialize the discourses and relations of the global and the local, as speculations and as *prototypes for new understanding*, they open these relations in a nonreductive and non-deterministic way.

At a completely different scale and economy, I want to move to a moment of retrograde localism or "localism of dominance." A common yet pointed critique of the excesses of cultural studies work is that it found resistance everywhere but effect nowhere. Micro-resistance of the subjective productive consumption of mass culture is an easy target at this point and I want to link it to the ideology of neo-liberal globalization rather than to a (cultural studies versus the humanities) disciplinary struggle. The local (and subjective) as a site of resistance can go beyond the worries of absorption to the active replication of the ideology of globalization. That is, the relationship of resistance and globalization is not oppositional. From Appadurai,

here is a statement typical of that relationship:

The megarehoteric of developmental modernization (economic growth, high technology, agribusiness, schooling, militarization) in many countries is still with us. But it is often punctuated, interrogated, and domesticated by the micronarratives of film, television, music, and other expressive forms, which allow modernity to be rewritten more as vernacular globalization and less as a concession to large-scale national and international policies (10).

The shift here is that the vernacular does not resist globalization, but forces it into a concession. But this improvisatory resistance which is rewriting modernity can also be flipped so that uneven development and the breakdown of social systems can be read as oppositional, even progressive. In the right-wing technological determinism magazine, *Wired*, a feature article on world-superstar architect Rem Koolhaas illustrates this reactive, absorptive flip. Coming back from Nigeria, Koolhaas and his researcher wrote of the "improvisational urbanism the capital's citizens were creating from the remnants of corrupt and unfinished development projects":

'We resist the notion that Lagos represents an African city en route to becoming modern,' the group reported on its return. 'Rather, we think it represents an extreme and paradigmatic case study of a city at the forefront of globalizing modernity. This is to say that Lagos is not catching up with us. Rather, we may be catching up with Lagos. (Wolf, 312-13).

Modernity, spatiotemporal relations and First World/Third World relations are turned upside down in a carnivalesque globalism, with a discursively bold yet politically reactionary gesture. For this is not a warning sign of bad modernity (or the second modernity of globalism) but a reading of uneven development and social system breakdown as opportunities for a new urbanism: "Dangerous breakdowns of order and infrastructure in Nigeria, however, are often transformed into productive urban forms: stalled traffic turns into an open-air market, defunct railroad bridges become pedestrian walkways" (Wolf 313). Resistance is given a value as production, but this valorization drops away the relations of production, in a sense, fetishizing necessity for resistance. The neo-liberal value of individual initiative over state infrastructure is fused with the discourse of local—and particularly—Third World resistance. A site in the past in the uneven and brutal teleology of modernization is now the global future as nation-states are slid through history as if indexes such as life expectancy, access to

health care and education, and per capita income are themselves anachronistic for locating a nation in space and time.

Eileen Myles

Work Letters

3/23/00

Dear Yedda + David,
I'd been trying ^{to} figure out
what were the relevant
poems to send you + then
I saw all these work let-
ters + it struck me
that they were more
of the topic than
my poems. I don't
necessarily like how
I sound in these

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Notes, but that made
them even more inter-
esting.

Love,

Eric

March 4, 1999

Dear Rachel,

Thanks for your note. I like your questions. So I'll bomb through them and answer them all a little bit, some more.

Punk was a huge influence. I came to New York in the seventies and punk was in full swing within two years of my arrival. Punk gave new permission to be angry, to be brief and incisive. Dumb and powerful. It wasn't touchy feely like the hippie movement, and it wasn't middle class. A big piece of the anger of punk was directed at capitalism, and by poor kids. It was ugly too, not pretty or "beautiful." In many ways punk resonated well with New York's foul beauty.

I very much chose to be identified with the New York School. Upon seeing Frank O'Hara and James Schuyler's poems I looked for everything else like them or by them. I loved their pulsing speech rhythms, well O'Hara's, and the active construction of a poem as a pile of things you see, and pass. There is a certain way the New York School was utterly new to me in the seventies that would be too cliched to be possible now. I think it's true that I'm that, the last one, though I'm not only that.

I found poetry reading styles peculiar and pretentious when I began to go to readings. I liked the normal speech rhythms of performance artists like Spalding Gray. I always liked the good talk, period. I saw Jack Nicholson in a movie once in which he was a sensitive late night talk show host. I like how he whispered into his tape recorder. Talking like myself always seemed like the correct delivery. I'm pre-slam. I don't really like the frantic hard sell or even the commercial composure of the slam reading style. I manage to hear my poems when I write them. It feels like listening, composition does.

I think poetry is pretty wreathy for people. In general people select the poetry that most rewards their own present or imagined station in life. I've clung to some of my regional accent, my class background persists in my work. It's my material, almost. Sexuality is also class. I've absolutely been punished for what I promote in my work. I have a rudimentary need to shock. In the midst of an aesthetically pleasing poem I loved the bizarre impact of say the word pussy. Perhaps this is childish of me, but it still is a thrill to talk dirty in church or in the pews of the fussy poetry world. My work is received oddly and enthu-

siastically, but not critically. I think often I'm received like a big bozo.

Dogs are big bozos. I genuinely wanted a dog when I was a kid—so desperately that some part of me was transmuted to dog. Dog=desire, or even yearning. I think there's a lot of shame around desire, neediness, impulses being touted, hopefully being gratified shamelessly and bluntly. There's a huge appeal in all that for me. It's very anti-catholic which I also am.

My poetry practice is pretty constant. I try to track what's there. Obviously in tumultuous times there's more to track. I'm stimulated by weather and all kinds of environment. I've been spending a lot of time by the sea lately and I have lots of landscape, sky, shifting skies are flooding my work. I carry a small notebook and write as I'm moved. I would carry poems more in my head when I was younger, letting them build all day. I'm clearer and less retentive now.

My works in progress? I'm writing a huge book of sky poems. My novel, Cool for You is nearly done after tons of editing. I revise poems slightly, though sometimes I wait years to begin. In general I throw things out, streamline them, see where I can leap too. Most poems err by being too long, saying too much. Too many words is always the best critique of a poem. Which words stay and which words go, of course, is the problem of a lifetime of writing poems.

Long prose works have to be revised a lot because so much time passes during the writing process, and the point of revision is to make the time of writing be transparent. In prose you want the consciousness to be so full that a shift of attention merely feels like a slight tugging. Are you a writer? Good luck, Rachel.

Sincerely,

Eileen

8/99

Danine,

I am returning your book and want to thank you for letting me read it. I guess I was abrupt on the phone the other night. You don't know how powerless I feel. Your work has always been gorgeous and moving and this compendium of gestures and texts is probably the most stunning thing you've done yet. The whole Danine is there, the young girl and the young lesbian, the kid who takes drugs, has a best girlfriend and a best boyfriend, the poet of the troubled family and the strong daughter writing to her dad to buck up. I admire you Danine and I admire your writing and your spirit. I regret that I don't know what to do with this book. I would read a poem and see another version of it later and that's what a writer's life looks like a lot. Though I've got some books in print and people "know" Eileen Myles I'm really just another sad Joe waiting to see who'll publish my latest edifice.

Your book challenges most people's idea of what a book is. I think at one time it was something like this: a mass of glowing roots that more than anything radiates human in all its glory and truth. Don't die, or end our friendship or your liking me because I don't have the nerve for your book or know what to do with it, or am having to live my life first. I am a quirky writer and that's how we met. And I am regarded as "way out" and impossible and I know editors think "this is not a book, this is her life" which is what I felt when I laid on my bed one night and read what you sent me. I get it now—that this is book as much as my book is book. But what I'm trying to say is that if I'm a stretch, you're all of nature itself. I think small pieces of this should go in the world first and then you might see some links that will help the reader feel safe as they move through your voyage. One writer advised me that my novel needed a little more hand-holding. I'd give the same advice to you, but I know you won't take it.

I'm going to take the liberty of xeroxing a little bit of this. Can I put excerpts in magazines here and there? Let me know.

I love you and your work and I wish I could help more.

Eileen

October 25, 1998

Dear Alice Quinn,

I appreciated your note. I was a good friend of Jimmy Schuyler's (as well as a huge fan) so I'm not surprised he's rubbed off on my work. Robert Kelly...now that surprised me. I've barely read him at all.

I'm enclosing a few more poems, of various lengths. All pretty new.

& Thanks for looking.

Eileen Myles

September 29, 1999

Dear Richard Herz:

I spoke with Chris Kraus on the phone today and she told me you had okayed my teaching the Diary class with her in the spring. That's good news, and I want to thank you for it.

She mentioned that I can perhaps do studio visits at Art Center in the spring. If there's a way of nailing down a schedule for those visits, that would be great. I'll be in Los Angeles all spring which I'm looking forward to tremendously, and doing things at Art Center makes the prospect of time spent on the west coast feel more engaged and welcoming.

Here's an article I wrote that came out this month in *Art in America*. I look forward to seeing you next year.

Best,

Eileen Myles

September 29, 1999

Dear Ed White,

Thanks for your note last summer about Chelsea Girls. I've got one more week in P-town—I noticed you were reading at KGB recently and I regretted I couldn't hear you and say hello.

I'm coming back to New York with a new book in my bag. It's called Cool for You and it's making the rounds with publishers. I've worked on this book for five years, so it's gone through a lot of drafts and I feel very excited about it going into the world. It's a darker book than Chelsea Girls, deeper too, I think. I'm calling it a non-fiction novel which is absolutely true, but only underlines the surprising strangeness of my book for a large number of editors. The book is supposedly "elliptical" (which I like) and "harsh" (which is typical of an American life, I thought). Then they say more good things and bad things. Frankly, we're at a fairly late round in Cool getting read and I'm wondering if I can put this book into your hands for a look. More than anything the subtext of what editors were saying about my book is who the hell is she and why should we care. I think I've written an important piece of American literature, and I wouldn't bother you if I didn't think this was true. If you, busy as hell with your own writing and probably teaching too, read Cool and thought it was a valuable book that could probably make a difference at this moment. I don't want to get ahead of myself too much, but I'm thinking a letter from you might make some editor wake up and remember what literature is supposed to do. Personally, I want to stop everything, and at the very same time not die. Some people pray at these moments, and some of us read and write. My book was written in a big pause in my life. If you'd like to read it, I will send it to you. Here's my number, and also here's a card. I hope you are well this fall, and I look forward to having a conversation with you some time.

Respectfully,

Eileen Myles

[Editors' note: this last letter was never sent]

"Work?!"

030197

moldy bread, not quite mummified, behind the books . smells truly green . *you know* who it is: Mr. Stench has arrived . "ack!" do lice have a sense of smell? do you have a sense of humor? tiny words squeak from a telephone earpiece . giggles split a grin . amazement: hey! *hay muchos Goosebumps!* piled on the floor . *World War I Tommy (Illustrated)*: uniform, helmet, gun, medals . FREE SOFTWARE EXPLODES YOUR BUSINESS! i *told* you not to go in there! the smell of smoke curls off her fury . duet of crying babies . the red-headed man placed it just out of reach, said: you never know when a pair of pliers'll come in handy.

Reverberations

racket & clash, clattering chipping-hammer, clanging hot metallic chatter in a haze of metal-melting welding-torch fumes, smoke, and acrid blue flames spitting slag-spray, stink of singed leather and skin and vibrating hull-humming head-aching whine of grinders on bulkheads, banging chipping-hammers chipping steel, flipping chips over floors groaning under two tons of torqued-up turret lathe, grating out grunts and hot blue chips, moaning carbide-tipped cutting-tool biting cold-rolled steel, peeling off spiral springs and chips raining, chips flying, while chipping-hammers hammer, chipping steel, chipping nerves, chipping eardrums, chipping hours out of life until the whistle blows and ears ring with silence

Two poems engaged in work, orbiting around individual experience: echoes of five years in machine shops and shipyards. memory traces of a day's work at our inner-city library with the usual cast of characters: the unwashed, the young & giggly, the fix-it guy, the pissed-off. (and yes, we actually have found bags of moldy bread behind the books.) work as CONTENT not contented to sit and be noun, subject matter, word fodder. work: "to form." yeah, FORM, our mutual friend with strange innovative habits. a way to get the brain buzzed, to be entertained, get thought processes bumped from their usual groove, undermine official versions of reality.

So what's the work of a poem, its purpose? "poetry doesn't need a purpose, it just IS." *well, find one anyway!* like finding identity? getting connected to alternate power sources: similar selves. connect to other minds, other lives. to understand: do you know how a shipyard smells? do you feel the grinders in your bones? or the strain of living on minimum wage? life goes cheap in eight-hour pieces: desolate desperate inconsolable inconceivable irreversible irrevocable irretrievable. the "wider view" seen from inside out. particular intractable details of one singular individual life suddenly seen as part of a pattern. make the connections. get self-respect.

Now juxtapose, cut & paste. exchange for brain work: work = words. the material of thinking/working life. deifying ideas. work constructed of bits of literary, social, philosophical theory. making distinctions instead of connections.* think critically. ask: whose poetry is bad? define bad: subjective. failing to add bits of theory. no wider view, no analysis. superficial. having failed to meet intellectual criteria. BAD. so look for answers in innovation or form or effective analysis of power structures: "cultural capital" "symbolic capital" *what the hell y'all talkin about!* in-fighting. word-fighting. say it: where's the beef? i mean the money! call it work call it unpaid labor and what do we hope to get? R-E-S-P-E-C-T. extracting respect from intellectual peers, eager (or not) to be immortally entombed in thick anthologies. a way to dig in or infiltrate: outsider opinion transformed to insider source? respect respect respect respect. what we all want. coming at it from different directions. so whose life/work is more worthy? how do *you* decide whose poetic aesthetic gets to be judge?

*is this why we're called elitist?

Murder in My Suite

Bienvenidos al Hotel California



Visitors to the New Origami Hotel enjoy all the amenities one would expect of Los Angeles' most posh hotels—but at what price? Behind the scenes, workers toil for minimum wages without overtime pay or benefits. Until...

A veteran housekeeper at the hotel, Carmen Lucía Vargas decides she's not going to take it anymore. But she soon finds herself, together with Japanese history student Nori Kenji, embroiled in a web of intrigue and scandal. A tourist's snapshot leads them on a search for the truth that unveils a heinous history of corporate deceit...

Editors' Notes:

Murder in My Suite / Bienvenidos al Hotel California is a photonovela produced by Los Angeles-based artists and activists Stephen Callis, Leslie Ernst, and Ruben Ortiz Torres, drawn from the real-life labor disputes at the New Otani, a non-union hotel in the Little Tokyo District of LA.

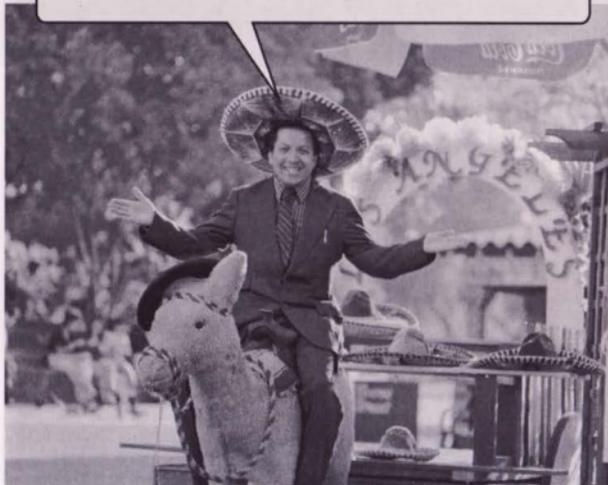
Callis, Ernst, and Ortiz Torres are also the creators, along with Sandra Ramirez, of *The Big Sweep / La Gran Limpieza*, a photonovela created with the support of members of SEIU local 399 and their Justice for Janitors campaign. Set against a backdrop of conspiracy and corruption in the City of Angels, *The Big Sweep* explores the seamy underside of working conditions, *la Migra*, and class conflict from the point of view of a Mexican journalist in search of her missing compañero, an outspoken union activist and hard-working janitor named Ramón.

The complete book-length version of *Murder in My Suite*, as well as *The Big Sweep*, are both available from:

John Brown Books
PO Box 5683
Salem, OR 97304
503-585-5173
www.labridge.com/jbbooks/

Welcome to Los Angeles, where the tourist dollar is almighty, a veritable tourists' paradise, except for the occasional civil unrest. Here amid the surf and the glamour are the people who work to make it all happen. The story you're about to see chronicles the experiences of a woman named Carmen Lucia Vargas who works as a housekeeper at the New Origami Hotel in the Little Tokyo section of downtown Los Angeles. Originally from San Salvador, she has lived and worked in Los Angeles for the past fifteen years. Carmen Lucia and her co-workers are organizing for union recognition at the hotel.

Bienvenidos a Los Ángeles, donde el dólar del turista es el todo poderoso, un paraíso verdadero para el visitante, excepto por los ocasionales desordenes civiles. En medio del mar y el glamour está la gente que trabaja para que todo pase. La historia a continuación narra las experiencias de una mujer llamada Carmen Lucia Vargas que trabaja como sirvienta en el hotel New Origami en el barrio japonés del centro de Los Angeles. Ella es originaria de San Salvador y ha vivido y trabajado en Los Angeles los últimos quince años. Carmen Lucia y sus compañeros del trabajo están organizándose para que reconozcan el sindicato en el hotel.



On the third floor of the New Origami Hotel, Carmen Lucia is in the middle of her shift. It is around 11:00 AM. She is humming to herself as she enters Suite 314.

En el tercer piso del hotel New Origami, Carmen Lucia está al medio de su turno. Son casi las once por la mañana. Ella está canturreando cuando entra en la habitación salón número 314.



These folks finally checked out.

Por fin esta gente salió.

So romantic. I wonder if they ever left the room—every time I came to clean, they had the "Do Not Disturb" sign up.

Que románticos eran. Me pregunto si salieron del cuarto alguna vez, cada vez que vine a limpiar tenían colgado en la puerta el letrerito que dice "No Molestar".

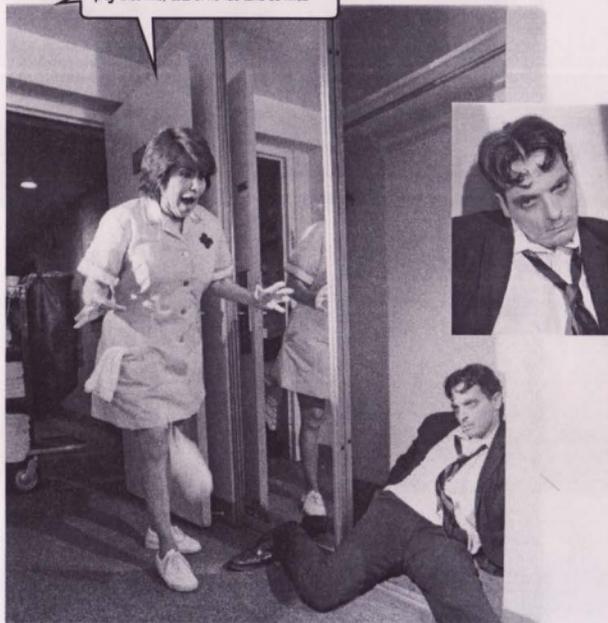


What's that smell???

¿¿¿Qué huele tan horrible???



GASP! Dios mio, that's no honeymoon!
¡Ay Dios mio, esta si no fue luna de miel!



Roger, come quickly! Th-there's a dead body in 314.

¡Roger, venga rápido! Hay un mu-muerto en el 314.

Carmen, what on earth are you talking about?

Carmen, ¿de qué diablos está hablando?



There's been a murder in my suite!

¡Hubo aquí un asesinato!



Okay, okay...I'll be right there.

Bueno, bueno...ya voy para allá.

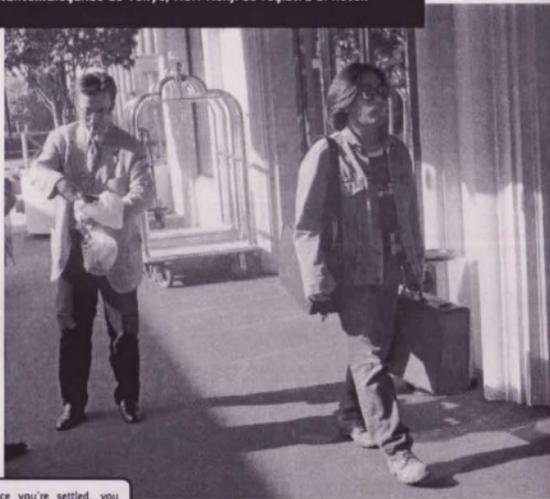
You know, not only do the workers get the shaft around this joint, but so do the guests!

Pues no solamente los trabajadores se friegan por aquí. ¡Los clientes también!



Meanwhile...Arriving from Tokyo, Nori Kenji checks in to the hotel.

Entretanto...Llegando de Tokyo, Nori Kenji se registra al hotel.



Once you're settled, you may enjoy a late lunch in our restaurant or perhaps in the bar.

Después de que se instale puede disfrutar de la comida del restaurante del hotel o en el bar.

Thank you very much.
Muchísimas gracias.

Have a very pleasant stay, Mr. Kenji.
Que tenga una cordial estancia Sr. Kenji.



What'll it be, pardner?
¿Qué va a querer, amigo?



Samuel Adams, please.

Una cerveza Samuel Adams por favor.



That'll be \$2.50. So, what brings you to L.A.?

\$2.50 por favor. ¿Qué lo trajo a Los Ángeles?



I will be a graduate student at the University of Southern California.

Voy a entrar a la Universidad del Sur de California para hacer mis estudios de maestría.





Aren't you a little early for the fall semester?

¿No es un poquito temprano para que empiece el semestre del otoño?

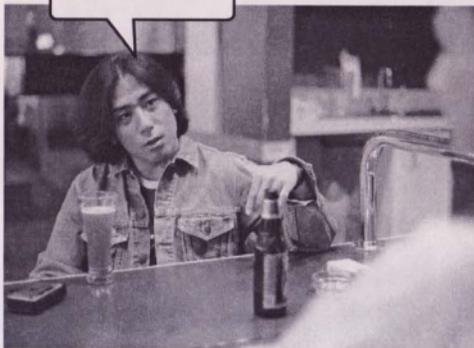


Oh, no. I need to learn about the City...and I have some research I would like to begin.

Ay, no. Necesito conocer la ciudad...y estoy haciendo una investigación que quiero comenzar.

How long have you worked for this hotel?

¿Cuánto tiempo ha trabajado usted para este hotel?



Since 1987—close to 10 years now.

Desde 1987, ya son casi 10 años.

Do you like working here?

¿A usted le gusta trabajar aquí?

It's a job...why d'ya ask?

Que le puedo decir, es un trabajo...¿por qué me lo pregunta?



Just curious. You know, the company that developed the hotel has quite a reputation back in Japan. They're involved in a major lawsuit.

Por curiosidad nada más. Sabe usted que la compañía dueña del hotel tiene muy mala fama en Japón. Hay una demanda muy grande en contra de ellos.



Really? I'd like to hear more about that...

¿De verás? Me gustaría escuchar más de eso...



Later that same day:
Carmen's boss Roger approaches as she is putting her cart away.

Más tarde el mismo día:
Roger, el jefe de Carmen, se acerca mientras ella se guarda su carreta.



Carmen, Jamey called in sick, so I need you to pitch in on the fifth floor.

Carmen, Jamey está enferma y no va a venir hoy, necesito que me eche la mano en el quinto piso.

I'm too exhausted! Even if the hotel paid overtime—which they won't, until the workers have a say around here—I've had enough trauma for one day.

¡Estoy agotadísima! Aunque el hotel me pagara las horas extras—que no lo van a hacer hasta que los trabajadores tengamos voz aquí—ya tuve suficiente trauma por un día.

Suit yourself. But don't think that your selfishness goes unnoticed by Mr. Yamaguchi. I expect to see you first thing in the morning.

Bueno, como usted quiera. Pero no crea que el Sr. Yamaguchi no va a darse cuenta de su egoísmo. La espero aquí a primera hora en la mañana.

After
a day like this, I
can't believe this...

Después de un día como
hoy, no lo puedo
creer...

Steven Farmer

Spectacler

overflow of an end to solace
collective agency phantoms
assumption as counterfeit
things that already would be
monitor's view to
anywhere
unto others until provisions

he was a pioneer
"employer of many"
the dry look
circa '67, Hawaiian
prints... rent children or visits
to fathers
index weekends

summered, to glimmer by
distance, means
living behind the power
song of the new man: "I am my" pier
grey breeze, glazed
favorite little nothings
condolences to abandon

work, having a case made
for it closed, open
allows you to
secrets to pass to each reveler
an industry his name, sales
all great works
digital, down to

stuffed couplet, collapsed
under federal trees a jacked-up past
bathed in an aestheticised
the immersion has happened
tones phoned in
haven / lapse
baubles to go where

accessed, inner history
embossed buckshot duck plates
from all fifty states
match the parts. . . flee
home-cooked meals
better as someone else
snag-free space

you recognize, but he wasn't acting
compatible with unwarier
consumer to be
game-time primate
in the eighth row
stalkers, pancake make-up &
personal favors. . . run

buttons for faces, heat to be
spread out under the helmet
all strange readings
12th map
escalators to take you
under the sand
once fled from, now

a sprawling, unorganized
document of communities, channels
surrounding trees
the further isolation
of words
necessary dynamics for
the capacity for interruption

two programs overwrite
independence for all bought parts
you've been opened up
". . . for someone to rave about you"
a member of
parts touch less
epic, bust

applet to give up
write-in life
a paradigm's pre-dismissal
accomplishments scant guidance
on how to implement
culprits
indicated by arrows

alphabetic body-response
Peebo/Whitney duet
and resulting sickness
time-outs give the child choices
muscle to minimize
hallway voices a neophyte milk
illusion bond to the product

just here to cook
room for your lineage
wampum, art in a replicant venue
you can drive there even
the doge's palace
June Bug vs. Hurricane
play now to inner media

any like cards dim
to build memories on
like minutes, not at the service of
she hit joy on the record
otherwise-object based
like needs
like that one, theirs

Word Processing

"The dialogue between formation and critique involves intellectual labor in which a new kind of subject is born."

—Michael Davidson, writing about Louis Zukofsky's "Mantis" and interpretation in *Ghostlier Demarcations*, quoted in the introduction to *The Objectivist Nexus*.

Before I quit word processing, I dreamed the word processing group had been moved to an even more sterile environment. We wore hairnets and plastic gloves. Rather than bankers coming into the office to drop documents, secretaries and well-dressed wives of bankers entered, dropping off orders for relish trays. We rushed to slice red peppers, celery, and carrots, wash mushrooms and break cauliflower and broccoli into flowerets.

My nightmare was that we had been converted into food processors. Even I realized that I had been lucky to escape with only part time food service experience. But, after years managing word processing, words had become as food is to food service workers. For example, when I worked in a bakery, sugar stank, chocolate seemed dirty, and donuts were gross. In wp, I learned a certain contempt for words and editing, formatting or otherwise manipulating them.

All blue collar jobs I've had have not allowed reading, even during slow periods. I do not know why. We were not allowed to read in word processing. I initially learned all I could about the software on my computer. This was before most office computers had network or internet connections.

I do not touch type. I got a "C" in a summer typing class I took before eighth grade. I read everything I type while "reading" the keyboard, something of a dicey situation working with sensitive information in a bank. I typed the dictionary in order to read it, then started just reading the dictionary. I brought Strunk & White, *The Chicago Manual of Style* and Fowler to the office and read and typed those references. Since I was reading them, I began editing the documents I typed. Since I had to make up for my relatively slow typing speed, I focused on structuring documents by writing macros quickly.

I also started bringing in other books to type them. There is a branch library behind the Waldorf Astoria in the N/R subway station. In these jobs which are usually categorized as white or pink collar, but

which I call blue collar, there is a twenty minute paid lunch. There are two federally-mandated, paid, ten-minute breaks for all workers. These were intended to be mid-morning and mid-afternoon. Because word processors, data entry clerks, and other office or computer workers do not have paid lunch, and are encouraged not to take a 30 minute to one hour unpaid lunch, both by economics and by office practice in addition to supervisors who do not like juggling lunch break scheduling, the two breaks are combined into the twenty minute paid lunch. I ran down to the branch, grabbed books willy nilly, made it through the checkout line, and returned in twenty minutes to type the books. We could leaf through magazines, but we weren't supposed to read the articles.

Word processing is physical work. We all know now about carpal tunnel, and also know that, whether because of job conditions or hormones, women are more likely to suffer from carpal tunnel than men. In word processing, female employees were more likely to be rapid typists and to focus on manual input. Men were more likely to focus on using the machine to make up for their slow typing speed.

Word processing asked how to input information to manipulate into the machine and how to make it consistent in structure or form (including spelling) for output. Found poetry and text manipulation can ask these same questions. Increasingly, text in the public domain is online, saving a step. There are OCR scanners and other machines for rapidly digitizing information.

I first focused on something we called "dupe and revise" after the Save As command in a word processing software before my time. I never started a document from scratch if I could help it. Instead, I would try to quickly think of a document on one of the thousands of floppy disks in the cabinets which had the same format as a new document (now, disk space on file servers is cheap, and there are searchable document repositories for this sort of thing). Bankers recognized this saved them money, but usually specified the wrong document to be duped: they tended to think of the structure of deals, not documents.

My enforced focus on input and output, on the necessity of entering and handling text, has probably led to my lack of interest in randomizers, babelizers, and similar tools. I was fascinated by the first VAX garbage files I saw, and also interested in old programs like *Eliza*, which recycled text, gradually eliminating its meaning. I don't find most word jumble interesting anymore. All text is handled as data. The limits and problems of human intervention remain interesting to me. The programs become another sieve.

**"How Soon Is Now?":
Anselm Berrigan, Prageeta Sharma,
Greg Fuchs, Magdalena Zurawski,
and the New Independents**

More than any other architectural landmark in the New York City area, the World Trade Towers visually dominate the urban terrain from a variety of locations. Monumentally boxy and tall, built in duplicate, the Towers jut above the vertically spectacular New York City skyline. Whether one is rumbling along Kent Street on the Brooklyn side of the East River, cruising over the George Washington Bridge north and west of the city, barreling up the New Jersey turnpike to the south and west of Manhattan or the Brooklyn-Queens Expressway to the south and east, riding the Staten Island Ferry across New York harbor, or walking around the southern half of Manhattan, the Twin Towers are frequently the most conspicuous piece of real estate.

This includes the Empire State Building—which despite being more famous, appearing on more cheap key chains sold to tourists, and only one hundred feet shorter—blends more readily into the midtown skyline, partly because of its graduated height and Art Deco design. Besides, as midtown Manhattan is taken over by Disney products and Niketown stores, it becomes less a place in which to orient oneself, and more the kind of dislocating environment upon which North American consumer culture heavily relies, with its clockless malls and enormous megastore parking lots one drives around and around in frustration looking for the seemingly randomly placed exits.

Because the Twin Towers are figuratively and literally all about real estate, they historicize in a way other postmodern architecture—such as the famous Philip Johnson AT & T building in midtown Manhattan—does not, or does not quite as explicitly. What the Towers signify is the transformation in the twentieth century of a diversified New York City economy with a strong manufacturing component into an economy increasingly reliant on the strong performance of Wall Street to keep it afloat. In a 1998 report from the Office of the State Deputy Comptroller for the City of New York, the authors write: "Wall Street, which represents only 5 percent of City employment, accounted for 56 percent of the increase in aggregate real earnings in New York City between 1992 and 1997. In contrast, between 1983 and 1988 only 23 percent of the real earnings gain was derived from the securities industry" (1998: 2).

As the report points out, the same can be said for New York State as a whole: "Wall Street's impact on the State's economy and tax receipts has been only slightly less concentrated than it is in the City. In New York State, nearly half of the real earnings gain between 1992 and 1997 was attributable directly to Wall Street" (1998: 2). While the Twin Towers were built by the States of New York and New Jersey (the Port Authority, to be exact), and thus are not directly connected with Wall Street, they represent an effort made by the ruling powers in New York City—especially landowners—to shift the economy away from manufacturing and toward companies specializing in finance, insurance, and real estate (FIRE). This, in turn, led to an increased construction of office and residential spaces in high rise buildings and skyscrapers which could be leased for significantly more money per square foot than the one and two story structures usually rented to manufacturers and small businesses.

For instance, the World Trade Center was built on a "13-block site" which displaced "1,400 commercial establishments doing over \$300 million worth of business and employing about 30,000 people" (Douglas 1996: 206). This is paradigmatic of a process which had been occurring in New York City throughout the twentieth century, and which began to pick up steam amid the financial exuberance of the 1920s. In 1929, the Regional Plan Association—a group of powerful landowners and financiers—presented a "government-financed" plan to "decentralize" the New York City area (Fitch 1993: 58-59). The idea was to de-industrialize New York City and extend the commercial office space concentrated in the midtown Manhattan Central Business District throughout the rest of the island and eventually into Brooklyn and Queens.

The next wave of this type of urban planning occurred during the post-War World II economic boom, specifically in 1961 when pressure applied by David Rockefeller's Downtown Lower Manhattan Association convinced the City to rezone all of New York City and make it less favorable to manufacturing (Fitch 1993: 135). A year later the World Trade Center was contracted to be built, and Rockefeller initially had hoped it would be ready by the start of the 1964 World's Fair held in Queens (Douglas 1996: 206). The final push to create more office space occurred during the 1980s, when—flush with cash, optimism, and greed—enough office space was created that even during the more lucrative '90s very few new office buildings have been built. In a textbook case of overproduction, New York City has a veritable "glut" of office space (Fitch 1993: 149), especially in the downtown area where the World Trade Center's "largest assemblage of commercial office space in the world" (Douglas 1996: 204) looms

right next to luxury residentials, some of which are a bargain (at least in comparison to the rest of New York City's real estate market), if the potential resident can bear to live in such a desolate concrete and steel non-place.

For this reason, it could be argued that beginning in the 1920s, New York City willfully made itself into one of the first examples of the "post-industrial" phenomenon which began to receive attention in the 1970s around the time of the publication of Daniel Bell's *The Coming of Post-Industrial Society* (1973). Whatever one may think of the political and economic implications of Bell's theory, "post-industrialism" in New York City has come to mean a precarious reliance on financial, insurance, and real estate companies, and in particular on Wall Street. Just how unstable this relationship is can be seen in the fact that finance, insurance, and real estate jobs declined during the 1970s, despite the effort to expand office space downtown (Spitznas 1981: 73-76). Middle class jobs in non-FIRE industries have also declined during the booming '90s because of mergers and downsizing (Office of the State Deputy Comptroller for New York City 1997: 18); and even during the precipitous rise of the U.S. stock market during the '90s, substantial layoffs have occurred at financial corporations during relatively brief dips in the market.

Ultimately, the financial, insurance, and real estate economy in New York City has created an urban environment which surpasses the rest of the U.S. in "job loss, unemployment and 'non-work'" (Fitch 1993: 4). A big part of the problem is the result of a near century long decline in manufacturing in New York City, which has accelerated during the past thirty years: "Between 1970 and 1993 in the U.S., the total of manufacturing workers fell from 19.4 million to 18.1 million. In the same period, New York's manufacturing jobs fell from 766,000 to 286,000. It's the difference between 6.7 percent and 63 percent" (Fitch 1993: 22). The numbers make one wonder how pervasive "post-industrialism" actually is outside of New York City. In stock market-speak, 6.7 percent is not even considered a "correction."

This is why a call is being made from various places for greater diversification of the New York City economy. The current State Comptroller writes: "While its dependence on Wall Street leaves the City vulnerable to a downturn, diversification of the City's economic base needs to continue and takes on added urgency" (1998: 3). It should be noted that Brooklyn has lost its manufacturing base at a greater rate than the rest of New York City while also becoming the poorest borough in New York. Almost thirty percent of Brooklyn residents live in poverty, half of them under eighteen (Office of the State Deputy Comptroller for the City of New York 1999: 9).

New York City urban planning as influenced by finance, insurance, and real estate has not only reduced the decently paying job opportunities available to semi-skilled and unskilled workers (a disproportion of which belong to minority groups in the city), but it has actively sought to keep industry out of such notoriously economically depressed areas as the South Bronx, instead arguing for the need "to build low-density, ranch-style homes throughout the South Bronx," as opposed to supporting community-oriented business initiatives (Fitch 1993: 155). Here Robert Fitch's proposition that "*Urban planning is the coordination of land monopoly*" is pushed to its most extreme state (1993: 50; emphasis in original).

The World Trade Towers also haunt those characters in Don DeLillo's *Underworld* living in New York City in 1974: "The World Trade Center was under construction, already towering, twin-towered, with cranes tilted at the summits and work elevators sliding up the flanks. She saw it almost everywhere she went. She ate a meal and drank a glass of wine and walked to the rail or ledge and there it usually was, bulked up at the funneled end of the island..." (1997: 372). I've chosen to write on recent first books by Anselm Berrigan, Prageeta Sharma, Greg Fuchs, and Magdalena Zurawski, not because I feel they represent a new movement or poetics in contemporary poetry, or even that they and their work constitute a uniform social and aesthetic entity. Instead, I'd like to propose the intentionally loose metaphor that to varying degrees they were raised, and their books were written, in the shadows of the World Trade Towers and the changing social, economic, political, and cultural conditions which accompanied the final completion of the Twin Towers in post-Vietnam North America. These changes include transformations in systems of production and consumption, an expansion of the media's role in society, and the interaction between global economics and local communities and how this relationship influences the construction of individual and group identities.

Moreover, the four poets I'm focusing on are around the same age, have all had first books published within a year of each other, and lived in the same general neighborhood—Brooklyn—and were in frequent contact with each other while portions of their respective books were being written. As such, these affiliations suggest an approach to their poetry as a type of social document, which itself can be seen as one of the forms now being utilized in response to conditions in post-Vietnam North American society.

I. "ideological subjects (a tautological proposition)"

Technically speaking, *Integrity & Dramatic Life* (1999) isn't Anselm Berrigan's first book of poetry, since Edge Books previously published a chapbook of his entitled *They Beat Me Over the Head With a Sack* (1998). Six of the twelve poems in the chapbook also appear in *Integrity & Dramatic Life*, including "My Poem," which is the last poem in the chapbook and the first poem in his full-length book. Two of the primary concerns of *Integrity & Dramatic Life* are signaled in its title: the positing of identities as performative acts and a certain dissatisfaction with this particular way of conceiving and constructing the self. The poems in the book bounce back and forth between understanding the self as provisionally articulated in language and ideology and feeling disgruntled with this awareness. As a result, there's an effort to make meaningful connections among the apparently random stream of signs which form much of the unstable field of experience in late twentieth-century North America.

At the same time, a certain amount of absurdism is consciously embraced in these poems in an attempt to disrupt the dominant ways in which discourse and ideology are manipulated in a media-saturated capitalist society. Tapping around for anything solid, many of the poems in the book foreground emotion and affectivity as momentary instances of feeling grounded within an existence that's constantly being refitted from both without and within:

Out of spite

I sit down calmly in someone else's recliner
Wearing someone else's shirt, pants, shoes, and socks
Though I've torn my own holes into all of them (4)

Here, the "holes" claimed as one's own partially compensate for the lack of wholes created or imposed. It's also important to point out the emotional aspect of this claiming, that it's done "Out of spite" and "calmly." Significantly, the experience is rooted in a reference to basic material objects—in this instance, clothing. But instead of functioning as a set of substitutions ("holes" for whole, "my" as opposed to "someone else's"), what Berrigan's work does—and what he shares in different ways with the three other poets under consideration here—is make poetry a part of its surrounding social and cultural conditions.

Of course, this is how all art functions, whether it acknowledges it or not. Nevertheless, one of the more notable aspects of the poetry of the New York School in its various manifestations is that it emphasizes this connection so prominently in its references to

everyday life, which include the names of friends and the occasions and places at which they hang out, descriptions of work environments, as well as a wide range of popular and mass and highbrow culture citations. Without being derivative of these earlier models, we find some of these examples in *Integrity & Dramatic Life*, too. But what makes Berrigan's work his own is the way he re-thinks the relation between art and life—or, more theoretically, between cultural products and social formations—within contemporary historical conditions, and not in relation to a particular avant-garde lineage or set of formal techniques.

The middle section of *Integrity & Dramatic Life* contains a marvelous set of semantically and rhythmically dense eighteen line poems that seamlessly blend references to American culture and history—and spatial and temporal locations—with autobiographical reflections. I'd like to quote the entirety of one of these. The poem is entitled "8/1/97":

Reagan shot himself said the ex-secret service agent
who taught Tom Cruise how to surf. This guy was one
of the many nervous people in America, not a happy huggy
& I... & I... nope. Speaking of ex-bosses, mine's sexually
blotto & likes to ski in New England. No gas to think
about him but I smile when this ghost steps on my heels
on Broadway to remind me no one's there, gee thanks
spirit, say something profound why don't ya? Kate
you know, I'm shocked to be of an age you didn't reach
tho' you seem permanently older & wiser than I'd ever be.
You died & I knew instantly I had to be exactly where I was:
public, unconsolable, & totally myself to offer by no choice
of my own. Your life is completely removed from myth
so I speak to who isn't there & is, on the most crowded
streets. These hang-ups don't interfere with my life, I didn't ask
for that, it seems right. Are you responsible? It doesn't matter.
Incantations & voices of the dead are points of interest
& nothing else. You have me here & that has to be enough. (30)

Beginning with the facticity of the date in the title, the poem moves quickly through a series of concerns, many of which are articulated via inversion, displacement, and conflation. The first of these is the representation of events in the media, with the poem inverting John Hinckley Jr.'s shooting of Ronald Reagan by having Reagan shoot himself. Next, a conflation of the movies as simulacrum (represented by Tom Cruise) and American politics (Reagan the movie actor who became a governor, then President) is created via the figure of the displaced secret service agent turned surf instructor. The poem continues

to disrupt surface appearances by describing as “one / of the many nervous people in America” this surf instructor to celebrities who represents the manufactured “happy happy / & I.... & I....” status unavailable to a large percentage of the American population worried about its tenuous economic status.

The “nope” signals a turn toward a more negative mood in the poem, which—as with the “holes” above—will be used to momentarily strike through the mask of appearances and imposed ideologies (though in this case the gesture is more Bartleby than Ahab). As the inversions and displacements continue, one spirit brings a “smile,” the other a sense of being “shocked.” This sense of shock is ultimately preferred in these poems to being fooled, numbed, or distracted. Yet despite the deceased individual’s life being “completely removed from myth”—the naturalized and universalized misrepresentations and ideological distortions with which Berrigan’s poems are constantly struggling—the question of “who isn’t there & is, on the most crowded / streets” remains unanswered. In other words, there are no perfect moments, aestheticized or not: “These hang-ups don’t interfere with my life. I didn’t ask / for that, it seems right.” Thus, it’s not simply a matter of re-establishing unexamined subject positions or bastions of authenticity or aestheticized idyllic arbors (even if in contemporary poetry they’ve come to take an increasingly fragmented character on the page). Instead, Berrigan’s work is notable precisely for its ability to vividly describe, juggle, and smash the dishes while still serving up substantial fare.

The series of inversions, displacements, and confluences which occur in “8/1/97” are part of a larger sense of absurdism pervading *Integrity & Dramatic Life*. Along with spotlighting the performative quality of identity and illuminating the seemingly random quality of much of late twentieth-century life in North America, an argument can be made that this absurdism exposes the workings of ideology, since one of the goals of dominant ideologies is to appear natural and transparent in order that they may be taken for granted: “Successful ideologies are often thought to render their beliefs natural and self-evident—to identify them with the ‘common sense’ of a society so that nobody could imagine how they might ever be different” (Eagleton 1991: 58). Absurdism seeks to overturn common sense, just as artifice calls the natural into question.

Absurdism likes to flirt with the potential for failure, because if it were to become too successful it would lose its critical edge and function as another kind of naturalized ideology. This is why it’s a useful tool for addressing ideological problems and the problems with ideology:

Entering a mid-town diner & greeted by a sign:
Please wait for the waitress to be seated.
Logic dictates a reasonably healthy diet
but I read that one should undermine authority. (38)

And if, as Louis Althusser would have it, ideology partially posits and “interpellates” subjects—“ideological subjects (a tautological proposition)” (1971: 171)—then absurdism and affectivity are employed in an effort to give this subject a little breathing room:

To defy
being positioned I indulge in irrelevant cosmic lunch
openings, take a handful at my will & dirty this penny-
ante heart. (42)

This absurdist element can be found in the work of Berrigan, Sharma, Fuchs, and Zurawski, though it figures most prominently in Berrigan’s poetry. At times, there’s an almost punk-like quality to this absurdism, as when Berrigan writes, “The world makes sense / if you piss on its / beauty” (5), which is appropriate, since one of the goals of the punk phenomenon in Britain and the U.S. in the 1970s was a desire to destroy conventional consumerism as a dominant ideology (Hebdige 1979: 102-103)—before, that is, this particular version of “alternative” itself became a best-seller. In the work of these four writers, absurdism functions as a confrontation with mainstream ideologies disguised as a common sense seeking to exclude a range of cultures and histories—personal and collective—which would call these ideologies into question and potentially destabilize them.

II. “Collision or collusion with history”

History destroys mythologies in the process of becoming one itself. This would have to be considered a primary lesson Modernity taught various artists, historians, philosophers, and scientists during the latter half of the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth. Postmodernity seeks to invert this relationship by making mythologies destroy histories. However, this process is more fragile, partly because of its exposure to critical evaluations (Roland Barthes was on to this fairly early when he published his prescient text *Mythologies* in 1957 [1972]), and partly because of the tenacity with which histories attempt to maintain the communities they represent. This isn’t to say that history contains an essential quality lacking in mythology, but that the productive forces underlying the creation of

mythologies deserve constant attention. To be specific, I would point to the recent merger of Time Warner and AOL and the enormous power this corporate behemoth will now wield in generating and distributing media content. In comparison, Microsoft's monopoly is more narrowly focused on amassing profit, and in this sense is more old school, however cutting edge the product.

In the midst of this, common sense seeks political quiescence. But material and social forces won't allow this to occur, as Prageeta Sharma writes in *Bliss to Fill* (2000): "An awkward silence plumes thee, so generators, cameras, and kinetics / flurry or garble with industrial strength to break this dreadful quiet" (3). Silence in lyric poetry tends to be equated with a place beyond language (hence, the temporal hiccup of "thee"), or an inability of language to convey the profundity of a personal experience, but the densely textured quality to Sharma's poetry points toward the idea that there can never be enough language and enough communication. Her poems are filled with imagined conversations accompanied by questions, responses, and retorts addressed to both self and others. For example, the title of the first poem of the book, as well as for the first section of the book, is the Michael Palmer-esque "Dear _____." The section ends with another letter, this one amusingly assuring the reader of the author's commitment to "herself as a product" (25). Behind this commitment lies the promise of further dialogue.

Of course, all products have an economics behind them. "Girl Vendor" begins:

Suggestively and geographically,
I landed on your trimmed lawn.

I wanted more economics — a lawn,
a partial history — a political life, (33)

This question of wanting something as opposed to presupposing it establishes the relationship between desire and absence at the heart of many of these poems. It's an absence described by Emily Dickinson in one of the epigraphs to the book as "Our blank in bliss to fill." This element of lack provides not so much a provisional and paradoxical solidity as a turning toward "the other possibility," a phrase used as the title for the second section of the book as well as the final poem. It's a notion of possibility as distinct from conclusion, which is why the book is filled with various proposals—poetry, rock stardom, love, anger, localism—none of which provide definitive solutions, though they're presented as bits with which to fill bliss. Nevertheless, "bliss" remains haunted by its "blank," just as the speaking subject

encounters silences, or politics should be responsible to actual human lives.

Similarly, cultural homogenization is disrupted by the "partial history" it can never fully appropriate and subsume. Hegemony, as Antonio Gramsci defines it, depends on winning consent to dominant ideologies (1971: 181-182). All four poets I'm discussing work in varying degrees to reveal this process, which is related to what Susan Howe describes in her long poem "Articulation of Sound Forms in Time" as "Collision or collusion with history" (1990: 33). This tension can be found throughout *Bliss to Fill*, as in the poem "Transit":

I left untitled by the force of gravity and passing especially quickly into,
and now to only a brief stay or sojourn — dropping
usually searching for work and descending freely
— and out of existence — a fall then.
Hanging freely — occurring in a circuit,
lamb's fall to birth
because of a sudden passage.
To enter if unawares — of a celestial body over the meridian,
losing office, change of voltage or load,
to come, to chance —
it fell in my mind to write you.
Passing through or by a place and affecting someone or something,
my social class falls into words.
With collision, I drank to avoid the backslide.
And now an act — or process — or instance
of passing through or over
or producing results beyond itself; a transient guest to a person traveling.
A temporary oscillation — a transient current or coherage or voltage
to cause light to pass through,
after a false thralldom — I fall
home, asleep, in love with the book, the book fell apart.
Taking one's place a faller fells trees, a declarative being.
I must — a drawer held all his clothes!
He is suitable for ink drawings or rugged activity,
a sketch for modernism and artistic afters
or roll onward, to deviate, to leeward — I did have thrills,
or happily ate, or vigor caught me. (44)

The poem begins with a loss of firm foundations, an experience which is represented by the lack of grammatical traction created by the short phrases separated by dashes, the half dozen references to falling, as well as the displacement and deferral of the subject after the initially posted "I." The shift in the poem occurs when the subject decides "to write you." At this point, the subject becomes oriented in material conditions via an explicit reference to class position, though it's a non-essentialized approach

to class that's dependent upon differing contexts: "Passing through or by a place and affecting someone or something." This brief orientation is followed by a "collision," which in turn leads to another series of variables. The change initiated by an address to a "you" means these variables are no longer framed solely as a kind of fall, but as an "oscillation" between collision and collusion which continues throughout the rest of the poem.

This wouldn't have occurred in as interesting a manner had this back and forth been conceived of solely on a textual level. This is why "the book fell apart," even though it's initially associated with the illusory comforts of "home." The reference to "social class" concretely orients the more metaphysical language of the fall, and makes the brief escape from a "false thralldom" more than a liberation of or from language and form. Similarly, Sharma writes in the excellent poem "Poor Vehicles:" "My advanced studies in nothing / suggest implicit domesticity for the orphan" (11). I think it's helpful to read these absences, blanks, and occasions of emptiness less as metaphysical quandaries, and more as cultural circumstances. The reference to "orphan" here and elsewhere in the book would seem to support this. So, too, do the clothes and food mentioned at the end of "Transit." They point to a material satisfaction briefly attained, even if the lack of a firm footing is again introduced at the very end of the poem with a return to the passive voice.

Questions of difference and identification are among the central concerns of *Bliss to Fill*, whether articulated on a personal level—"My will is to create a history // between us" (22) and "I will not be like you" (11)—or in terms of the larger social and political configurations found in the poem "Serious Confusion" (19). But difference is not an excuse to establish rigid boundaries, either; in making this point, Sharma references an example from history: "I never use the word partition to separate them / for it is too historical" (45), i.e., because of its historical implications. "Partition" is the word used to designate the division of formerly British controlled India into India and Pakistan after World War II. In 1947, a combination of nearly ten million Muslims in India and Hindus and Sikhs in soon to be created Pakistan crossed the proposed new border in an effort to relocate to a country they felt would be less antagonistic to their religious beliefs. In the midst of these massive migrations, ethnic and religious violence broke out, killing nearly a million Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs in one of the horrific slaughters for which the twentieth century will always be remembered (Wolpert 1997: 347-9). Sharma's subtle reference to these events resonates throughout *Bliss to Fill*, thereby complicating and expanding the range of personal and historical meanings.

III. "...mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf."

Another striking aspect of these four books of poetry is their general lack of irony. The relative absence of that most signature gesture of '90s postmodernism is one sign that these poets are doing something new. Irony can't function without leaving unchanged that toward which it's ironic, which makes it particularly appropriate for the '90s, since on the surface it's the most static decade in recent history—partially made so, in fact, by the expanding stock market bubble. Of course, irony still has its uses, but in Greg Fuchs's *came like it went* (1999) it's been replaced by a more interactive and dialogic form of critique. This dialogue, inflected with everyday speech, puts all kinds of signs into contest and play; but it does so within an approach that's less interested in a de-historicized formalism, and more immersed in the vernaculars of various locales: urban and rural, North (mostly, New York City and Philadelphia) and South (New Orleans).

In this sense, there's an ethnographic quality to Fuchs's work that's augmented by an accompanying journalistic element:

The psychological width of the Hudson River stretches the tunnel from the city of cosmopolitan assurance all the way to the virtual backwaters of man kicking off his millennial [sic] fins for flip flops. Of course the G train is the train to nowhere it never crosses the shore of the only somewhere that spends

all of your money convincing you that you are there. So there. (39)

As the only train in the New York City subway system that doesn't travel into Manhattan, the "G" is deemed the train "to nowhere" (Queens and Brooklyn, to be exact); but Fuchs describes it as such in order to submerge irony within a larger depiction of New York City economics, where it's only the concentration of wealth in Manhattan that makes it a "somewhere." The commonsensical wisdom invoked by the opening "Of course" is overturned by the specificity of the "So there" in an effort to push the discussion away from the fictions of ideologies and toward the sciences of economics.

Brooklyn's poverty marks many of the poems in *came like it went*, just as North American consumerism forms the broader backdrop against which questions of location and identity are addressed. Unwilling to accept the imposition of identity within an ideological framework that appears natural from afar but looks just plain nuts from close up, Fuchs's poetry endeavors to build identity, community, and circumstance at ground level. Some of the unconventional quality

to Fuchs's work is, in fact, an idiosyncratic dialect—a kind of poetic slang looking to create meaningful relations between unique individuals instead of encounters between purchased or enforced identities. For this reason, it's a poetry that's always in dialogue with either real or imagined interlocutors, and finds its voices in these conversations.

This dialogic aspect of self and other is referenced by Zora Neale Hurston when she has a character in *Their Eyes Were Watching God* say: "...mah tongue is in mah friend's mouf" (1990: 6). This personal interaction is threatened by a culture which prioritizes self-perpetuating mechanisms of profit over a betterment of the lives of individuals and social groups. In a poem which borrows its title from William Greider's *Secrets of the Temple* (1987), a history of the veiled power of the U.S. Federal Reserve Bank, Fuchs writes: "Mini-malls assist / the gradually deliberate cult of ugly homesteading / designed to break our backbone" (17). Creative self-formation within the determining confines of society and culture would appear to be one of the proposals *came like it went* makes in response to this disfiguring of both the landscape and the human beings within it.

So, too, is a greater sensitivity to what exists—willingly or unwillingly—on the margins of an inexorable march toward mollification. In "The Sky Is Falling," these margins cause hierarchies trouble:

[...]

Speaking of painters there is Duchamp.
Cities are made for walking talking
so much so even J.P. Morgan left his home in Murray Hill
when the neighborhood was rezoned for shopping.
It's vulgar. Born into the vulgar class,

I don't mind sleeping in the kitchen
with spatulas or the cook occasionally.
There we are—students
of radical expression building blocks of brillo
la a Andy Warhol on the chchshopping block.

Click me, we don't know no better. Suddenly,
the button holding my hair
to my head lights like a Vegas marquee
carrying the words—pop assemblage line.
Get in line, buy retooled revolting slogans,
e.g., everyday people drive to their everyday job
in an everyday sedan.

By now,
a cartoon of myself
wearing wigs of steel wool.

Keep the hard hat on in the danger zone, watch for falling rocks.
On Madison Avenue the skyscrapers unglue,
a sign the guys who rule our skies
are unhappy with things down here, so beware.
Last month a giant neon parking sign fell
on the head of a Philadelphia Judge.

Speaking of Duchamp
the ad men know the ship named Desire
still docks and clocks the dough. (50-51)

The phrase "the sky is falling" is another metaphor for the idea of the world turned upside down—that topsy-turvy moment when high and low get all shook up: high art and Brillo pads, upper class and "vulgar class," powdered wigs and "wigs of steel wool." This can result from progressive social politics or from the quasi-democratization of the market where consumers have access to products designating class mobility, even if their actual place in society mostly belies this possibility: "Such an understanding of class has moved away from the conception rooted in the social relations of power, and toward a notion based, for the most part, on income and credit.... While this modern idea of class invested more and more people with the iconography of status, it also tended to mask the relations of power that prevailed within society" (Ewen 1988: 68). This collapse of identity into consumerism is the falling piano Fuchs as "cartoon of myself" seeks to elude, even if the shadow he's standing under is rapidly expanding.

The economic inflection to much of the language in Fuchs's book roots it in material conditions specific to late twentieth-century North American society, especially to a financial and service economy such as the one that predominates in New York City. This employment of economic jargon is also part of a larger attempt to contest from below—"down here"—the values and meanings given to important signs in the culture: the myth of the political innocence of "the cherry tree" (11-12), the concept of "love" (11), "gold" (26), "work" (32), "money" (36), "Desire" (51), etc.; even the advertising slogan "got milk?" is made to reveal a cold inhumanity (52). These signs are all set up in Fuchs's poetry in order to be challenged and inflected with a struggle over their significance, i.e., is desire seen as a liberatory force or a crude tool "the ad men" use to sell products? This struggle over the meaning of signs is fundamental to the workings of language and ideology, though this doesn't mean the struggle is inherent to language, but that it's waged by different social groups within particular historical situations.

Similarly, the utopian moments that briefly surface in *came like it went* (the first of these appears right away in the opening poem when Fuchs writes: "Nothing matters / except being a champ for your loves" [11]) are site-specific, stuck to locale in all its positive and negative aspects. As the book unfolds, the reader comes to learn what these loves are. But even these alternatives to an economic mind-set constantly reference it. The danger resides in the speed in which capital is able to aestheticize the discontents it creates, thereby turning them into signs and images which must then be contested all over again: "Get in line, buy retooled revolting slogans" (50). This is the major battle Pop Art waged, and which has been waged by its supporters and critics, with some saying Pop Art perpetuated this commodification of the image, while others argue that it interrogates it. Thus, the reference to Warhol and his Brillo pads in Fuchs's "The Sky Is Falling." This contesting of signs has remained of primary concern to different versions of the twentieth-century avant-garde, even as consumer capital perfects its skills in using the illusion of rebellion (and the actual formal techniques of avant-garde art) to sell products, which is one of the factors that has led to the avant-garde's wider absorption by mainstream institutional cultures.

IV. "Hey! Do you believe there's anything / beyond troll-guy reality?"

Of the four books of poetry I'm discussing, Magdalena Zurawski's chapbook *Bruised Nickelodeon* (2000) most consciously utilizes the stylistic fragmentation and formalist self-reflexivity that have become standard modes in experimental poetry over the past few decades, and more recently in mainstream verse as well (see, for instance, Jorie Graham's most recent book *Swarm* [2000]). Yet *Bruised Nickelodeon* ends with a sparkling poem written out of the ballad tradition, which, of course, is one of the oldest and most conventional poetic forms in the English language. At the same time, it's a form that has long harbored some of the most subversive content in English and American culture, from an embracement of miscegenation and cultural hybridity in surviving examples dating back to the early modern period, to its use—beginning in the nineteenth century—by a radicalized working class, to its expression of alternative politics during the American folk revival of the latter half of the twentieth century. By the end of her chapbook, Zurawski has modified an earlier avant-garde aesthetics to reflect contemporary concerns. She does this by replacing an emphasis on textual-based relations with a focus on social relations. As in the poetry of Berrigan, Sharma, and Fuchs, this opens up new ways of addressing questions of identity, representation,

community, politics, and culture.

Bruised Nickelodeon contains two extended serial poems entitled "Ten Imaginary Love Poems for Joan of Arc" and "A Book of Felled Musing." The serial poem form is one aspect of an approach to gender and sexuality that's careful not to rigidly circumscribe them: "[G]ender never exhibits itself in pure form but in the context of lives that are shaped by a multiplicity of influences, which cannot be neatly sorted out" (Bordo 1990: 150). Played out against the forces of history, identities are shifting amalgams of class positions, ethnicities, genders, sexual orientations, geographical locations, and various other elements. As a result, notions of self become artificial constructions, and, as Zurawski writes in "A Book of Felled Musing," "only dogs do what is natural" ((29)). Similarly, the confusion surrounding Joan of Arc's gender and sexuality is a crucial aspect of her historical representations. This is evoked a number of times in "Ten Imaginary Love Poems for Joan of Arc," as when "The little french girl becomes a deer / in boy's clothing" ((9)). It was partly because of her refusal to conform to traditional gender roles that Joan of Arc had to answer to the French authorities.

This confrontation with power is rendered obliquely throughout the pages of *Bruised Nickelodeon*. It tends to get played out in a series of slippery dualisms between, for instance, the liberatory articulations of poetry and the constraints the everyday world puts on this expression, between the creative structuring mind and the inscriptions power leaves on the body, and between subjectivity as self-fashioned and the interpellated subject. Yet the different terms contained in these dualisms are never kept completely separate from each other. In fact, they aren't even made to function dialectically. Instead, this dualistic logic is undermined at the end of the first poem:

Until the mad farmer
Falls from his perch and possesses
The sweet thick pitch from which he has
Been hiding. ((15))

This break with verticality and its accompanying hierarchies is followed by a more associational mode in the second poem, complete with the rhetoric of *égalité*: "We rhyme with the comrades of our dreams" ((16)). The creation of alternative communities and social formations is clearly central to *Bruised Nickelodeon*, as is the difficulty in establishing these communities. After all, they can't simply be written, read, or dreamt into existence.

This concern with social formations makes it important to

resist hearing the voice in these poems—as with all of the poets under consideration here—as an untethered lyrical “I.” Zurawski’s “Ballad of the Concrete Tree” is an excellent example of the subject’s rootedness in material conditions, despite the ostensibly lyrical trappings:

What is time when I am not with my head?
I asked a bird in a concrete tree and it told me.
Time is what my head is not.
My head is only the wind that imagines me.

A banker in any time can catch a bird and choke a tree.
But a banker will not imagine a bird in a concrete tree
Or other things too small to eat.
My head is only the wind that imagines me.

I ate my heart when I put my head in a concrete tree.
It grew back like a starfish.
A starfish has five knees.
My head is only the wind that imagines me.

A bird is too small to eat
So it makes the sound of poetry.
On the first hard day I
Fed it my first broken knee.
I get scared when my heart sounds
Like a banker choking a concrete tree.
My head is only the wind that imagines me.

In the battle against the banker
A starfish can lose a knee.
As revenge it made the rhyme
That hung my body from a concrete tree.
My heart laughed when it fed the bird its last poetry.
My head is only the wind that imagines me. (35)

Modifying Bikini Kill’s anti-frat boy-grunge band boy-misogynist-patriarch lyrics, “Hey! Do you believe there’s anything / beyond troll-guy reality?” (1998), the “Ballad of the Concrete Tree” partakes in a struggle to create a place which may not be completely separate from that of the banker, but can’t be entirely destroyed by him/her either. Nevertheless, “In the battle against the banker / A starfish can lose a knee.” What is striking about this poem is that despite its longings for a more perfect world it doesn’t erect an impermeable wall between the realm of poetry and the domain of the banker. The “concrete tree” shielding poetry turns out to be fairly porous. Similarly, the banker’s identity is dependent upon the world of poetry, if only

negatively: “Time is what my head is not.”

Poetry’s difference here exists in a critical imagination seeking to express a set of material conditions distinct from those represented by the banker: “A banker in any time can catch a bird and choke a tree. / But a banker will not imagine a bird in a concrete tree.” The inability to turn a profit on poetry is partly what makes it, along with “other things too small to eat,” unappealing. Or, as Zurawski writes in the poem “What Skyscraper?”: “What skyscraper could have satisfied?” ([20]) the speculative voracity of financial greed? Nevertheless, poetry has its own relations of production which like the banker’s world are dependent upon access to capital, resources, and recognition. This is why the poet is “scared when my heart sounds / Like a banker choking a concrete tree.” Poetry’s utopias can just as quickly turn into dystopias, which is an awareness found in the work of all four poets. This—along with the continuing appropriation of alternative form and content by consumer capitalism, specifically advertising—threatens to make poetry complicit with reigning status quos and their ruling institutions.

At the same time, there are cracks in the edifices of power through which people slip all the time, though in everyday life this doesn’t always occur consciously: “*My head is only the wind that imagines me.*” One of the goals of the “Ballad of the Concrete Tree” is to facilitate an understanding of this process. This is why the poem commences with a question which the rest of the ballad addresses without arriving at a final concrete answer. However, this is clearly not yet another example of the overly celebrated trope concerning the end of closure. As Classical or High Postmodernism becomes an increasingly ossified style, textual indeterminacy for its own sake sometimes becomes formulaic, and its results can feel, paradoxically or not, predictable. Addressing these same issues less in terms of form and style, Jeffrey Kastner writes: “Asking questions about real issues and real people without worrying if they’re ever answered may allow for a comfortable sense of conceptual freedom, but it also suggests a puzzling kind of disregard, not only for the act of questioning, but also for those on whose behalf the questions are asked” (1999: 85).

The question and answer quality to “Ballad of the Concrete Tree” makes dialogue, as distinguished from indeterminacy, the basis for its approach to society and culture. In doing so, the poem displays a sophisticated use of formal techniques placed in the service of larger social issues. We don’t need to think of this in terms of some kind of art vanguard initiated world historical revolutionary moment; instead, it might be more useful to conceive of this relationship as a dialogue between poetry and the particular communities and institutions

which help to generate it. In the end, this seeming modesty about poetry may be what finally makes it once again politically and culturally relevant to people's lives.

"We will remember the art of the '90s for, among other things, its myriad acts of staged disappearance into the larger culture landscape," writes Jan Avgikos in *Arjforum's Best of the '90s: A Special Issue* (120). I hesitate to generalize about poetry in the '90s, but I think a similar movement—though to a lesser extent—can be seen in poetry as well. The four writers whose work I've examined can all be understood as part of a shift away from a more strictly formalist approach to poetry and toward a writing that partially erases the boundaries between art and culture. In their work, cultural politics begins to supersede textual politics, because if we're going to try to talk seriously about the relationships between cultural products and social formations, then we can't reduce either of these to a set of formal devices or reading practices. At this point in time, these latter approaches are affiliated with academic discourses surrounding the avant-garde, which I'd like to distinguish to a certain degree from the difficult work that goes into creating communities on the margins of institutional power.

Another way of thinking about this is to say that "form follows culture" (Ypma 1994: 207). This is not simply a question of realism, because the real is exactly what's being contested. The better known idea that form follows content or function isolates particular elements within the larger cultures shaping a work of art. It doesn't, however, negate them, but instead focuses on the ideological issues that preoccupy different communities. It also means our knowledge of a cultural product must take into account the contexts in which it is created and the people creating it. This is not simply a question of biography, but of more comprehensively understanding the determining and framing cultural contexts and socio-economic conditions that problematize traditional approaches to the subject—whether classically humanist, radically anti-humanist, or somewhere in between. At the same time, it can now be seen that an emphasis on human agency was one of the more important developments in art and criticism during the 1990s.

This is related to, but not synonymous with, an interest in transgressive subjectivity, which foregrounds both the ways in which individuals express themselves and the powers that seek to shape and control this expression. Appropriately enough, much of this type of work is concerned with the body and its experiences of gender and sexuality. What Maria Damon calls "the subversive radical subjectivity of poetry" is one of the concerns found in the work of the four

writers I've been discussing (8). I would also include an emphasis on context and material conditions; an interest in subcultures and marginalization; a collapsing distinction between art and culture; an understanding of form less as a set of inherited avant-garde techniques and more as an expression of social history; a dialogic approach to creating meaning; a slackening of inhibitions regarding affectivity in poetry; an interest in social and personal documentation; a contesting of the linguistic sign that does more than deconstruct it; a thinking through of identity and difference; a site-specific and localist approach to representation; etc.

Ultimately, one gets the sense from reading these writers that poetry is in service to its surrounding communities. Thus, poetry becomes a civic act, whether real or imagined, just as poetry is always in dialogue with the communities and institutions supporting it. The key for artists, critics, and audiences is to link up poetry and its communities, because poetry's social and political effects are not located in its formal devices, but in relation to both its production and reception in the world. Moreover, if poetry contains the possibility of articulating alternative sets of values, then this allows for a definition of subcultures which has the potential to go beyond (or beneath) the level of style, a problem Dick Hebdige never quite resolves in *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (except, perhaps, in his discussion of reggae music and Rastafarianism [cf., 40]). This dilemma of alternative and/or style is an important one in the work of Berrigan, Sharma, Fuchs, and Zurawski. How could it not be for a group of writers for whom Nirvana's explosion into American youth culture in the early '90s was, for better or worse, a landmark event?

The fact that we can delineate a positive set of criteria for this work means it's not "post-" anything—neither "post-postmodern" nor "post-Language [Poetry]," which are two recent descriptions bandied about in an attempt to get a grasp on the heterogeneous and heterodox aspects of contemporary poetry. To use the phrase "post-postmodern" or "post-Language" reduces the plurality of poetics practiced by an entire generation of writers to a pre-established set of formal techniques, something we shouldn't wish on anybody. Moreover, as Stuart Hall writes, echoing Gramsci's definition of hegemony: "Hegemony can only be maintained so long as the dominant classes 'succeed in framing all competing definitions within their range'" (Hebdige 1979: 16). These particular "post-" descriptions also cause us to lose our historical bearings, which is not so great in the wake of the '90s, a historically rudderless decade during which all styles and periods became so easily appropriable (even parachute pants had a brief revival near the end of the decade!) that "retro" has been

rendered an almost meaningless concept.

Of course, parachute pants were all the rage in the mid-'80s, right around the time Ronald Reagan was elected to a second term as President of the U.S., Margaret Thatcher was ruthlessly extending her power in Britain, and The Smiths were singing: "When you say it's gonna happen 'now' / Well, when exactly do you mean?" in "How Soon Is Now?" (1985). It's a good question, given the obsession with the latest trend, product, or fashion in North American culture and the way Ezra Pound's dictum "Day by day make it new" has become one of Madison Avenue's chief axioms (1972: 265). But there's a sense of both deferment and loss in the song that's resistant to a consumer capitalism in which the newest product promises immediate gratification, and identity and self-worth are items to be purchased, after first being selected from the pages of a glossy lifestyle magazine. Unfortunately, it didn't take long for The Smiths to become a part of so-called "alternative" consumer culture. And just this past year, Johnny Marr's unmistakable and haunting guitar riff on "How Soon Is Now?" could be heard in the background of a television commercial hawking mid-size sedans.

The tension between artistic innovation and its absorption by capitalist consumerism has spanned much of the twentieth century. In his own reflections on emerging poets (including Anselm Berrigan), Tom Devaney describes it as: "How do we deal with the revolution against the given when the revolution against the given is the reigning given?" (1999: 57). Inverting this formulation, it's possible to see that as the twentieth century progressed status quos of all kinds became more flexible while at the same time endeavoring to limit serious opposition to them. Similarly, the underground shopping concourse beneath the World Trade Towers cruelly mimics the thousands of small businesses that the whole massive complex destroyed or displaced when it was being built. Poetry and cultural products of all sorts help communities survive and flourish. Berrigan's *Integrity & Dramatic Life*, Sharma's *Bliss to Fill*, Fuchs's *came like it went*, and Zurawski's *Bruised Nickelodeon* are books produced by small presses with very little money and almost no institutional support. But the options these books present for thinking about the relation between poetry and its accompanying social and cultural conditions are an invaluable and timely resource.

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Pa ba-m manje
si m' grangou:
m'pa bezwen bezwen-ou.
Se travay m'mande.

Ou di jodi!
Sa ou fè denmen?

Tout bouch ap bat
tout bra kwaze
barik mayi-a rete la.

Néf mwa nan vant
de mwa lavi
youn jou lan môg
tout tan anba tè.

Pale met la...pale met la...
pale met la jouk ou pa la.

Nan peyi Dayiti
ou bezwen rich
louvri youn komès môg.

Bél ti wòb, ti ba plen tou
Gogo bay...
gaga pa pran.

(translated from the Haitian Creole by Boadiba & Jack Hirschman)

Don't give me food
if I'm hungry;
I don't need your need.
It's work I'm asking for.

You say today!
What did you do to tomorrow?

All the tongues are wagging
all the arms are crossed
the barrel of corn hasn't been touched

9 months in the belly
2 months in life
one day in the morgue
the whole time underground.

Tell the master...tell the master...
tell the master till you're gone.

In the land of Haiti
if you want to be rich
open a mortuary.

Pretty miniskirt, fishnet stockings full of holes
Gogo gives
but Gaga ain't taking...

translators' note: Wongòl: a short poem, invented in the 1960s, of anywhere from 2-6 lines, containing a succinct message, often politically dissident. The above Wongòl are selected from a dozen written by Banbou.

And yet another incipient form or
face, venal "left" co-optative rump
of the WTO, NGO-ite operative's
proclamation - baldly - put

(quoting)

" In Brazil, WE

have

a movement, that is

particularly

eloquent

in showing

potentialities

for

Cultural

Change

forged

by

CIVIC SOCIETY

itself

around the ISSUE of

social exclusion

-ism

IT

has

a UNIVERSAL

dimension

despite

its

unique Brazilian

features

After all

[*after all*

- after all]

IT

appeals

to

CITIZEN'S

consciousness

the

movement

is

a

LEARNING

process

for

the

citizenry

based

on

ethical

INDIGNATION

the

movement

directs

ITSELF

to those

integrated

in

the current

development

model

to ENABLE

them

to see

OTHER'S

and

assume

responsibility

as

citizens

for

their

FATE "

The Dane
with disdain
for the peasant's recalcitrance
for their organization's
dissolving
into

the
"movement"

headquartered
in Brussels

headed by the
Schroederesque -"third way"-ist
anschluss

louse

who
has discovered
homo pluralisticus

for democratic
vistas...

is offended
(the Dane)

[by them self-organized trade unions too]

/// as to how come
you

and you
and you

have not LEARNED thee

the

rrr...RRR...*radical*

break

from the "bi-
polar
political"
past
into that

rrr...ludic

project

* * *

us

"masternarrativists"

"economists"

"idealists"

"workerists"

"statists"

"essentialists"

ortho- gap-toothed

foos

Notes on two pieces for Tripwire

"FRAGMENT 2000"

line in Spanish translates as
"a veritable prison, young man—listen to what I am telling you"

The fragment, lifted (and compressed) from actual "case progress" notes; my having been MG's caseworker through the San Francisco County Mental Health Department / SEIU 535. Problematic was how to render the interpenetrative logic of capitalist accumulation—especially at the level of its failed (or inadequate) institutions. How expose it / to transform it; to make connections between political-economic structures and individual circumstances, as well as between the variegated systemic crises (which are really byproducts of the exigencies of accumulation) more palpable to activist audiences whose interests lie in intervening at concrete junctures of said logic. One important omission in the fragment, however, is how, or rather, what global forces brought MG to the U.S. in the first place (something not in her story as it was related to me).

Fragment 2000 was composed before Seattle—or "BS"—in reference to the still too alienated avenues of political participation, or containment (i.e., the Democratic Party) along with their cultural-aesthetic spin-offs, i.e., plutocratically supported "identity" politics.

The CCA, or Corrections Corporation of America, is the largest privatized prison complex and prison-labor producer of goods in the U.S., having contracts with Starbucks, Microsoft, some of the largest airline corporations, as well as many textile companies. The Wall Street Journal has referred to it as "one of the most promising theme stocks for the new millennium."

"AND YET ANOTHER INCIPIENT FORM OR FACE. VENAL "LEFT" CO-OPTATIVE RUMP OF THE WTO, NGO-ITE OPERATIVE'S PROCLAMATION—BALDLY—PUT"

One central task of Transnational Capital is how to transform worker-based organizations (especially those which are perceived by their constituents to be legitimate representatives, and which therefore have the potential to resist the Transnational Corporations' (TNCs') Nation-State restructuring necessities) into the very relays of that restructuring. In other words, the end-game is to

socialize their investment risks. Right from the horse's hoo! A delegate to the Third Ministerial Meeting of the WTO dribbles through some of this new doctrine in perfect form. So in the first part of the piece, all I had to do was give the eloquent monsieur a hand—that is, amplify the key (and rather absurdly transparent) words. What is called for in all such homilies is some form of "social solidarity" at "roundtable talks;" and it is there that the mysterious (and ever flexible—and sharp-as-a tack!) "citizen" is resurrected as the central agent of History. The Globalizationalistic "end of the effectiveness of struggles at the national level" adds the needed backdrop to such "debates."

The components of a new concrete cross-border Internationalism are just now being assembled—an Internationalism organized solidly around nationally-based labor movements against common enemies. The process is slow and painstaking, involving many twists and turns; but the important thing is that it's being assembled at points along lines of production (along with the complex relations that they engender) that is to say, by producers (not "consumers", or "citizens").

At the same time, there are attempts at positing "internationalisms" that define themselves solely in relation to (albeit as "oppositional") Transnational Corporation's movements and culture, and that succeed only in coursing alongside it (or behind—or worse! "in front of" ... somebody once said to me "don't you sometimes feel like you can keep ahead of Capital—and catch it?") repeating its jokes and spinning them in ever-more clever ways. Such "internationalisms" declared, originating from the laboratories of critical and cultural theory, speak (mainly) from and to their own ranks, and are more easily co-opted by Capital than those which arise from a mobilized social base in its own name and interests; such as is the Labor Movement of every country.

"on s'engage et puis—on voit!"

one engages [it] and struggles—then one sees!

—V.I. Lenin, quoting Danton

from *Laurence*

translated by Gail Scott
Toronto: Mercury Press, 1998

translator's note: *Set in Québec in the first half of the 20th century, Laurence is a novel about a young woman from an impoverished rural Québécois family who struggles against poverty and class prejudices to become a nurse. She flees the family farm, located in a region where many people still live as in the 19th century, weaving their own cloth and making their own shoes, and does menial work in Catholic hospitals, in pursuit of her goal. Her first attempt to become a nurse fails when Laurence is expelled from training for attending a carnival forbidden by the Mother Superior. In the following excerpt, Laurence leaves a job as a home-care worker and begins training as a nurse.*

Even bourgeois people from Outremont were losing their homes, she heard. She found the misfortunes of the rich scandalous, incomprehensible. The newspapers said that landlords were throwing large families into the streets. Unemployment was increasing. Charitable groups opened soup kitchens. September afternoons, with nothing to do before the children were brought to her, she went for a walk and ruminated on her future. The idea of living in residence again awoke such rage in her that she had to choke it back. Her recent hospital experience had opened old wounds. People, if indoctrinated to behave like machines, could not establish reasonable relations among themselves.

Francoise got up and dressed herself one morning, sat in the armchair, and called Laurence to take her to the garden. The nurse spread mohair blankets on the double swing, wrapped her convalescent patient in them and covered her legs. The warm September wind ruffled their hair. You could hear leaves rustling. Muffled city sounds floated up from somewhere below. Without warning Francoise asked her: have you ever been truly in love? She was trembling. Her eyes looked enormous. Words were not adequate to explain a thing as vast, as strong, as love. Love couldn't be talked about like any other event. Laurence lapsed into a way of speaking Francoise had never heard to sum up, in three sentences, their meeting, their falling in love, and their separation. Francoise was shocked by the vocabulary and a country lilt that Laurence never used on duty, where neutral medical terms were de rigueur. She was persuaded, believed her, especially since the man had a name, Gaston Ramsay. A name, in itself, demanded respect. It was impossible to invent a name instantaneously. Gaston

Ramsay existed as surely as the passion that had devastated Francoise herself.

In the boudoir, the doctor read the medical reports filled out daily. The man, whose allusion to psychiatric care had not impressed the nurse, turned out to be approachable and she took him aside. The fact that he was a doctor for rich people didn't prevent her from telling him that she was looking for work in a hospital where she could finish her training. The doctor spoke of the continuing crisis. He had contacts at Misericorde Hospital and promised to recommend her.

Laurence believed that to get a job, you had to have a contact. She thought that everybody knew somebody, that family relations or neighbours or professional connections were links of a chain connecting workers to society. It was fate that brought her the doctor to help out of her impasse. She had tempted fate and it had been good to her. She acted without knowing the rules, took initiatives in the good faith that society was an extended family that responded when you needed something. Consequently, she saw the economic crisis as being manoeuvred by high international finance, causing various degrees of helplessness, and destroying solidarity among people; When she heard talk of high finance, she imagined a secret government that lorded it over politicians.

In November, she was dismissed. The colour was returning to Francoise's cheeks, and the mother was already organizing balls and receptions for the winter season.

On rue Dorchester, Laurence found a large square room, with shared bathroom. The single bed had a metal head and foot, the dresser was bulbous, and the thick flowered cotton hanging in the widows all gave it a familiar ring. The homemade rug reminded her of the long evenings with Aline, their whispered conversations as they wove. It was a room for reminiscing.

The nun at Misericorde Hospital questioned her about her training. Laurence described the courses she had completed. It was an interrogation for which she was not prepared, and she replied carefully. Fear of making an error caused a lump in her throat that choked the possibility of inspired replies. An inner voice whispered that she should elaborate on her replies, but she didn't hear it. The interview lasted two hours. In the evening she couldn't remember a thing about it. The next day she remembered the things she should have said. She mixed up what she had said and what she should have said.

The nun accepted her into the training school, but declared, sitting on her high horse, that it would take a year and a half for her to get her diploma. The reason for the extra half-year was that her

dossier lacked certain theory courses. Laurence didn't protest. She would be admitted in January. The director made no reference to her lack of schooling, the five years of elementary school. It is possible that the small number of second-year students was the reason for making her do the extra half-dash year. She said nothing and thanked her.

In the meantime, she was given various duties. Laurence expected to keep her job on the evening of night shift during her studies. The school was against this practice, for there was no lack of nurses' aides. The school and hospital had different administrations, formed two different entities.

The hospital, known for its obstetrics department, took in single mothers from Montreal and around the province. The religious community reserved a floor for married women, who got entirely different treatment. The segregation bothered Laurence, all the more so since single mothers were admitted under false names to preserve family reputations. The staff looked after anonymous faces and bodies. They were clothed identically, in uniforms. Hospital management did not allow them visitors. For the most part, families acted as if they had forgotten them, and many experienced the long months bracketed by conception and birth as an interminable period of atonement. The nuns refused to administer anaesthesia and sedatives during labour because they must feel, and never forget, their pain. The women were expecting children begotten in sin and it was only right that they should suffer the consequences of illicit pleasure. Their hypocritical language sanctioned the moralizing posture of the institution. Furious, some women called the practices abusive.

The women gave up their children, signing adoption papers prior to giving birth. They were not spared the belt-tightening caused by the Depression. Their delivery and their stay in the hospital had to be paid for. They paid the same as married women, more if they had taken refuge in the hospital some months before giving birth. And if they couldn't pay, they worked in the kitchen, in the laundry, as chamber maids, until the debt was settled. They were not allowed into the nursery. This was stipulated in a legal contract. Laurence saw these women, for the most part young, scouring the big iron pots, removing bedpans from damp beds. They didn't treat their situation melodramatically or tragically.

It took concentration and effort to imagine the broader reality of their existence. Her gift of observation was helped along by her critical spirit. The nuns, backed by the clergy, behaved in ways behind the hospital walls that the public knew nothing of.

She kept ripping up her letter to her father. Trying to write it gave her a headache. She wrote the raw truth. The director wouldn't allow her evening or night duty, and she would be earning seven dollars a month. Laurence's determination to pursue her studies did not prevent her from dreading his reply. It was ambiguous. He was pleased she was living in residence, though he disapproved of her choice of Montreal. The father seemed to believe she was paid to study. He wrote the oft-repeated phrase: no child of his had ever lied to him. Leon Naud didn't beat around the bush; he expected them to be straightforward. His daughter disconcerted him. Laurence had no religious calling and he presumed she would one day marry. The bachelor existence, if not directly if not directly helping out the family, was more suitable for a man. The moral discomfiture she caused him was irksome.

In February, the roads were impassable. The accumulated snow formed banks that reached the second floor of the hospital. You only went out if you had to. Laurence grew restless, her books open on her desk. Doing nothing made her nervous. The director's refusal to let her work weighed heavily, and she invoked her isolation, her distance from her family. Her loneliness was recognized as a valid reason and they let her work Saturday and Sunday. The thought of having got around the regulations excited her as much as the favour granted.

She had not entered the programme at the same time as the others. It was an already-established group who noticed that the new older student wore heavy cotton stockings under her shapeless skirt. They noticed her frank gaze, which they interpreted as a sign of insolence. They were twenty-year-olds from bourgeois families, conscious of their status, forbidden to socialize with people from inferior situations. Laurence's appearance did not gibe with their notion of the nursing profession. She was aware of their coolness, and attributed it to her clothing.

The young woman memorized the lessons in nursing theory by rote, repeated the lists of scientific terms out loud to herself. She pushed her notebook away, lost patience, hated writing because the pencil refused to go fast enough. She feared for her spelling, her handwriting, on the simplest medical reports. Laurence hadn't got over the wound inflicted on the gifted child who had been taken out of school. Her letters home remained matter-of-fact, the words coming easily. She knew what to say. Faced with words in any other context, she was gripped with terror. Outside the family circle, language sent back a mocking reflection.

Despite what the director said, the training focused on learning through doing. Her skill and self-possession came in handy. They saw that she paid close attention from the very first exercise. It was good to learn the terms by rote, for she could come up with the appropriate technical term for the appropriate gesture. The students appreciated her. Their uniforms put them on an even footing. It was she who kept her distance, for reasons not clear to her. The Montreal bourgeois girls seemed more out for themselves than those of Quebec. Here, each led, alongside her training, the life of a young girl of a privileged family. There, the group spirit had helped her to get to know Estelle Haley. Their unabashed individualism dampened her desire for a class companion. She kept to herself.

In March, she mailed the money earned on weekends, happy to be able to add to the small amount earned as a student. She got an unpleasant letter in return. The father believed she was hiding money from him. In the name of respect and honesty, he ordered her to say what she earned, complained of their lack of money, said another son had gone away. Laurence was disconcerted. Her benevolence was misunderstood, earning her reproaches. He demanded and she gave. Caring as she did about their well-being, she didn't bother to explain. She felt she had shown good faith and that was proof enough. She remembered Dr. Fournier's words, didn't know yet how to strike a reasonable balance between heartfelt giving and looking after herself. Her generosity was not appreciated. The grim call to duty prevailed, when what she craved was a sign of appreciation.

Camille Roy

excerpts from Craquer¹: An essay on class struggle

(2) BLUR

Remember the class struggle? I do. The adults in my household were commies. When I was a kid, class struggle was a thing bigger, and more vivid. Bigger than what? *Like Iron Mike, like Tyson*. It's what this essay is supposed to be about. In truth I am slouching, ever so slowly, into that conversation. We're in the post-communist era now. All that was reddish has fallen into a pit of silence—which is not particularly new or different. Pretty much everything falls in there.

But back to the story of my mother, Pearl. How do we get a poor (but plucky) girl from Nevada to anywhere else, ideologically speaking? It must come down to character. Picture this: Pearl, radiant & shining (but in a dumb way), as she stumbles down the center of a deserted road. Pale cracks at the horizon light the scene for sacrifice. Each pair of oncoming headlights flattens and drains a little more from her rosy charms. She's fifty miles out in the desert with only a thermos of bloody marys. It doesn't look good. But Pearl is too subtle for this particular disaster. I can guess from an assortment of possible scenarios: She'll hitch a ride with a local spanish speaking priest or, alternatively, with a chivalrous dyke mechanic who goes by the name Eddie, or perhaps the mild-mannered man pulling over in the burgundy Buick will turn out to be a Nobel prize winning physicist driving to a conference in Taos. Whoever her companion happens to be, Pearl will persuade him to stop at a vista point to watch the sun rise over the desert and talk politics (Pearl will do most of the talking), while they slurp what's left from the thermos. And Pearl will arrive home spouting a joyful music about decency, reliability, solidarity, community, et cetera.

Pearl is the most elusive person I have ever known. A genius of charm.

Pearl was raised on a faith-healing religion, not the gloriously dramatic Temple of Aimee Semple McPherson, but the stubborn doctrines of Mary Baker Eddy. *Christian Science*. After her father took off, leaving his little family to starve, her mother Amanda found respite in a read-

1. to tell dubious stories.

ing room. Eventually she founded her own, in her living room, for herself, her two daughters Pearl and Lydia, and an elderly bachelor named Ronald. This little group of four were the only Christian Scientists in town. During their evening studies, they mumbled and moaned and passed the book from lap to lap. Then on weekends Pearl and Lydia went door to door with pamphlets, two lovely girls with soft cheeks and shining hair. Never in need of medical care, the girls were implicit testimonies to the power of faith and prayer. But no one converted.

Faith, as a form of insistence, is an oddly stable construct, given that it brings in relation two contrary mental formations—pouring emotion (some form of religious exaltation) and an intellectual framework designed to provide stasis, as a necessary stabilizer. Its electrifying core can transition from religion to politics with little more than a change in vocabulary.

In a hypothetical marriage between a faith-healer and a hard core leftie, the latter would seem a little like a dumb lug out of the movies. Part thug, but also oddly innocent, in the way that stupidity can seem comically blundering. You know how straight men can be innocent of themselves, their fantastical drives cloaked by pseudo-technical terminology? It's so boring. The intellectual left has that problem. Anyway. In my scenario, Blanche DuBois rules simply because her drive towards emotional extremes wounds and confuses everything around her. Poor Stanley. He's paralyzed by her spectacle, as well as his own befuddled desire to *do right*.

The covert fantasies which motivate the need to believe—these are the muscular terms in a language of transformation. That's the burn. It's the first spot in this essay where class explicitly slips in (look quickly or you'll miss it). Fuck everything else. My mother's side of the family, the working class side, teeters right on the edge of self-dramatization and self-destruction, and since everybody winds up dead, you know how the story ends.

Still, I have to insist on my argument with them. Can we stop piling blur on top of blur? As a goal, people. Of course I've never told a story straight in my life (and in this essay, I haven't tried). This is not hypocrisy, because consistency is not my point. I'm a seamstress of blur, performing nips and tucks on the empty center. But I need to know where it is. Is that just personal taste, like clean underwear?

(3) First Comes Love

Pearl met my father at a communist party meeting in the early fifties. I like to imagine the ardor of their first glance across a smoky room, crowded with people engaged in passionate political conversation. Youth being a plush velvet suit, deep and soft, yet lacerated with the rigorousness of all those sexual impulses. But this wasn't Paris, with its aestheticized frenzies. It was the south side of Chicago, a place that hangs you upside down and whacks the sentimentality right out. They moved in a community whose (exhausting) urgency came from the streets, the factories, the union halls.

My parents met at a C.P. meeting. That's all I know. I never heard what they said to or thought of each other. No personal touches. Somehow that didn't qualify as 'material.' (Is this a marxist definition of *material*?) But I heard another story, over and over. It was a late night story, when the household temperament went from coolly intellectual to soft and sudsy. This one was a little drama with Pearl's shrink. Before Pearl met my father, she had been sticking her toe into the murky waters of psychoanalysis. Introspection was not her style, but her boho intellectual friends were doing it, and since it was the fifties, the shrink was freudian, and since she was broke, Pearl had an analyst-in-training who charged twenty five cents an hour. This man was fond of telling Pearl that her life was a fantasy. This was his response to everything she told him about her childhood, her first failed marriage, her political beliefs, her friends. When she came in with tales of my father (tall dark and handsome, smart, communist AND social register), he calmly told her this was also a hallucination.

It was to be Dr. Kornfeld's last such pronouncement. With sweeping gestures Pearl described the wedding announcement that ran in the Chicago dailies. It took up a whole page. Why her wedding announcement took up ten times more space than anyone else's was never specified, but the implications were clear enough—it had to do with the shock communism of a son of the ruling classes and his inappropriate divorcee wife-to-be, Pearl. In any case, Pearl didn't go to her last session with her shrink. She snuck into his office and left the clipping on his desk.

Perfect moment of revenge, possibly invented. Any invention being possible, especially when we are sexually soiled, wild, fruitful, & poor. Being the wrong favor, yet being chosen, Pearl went adventuring. It poured out easily, warm companions found in the doorways of the

city. I can picture my father's mother, Ethel, watching my parents through the window of her elegant Gold Coast apartment, her green eyes half-closed as she lifts an ebony and ivory cigarette holder to her lips. A barely audible sigh as she releases a thin snake of smoke.

This I know is true: having chosen one another they believed they were free.

With a feeling like yearning but more vague, I used to check the wedding announcements in the Chicago papers. Everyday I'd sneak a glance at that page, looking for any announcement, just one, that was over-size. Not that I was fact-checking my mother—I only wanted context. I wanted to be located in relation to some other over-size wedding announcement. But they invariably looked the same: a small paragraph of copy under a mugshot of a bride.

[[Once a mugshot of Pearl did appear in the paper. It was because she was a pipesmoker. We all gathered round as she pointed to the excited caption: "No more Lucky Strikes: Pearl is a woman who swears by her small yet sturdy Norwegian pipe.']]

Thomas married Pearl at City Hall. They exchanged gold bands in front of a judge named Bogan. It was early on a Friday, in order to avoid the worst of the Chicago's July heat. Still, the breeze off the lake was like a warm scarf. Pearl wore a blue suit of light crepe wool, but no hat or gloves.

There are no photos of this event. Due to my ignorance, I've made up every detail—*stonewall* being a shimmer that repulses. This was more my father's response to questions than my mother's. It sounds rather stiff, but it's really a form of motion, like a fine breeze in the sails of a little boat. You don't question the breeze, you just keep moving.

It's not what is told, but what is withheld, that creates suspense, so storytelling is partly the art of not telling. My household was greasy with that kind of suspense—or is that something all children experience? It may account for the flatness of childish expressions, their diffidence, a wariness around adults. I, at least, remember that emotion parsing everything I said. It took effort to detach facial expression from the act of speaking, but as much as possible I blanked my own face. With that kind of carefully contrived innocence (which I felt guilty about, but which was, in fact, ignorance), I remember remarking to Pearl that I didn't know anything about my father's father, since

he had died before I was born. I was perhaps eleven, and we were having dinner. The adults were a little sloshy. Pearl seized my idea, exclaiming to Thomas that he must must must instantly entertain us with tales of Thomas, Senior. Thomas replied, "There is nothing to say."

Pearl tried beguiling it out of him but Thomas was stubborn. After awhile Pearl's voice quivered, bluster melting into hysteria—"How can there be nothing to say about your own father?" Over and over again, Thomas would only respond, "There is nothing to say."

No way into that matrix. The argument dwindled off. In fact, nothing was ever said about Thomas, Senior—his name never crossed my father's lips.

Thomas told me only one family story that I can remember, and I go fuzzy when I think of it, so I'm not sure how much of my memory is correct. He lifted his head up from the newspaper one night and told me how, when he was fifteen, he'd gotten a call from his aunt. As it happened, before she made the call she had drowned her son in the bathtub. Michael was a little boy with red hair and tender skin. A baby, perhaps? Was it two children that she murdered? I vaguely think that it was, but I'm not sure. In my memory the murders just begin with Michael and then take in, like a cloud of pestilence, whatever other children there were and the husband Jack, and then the murderess herself. I don't know her name. What went through my father's head when he hung up the phone? What was said in that conversation and what was implied? At the time I was so shocked I couldn't think of any questions. Much later I went to one of his sisters, and she told me her version of what had happened, which was distinctly different, but which had the feeling of truth. Like a godmother in a fairytale, this aunt is gentle and wholesome. Refreshing. Nonetheless, I've forgotten what she said.

This is a story I could get to the bottom of by going to the Chicago Public library and researching through the archives of the *Tribune*. Murderesses, especially double or triple with a possible suicide thrown in, tend to make the news. But would you want to play *Clue* with your own family history? Perhaps you would. For me, the prospect is inexplicably irritating.

[[A friend questioned me on this—what is at stake, he wanted to know. Would the truth undermine the sense of myself I've constructed from these family histories? I'd be violating my own cloud of

uncertainty, that's for sure. My self of no sense. Perhaps I like the cloud, and even believe in it. It's a habit—I have always lived in the castle. It's expansive, oddly permissive, as a form of identity. The irritating part is the work required to manage it.]]

Families trail off like the ghosts to whom we are all connected. They don't have a bottom. And it's not only ancestors, but other ungraspable relations which shadow me—from my father's silence to mother's dreamy milk. That's a sweet one.

It's not that Thomas never talked. What he said and didn't say never failed to surprise me. What he uttered came from a territory of silence. It entered with complete confidence but felt alien.

Once, eavesdropping, I heard Thomas and Pearl talking about a recent neighborhood rape, of a new girl in our neighborhood. Age-wise, I was somewhere in my slow descent through high school, and this girl was not much older. A stranger had broken into her room, raped her, then he let her leave to do something oddly childish. I think she needed to feed her guinea pig. He let her out on the promise that she would come back and she did, and he raped her again. After a few weeks of mulling this over, she pressed charges. In my neighborhood that kind of idiocy was more than a little suicidal (although all the actually dead kids I knew had died of overdoses). Pearl responded to the story with complete impatience—perhaps she found the girl's inability to handle her circumstances threatening. Thomas' opinion was the surprise. He was sympathetic to this mysteriously stupid girl. He thought that perhaps she had come from *the country*. Sexually innocent, as well as innocent of our local racial politics, of the lacerating hostility that was part of our daily life, she suddenly found herself cluelessly adrift inside that (inside us), and was lost.

Thomas had more than a few such moments of sympathy, but they were as unpredictable as his little fits of irritability. I grew up in his city, in the city his parents had been born in, but there was little context. It was missing, and that was the loaded message. In our deep and disorderly photograph drawer, we had one picture of my father before he became my father. It shows a boy of about nine, wearing shorts and holding a pail. He is standing against a wall and grimacing awkwardly for the camera, as he squints into the sun. No one else is in the photo. It's just Thomas, but his fixed frightened eyes are on someone standing behind the camera, so that I feel that person—her hysteria. I think I know who it is.

(4) *The House of Ethel.*

Ethel. For me the word conveys a fine-tuned state of paranoia and high dudgeon. She was unbeautiful, despite her elegant figure. Her nose was a little beak, and her chin was awkwardly receded. But she had style. Observing Ethel ordering a cab over the phone was an electrifying experience. "I am ... " She spit and hissed every syllable of her long married name into the phone as if...as if—what? Vengeance, power, money, style were all at stake. And yet there was an impossible sheen to her speech, a melody. It was brutal, really, just the way she said her name. Had there been a time when random cab company dispatchers knew Ethel by name? Who am I to say, but probably. In any case, Joan Crawford's accent and style, in fact the vocal style of that generation of actresses, was a whole-cloth imitation of women like Ethel, for whom it was bred in the bone.

Ethel was always ready to meet the cruelty of the contest. I'm glad I didn't know her better. What I did know came from afternoons, maybe once a year, when Thomas and Pearl would load me into the car and drive with mysterious urgency to her northside apartment on Astor Street. The prospect of being five minutes late to Ethel's made Thomas tight and crabby. We had to arrive on the dot. I felt breathless.

Her building had a doorman. Her apartment was like its own climate—tones of soft, saturated beige, imported from the fifties like that was a foreign country. Snowy white wall-to-wall. Stacks of *Vôgues*, in Italian, French, and German. The afternoons always followed the same pattern. Our coats were dispatched to an enormous closet. Then we were led to the living room, where we sat around an inlaid mahogany table on round upholstered chairs with no arms but odd little skirts, while Ethel reclined upon her divan, tiny feet crossed. She was inordinately proud of her small feet—size 4 1/2 before marriage, and five afterwards. From a mirrored cabinet, drinks for everyone (mine with the maraschino, gingerale, and grenadine) and then, a round of cheddar cheese puffs, served on a silver tray by a maid who endured. Delores. Ethel took a martini, and smoked one Kent after another, in a long ebony and ivory cigarette holder.

These afternoons were conducted like interviews, in which each person sitting on an armless chair would have to describe, in a manner amusing to Ethel, what they were up to. The goal was to raise a dry, appreciative laugh from Ethel; at stake was social humiliation of a degree so peculiar and yet severe, it was utterly mysterious. Each

eroding second, every witty remark was part of the burnished display of her total control of social intercourse. Yet her eyes sparkled with pure fear. Ethel was a breath of terror inside the artifact of personality. One afternoon she asked me about my tennis, and I told her that I didn't know how to play tennis, then she said, but tennis is the best way to get bows, and by the way did I have any bows, and in distress I murmured WHAT? and she said BOWS and I cried out HUH and she said BOWS again, and this went on, with increasing agitation, until finally Thomas broke in and said Mother, that is not a word people use anymore, and Camille, it means *admirers*.

I didn't get it. I never did. Around Ethel I turned into a sloppy version of nice, which was obviously fake, and in any case, Ethel didn't appreciate sloppy. I assumed the guise of stupidity, which was protective, even if inaccurate. Dumbness can be sweeter. Stumbling down her halls, lined with photographs of grandchildren in tennis whites posing on their private courts or in country clubs, I never noticed there was no photo of me, or Pearl, or even Thomas.

The stupidity was feigned, but my cluelessness was deep and pure. I sailed through childhood sustained, on the one hand, by a combination of maternal fable and paternal missing links, and on the other by a strange belief that everything told to me by an adult was an untruth. I believed in a sort of principle of opposites. The statements of adults were a kind of signpost, indicating that the reality I should act on was the opposite of whatever it was I had just been told. This boiled down to *I'll do whatever the fuck I want*. It took six years for the public school system to beat this out of my behavior (using the usual tools of suspension, flunking, etcetera), although of course it lingers in my beliefs today.

Let's get to the basics. When we speak of rules we are referencing contested territory. That includes not only injunctions on student behavior enforced by obscenely poor public school systems, but all the unwritten codes, the ones relating to unspeakable divisions and unbridgeable gaps. When they're violated, it's like invisible writing that appears when you hold the paper over a flame. There they are, the codes which describe intelligible experience. Since no one ever talked about them, I thought maybe they didn't exist. Hah. Break them and an transformation happens. As the rules become intelligible, finally specified and visible, the person who violated them becomes unintelligible, slides off the map towards *strange*.

One example is the rule about what happens when the asphalt playlot of your elementary school erupts into a gang melee, ten year old girls imagining themselves to be representatives of Chicago's illegitimate armies, swinging at one another in a seething mass. The rule was that all the girls fighting were black, and all the girls watching were white. But it looked like fun, so Camille broke that rule, jumping into the pool of flailing arms & fists. Then everyone acted embarrassed, so she got out. There was another the rule about double-dutch, a great jumprope game that came up from the south with the black migration to Chicago. The rule was that only black girls played this game, but Camille discovered that if she slunk around in the background long enough, her participation became tolerable. It was as easy as two-four, six-eight, ten-twelve, fourteen-sixteen, twentytwo-thirty-two... Once Camille was established, the other white girls wanted to play too, but (being pussies every single one) they only wanted to play with Camille.

We were different. The family, I mean. Being of the left, we were somehow outside the necessity of following all these stupid rules. We were made out of broken ones. Yet breaking rules brought a kind of shame, because in truth there was no outside. I, at least, never got there. What I found was a kind of defeat in my own sadness, when the first girl I loved moved away from me, deeper into the ghetto, unavailable.

Getting a clue meant being indoctrinated into social pain. What I learned was how to walk down a south side street. The task of pleasing my grandmother, or even the basic chore of washing regularly, remained inscrutable—in fact invisible. I was a dirty, scraggly, skinny child, which I now recall with a dash of regret, because it leads inevitably to the reflection—that perhaps, if only—I had been different, there would have been a place for me [[in Ethel's will]].

from *Woman Sitting at the
Machine, Thinking*

she thinks about everything at once without making a mistake.
no one has figured out how to keep her from doing this thinking
while her hands and nerves also perform every delicate complex
function of the work. this is not automatic or deadening.
try it sometime. make your hands move quickly on the keys
fast as you can, while you are thinking about:

the layers, fossils. the idea that this machine she controls
is simply layers of human workhours frozen in steel, tangled
in tiny circuits, blinking out through lights like hot, red eyes.
the noise of the machine they all sometimes wig out to, giddy,
zinging through the shut-in space, blithering atoms;
everyone's hands paused mid-air above the keys
while Neil or Barbara solo, wrists telling every little thing,
feet blipping along, shoulders raggly.

she had always thought of money as solid, stopped.
but seeing it as moving labor, human hours, why that means
it comes back down to her hands on the keys, shoulder aching,
brain pushing words through fingers through keys, trooping
out crisp black ants on the galleys. work compressed into
instruments, slim computers, thin as mirrors, how could
numbers multiply or disappear, squeezed in sideways like that
but they could, they did, obedient and elegant, how amazing.
the woman whips out a compact, computes the cost,
her face shining back from the silver case
her fingers, sharp tacks, calling up the digits.

when she sits at the machine, rays from the cathode stream
directly into her chest. when she worked as a clerk, the rays
from the xerox angled upward, striking her under the chin.
when she waited tables the micro oven sat at stomach level.
when she typeset for Safeway, dipping her hands in processor
chemicals, her hands burned and peeled and her chest ached
from the fumes.

while we know who makes everything we use or can't use.
as the world piles itself up on the bones of the years,
so our labor gathers.

while we sell ourselves in fractions. they don't want us all
at once, but hour by hour, piece by piece. our hands mainly
and our backs. and chunks of our brains. and veiled expressions
on our faces, they buy. though they can't know what actual
thoughts stand behind our eyes.

then they toss the body out on the sidewalk at noon and at five.
then they spit the body out the door at sixty-five.

* * * * *

knowledge this power owned, not shared
owned and hoarded
to white men, lock stock dollar
skill passed down from manager
to steal, wrench it back
knowledge is something we have
this is the bitters column
around the chair, toe stubbing the floor
and I am here, legs twisted
on our own time the words clarify
with all we are not taught
I will know it and use it burning
I sneak it home and copy it
the Puerto Rican janitor, the older
woman, the Black women, our heads
held over stolen not granted
in my stomach for all the access
I have to sneak
language is something
get my hands on the machine
he takes it all as his right
eating lunch for granted his whole life
get my hands on the book
he's being taught what I am not
angry words swallowing my throat

to take to take it back

and open and ribbon out and share

The Bitters Column.

* * * * *

Line corrections

Interview with Leola S.

Typesetter: Karen B.

Born in Shreveport, Leola
independence is important, she
one of fourteen children, her
housecleaning in San Mateo
divorced now, she lives alone in
serving dinner from 4-5pm every
starting pay 1.53 per
h o u r

she and some co-workers
today more than ever in U.S.
h i s t o r y

posed to discrimination by sex,
race, color, religious or national
o r i g i n

more women go to work in

enter the labor
70 percent of the average wage
Black women lowest paid of
to organize the continuing fight
determined to be heard
plaints against unfair policies
something worth fighting for
sector of the working class
w o m e n

* * * * *

some buildings never sleep
round the clock
three eight hour shifts
seven days a week
centrifugal force irons us flat
to the blank walls, speeding,
whirling, intent as astronauts,
eyes toward the clock,
hands on the keys,
shoulders pressed against the chair.

some buildings never sleep
never shut down
roaring and roaring and we shout,
WHAT DID YOU SAY? HUH? WHAT?
WHERE IS THE? WHAT DID YOU SAY?

continuous paper streams form the room
words ratatat through our brains
trains and earthquakes shutter the walls
the long whistle of wind under the door
all we know of outside

remember that fish
that lives so deep
it has grown its own light
energy glaring out the bulbs
of its eyes
remember that fish formed flat
under fathoms of water
bones streamlined as ribs of steel
precise and efficient, formed in duress,
reaching, spinning the tough wire
of its own life, and long before Edison
vaulting out through its own demands.

(1981)

Editors' notes:

Raised in a socialist home in rural Woodinville, Washington, Karen Brodine (1947-1987) moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in the mid 1960s. She graduated from the University of California-Berkeley in 1972 with a degree in dance, and went on to receive an MFA in creative writing from San Francisco State University in 1974, where she taught part-time for six years.

During the early 1970s, Brodine co-founded the Women Writers Union in San Francisco, was a founding co-editor of Kelsey Street Press in Berkeley, and an editor at the Berkeley Poets Co-op. From 1975 to 1986 she supported herself as a typesetter while continuing her active involvement as a member of the National Women Studies Association and the National Writers Union.

Throughout the 1980s, Brodine worked as a national leader and San Francisco's organizer for both Radical Women and the Freedom Socialist Party, serving on the FSP's National Committee from 1982 on. From 1982 to 1984 Brodine coordinated the successful defense of Merle Woo's landmark suit against the University of California-Berkeley for discrimination on the basis of race, sex, sexual orientation and political ideology. Karen Brodine died of cancer on October 18, 1987 at the age of forty.

Her books include *Woman Sitting at the Machine, Thinking: Poems 1978-1987* (Red Letter Press, Seattle, 1990), *Slow Juggling* (Berkeley Poets Cooperative, 1975), *Workweek*, (Kelsey Street Press, Berkeley, 1977), and *Illegal Assembly* (Hanging Loose Press, Brooklyn, 1980). She also edited and published Gloria Martin's *Socialist Feminism: The First Decade, 1966-1974* (1984). Her critical essays include "Politics of Women Writing" (*The Second Wave*, V.5, #3, 1979), "Ancient Matriarchy and Modern Feminism" (*Radical Women Internal Discussion Bulletin*, V.11, #2, 1981), and "Giving Criticism Arms" (*FSP Pre-Convention Bulletin*, #3, April, 1982).

Zapatista Army of National Liberation

Zedillo's Last Moments! The Political Class

Zapatista Army of National Liberation Mexico.
November of 2000.

To the National and International Press:
Ladies and Gentlemen:

Here once again. The letters are off, for the one who is now leaving (fortunately), and an invitation for you to a press conference. We will do everything we can to not get hung up on the time.

Vale. Salud, and, no, you don't have to worry, Martha Sahagún is not going to be here.

From the Mountains of the Mexican Southeast.
Subcomandante Insurgente Marcos
Mexico, November of 2000.

(Zedillo's last moments!)

Yepa! Yepa! Yepa! Andale! Andale! Andale!

Arriba! Arriba! Arriba!

PLAYWRIGHT'S (ja!) PS WHICH SAYS WHAT IT SAYS. -

First Act—

Characters: the political class, announcer, the headlines, the public.

Place: Mexico.

Date: Prior to the elections of July 2, 2000.

(The curtain goes up. There is a television and a radio on the stage, turned up at full volume. In the background, the headlines of a national newspaper. The audio on the TV and the radio is the same: commercial jingles. The newspaper headlines are changing as they are signalled.)

The political class: "We are in the media, therefore we exist. We should now confront our greatness with the most difficult test in the supreme art of governing: the ratings. Call for the image consultants!

(clapping of hands)."

The headlines: "THE IFE IS CREATED, THE FEDERAL INSTITUTE OF POLLS. The bother of going to the voting booths will be eliminated, says its boss."

The consultant (entering from the right): "Here I am (turning to the public). Modern political science consists not just of discovering which product will have the best acceptance in the marketplace, but—and here I have the science—in converting anything into something which resembles that product as far as possible (he takes a complete makeup kit out of his briefcase). (He painstakingly applies cosmetics to the face of the political class.)"

The headlines: "CYBERNETIC CHALLENGE A DEMOCRATIC ADVANCE: EZPL"

The political class (sneezing): "Achoo! I think I'm allergic to this dust. What is it?"

Consultant (offering a handkerchief): "Bless you! It is the latest word in fashion, it is democratizing dust."

The political class (sighing in resignation): "Okay, anything to survive".

The headlines: "CANDIDATES' PRICES WILL BE GOING DOWN: SECOFI."

Announcer (entering hurriedly from the left): "Quickly! Hurry up! The sponsors are getting anxious! We have to tape the program."

Consultant: "The sponsors? I thought the members of the audience would be the ones who were anxious..."

Announcer: "No, no, no. The rhythm of politics is not set by clocks or calendars, but by program times. Hurry up! We don't have much time between the commercial breaks."

The political class (fixing itself up in front of a mirror being held by the consultant): "Good, how do I look?"

Consultant (smiling in satisfaction): "Magnificent! You are unrecognizable..."

The political class (to itself): "Commercial breaks! In the good old days there were no breaks other those produced by the happy sound of the rattles and slogans of "You can see it, you can feel it, the PRI is omnipotent."

(The consultant moves to one side).

Announcer: "Lights! Camera! Action!"

Announcer (turning to the public): "Welcome to our program: 'The Modest Truth!' Today, as a special guest, we have ... the political class! (loud applause is heard, the public is still, but an audio tape is keeping them from the grueling task of having to applaud)."

The political class (turning to the announcer): "Is my tie okay?"

Announcer: "Tell us, political class, excuse me, can I call you 'tu'?"

The political class (fixing a decal which looks like a smile on its mouth): "Of course."

Announcer: "Good. Tell us, what can the audience expect from the upcoming election?"

(The political class moves its lips, but no sounds at all come out).

Announcer: "Very interesting! Almost as interesting as these commercial messages from our sponsors!"

The political class (to the announcer): "Are we still taping?"

Announcer: "No. It went perfectly. Now we're waiting for the consultant to send us the audio of your response after he's done his marketing studies."

The political class: "Then can I leave now?"

Announcer: "Yes."

(The political class leaves. Someone comes and turns off the radio and television. The headlines disappear. The curtain falls. The audience yawns. An audio breaks into enthusiastic applause.)

Second Act—

Characters: The political class, Señora X, a young man Y, Señor Z.

Place: Mexico.

Date: July 2, 2000.

(The curtain rises. There is only an empty street on the stage).

The political class (to itself): "We see faces, we do not know votes."

Señora X: "No."

The young man, Y: "No."

Señor Z: "No."

The political class (to the public): "We see faces, we do not know votes."

The public (breaking into the script, to everyone's shock): "No!"

This play is a problem. Those directing it are making a huge effort to convince the audience that it's already over. Not only is the public not leaving the premises, they're also insisting on getting up on the stage. The director and the actors are tearing their hair out. It is no longer possible to know where the stage is and where the seats are. Suddenly, apparently without an agreement having been reached, and with stern expressions on their faces, all the members of the public yell: "Third act! Third act! Third! Let's begin."

Does the curtain fall?

What? You didn't like it? Well, La Mar did. Okay, at least she smiled. What? Dari'o Fo, Carballido, Gurrola, Savariego and Lenero are going to reprove me? Let them do so. They reproved Einstein for his hygiene (or was it for his mathematics?).

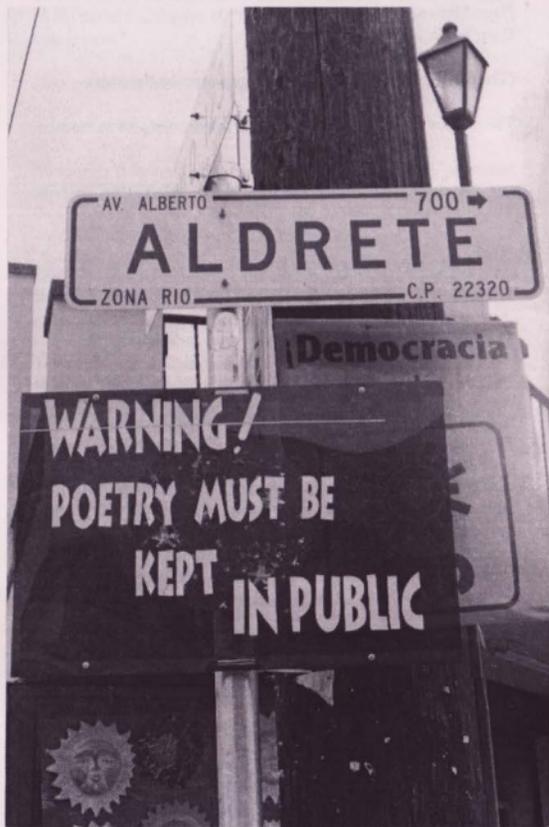
— *The Sup in the box office*

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for more EZLN writings see Our Word is Our Weapon (Seven Stories, 2001)



Heriberto Yépez

Contexts and Signs of an Urban Visual Poetics

Modern poetry is poetry of the city. What can postmodern poetry be? Certainly poetry not *of* the city but *on* the city; not poetry *about* the city but *over* the city. The city not as poetic *topic* but poetry *on top of it*.

What I call Context Poetry (or Contextual Poetics) is writing explicitly done for its placement on a specific point of the concrete/material world. Visual poems conceived to be read in a public space. The Street as Page.

The meaning of a Context Poem depends as much on its words as on its surroundings. To create and install a Visual Public Poem on the street is a way to keep and underline the close relationship between language and reality.

The meaning of a Public Visual Poem is given both by its Text and Context. But more importantly: I hope not only that the physical context gives meaning to the text, but also that the text gives some new meaning to its surrounding physical context.

I believe Context Poetry was one of the first forms of poetry and is directly related to cave paintings, for example. When cities appeared, poetry on the streets also appeared. Some of the ancient Chinese poems we admire now in books were in fact originally written on crossroads and on all kinds of buildings. A very important part of the literature of ancient civilizations was written on walls and in nature. Today our skyscrapers and houses don't consider poetic writing as part of their structure. This fact *says* everything about the nature of our *silence*.

The alienation of poetry began when intellectuals started to read in silence and to write in private.

The first anthology of Context Poetry is *The Greek Anthology*, which compiles inscription-poetry made for statues, monuments and grave-stones. Real epigrams are the first Western expression of contextual poetics.

Greek poets wrote Contextual Poems on public objects and sites in

order to construct a discourse about people (especially lovers and enemies), territory, journeys, to give human meaning to a natural landscape or to tell the history of a place—which demonstrates that Context Poetry can be about practically everything.

The only form of contextual poetry that still survives and is in common use is epitaphs: little poems about the dead in the precise place where they are. But Context Poetry also needs to be a common form of writing about the alive in the precise places where they live.

When every ready-made becomes an already-made, when the word Avant-Garde becomes a must in every ad to sell new cars, when artists change their strategy from "Make it New" to "Make it News," and when the idea of the New becomes old, as art-makers we become aware not that Art is Dead, but that there is something after it. And we also understand that what is after Art is what Art has always been after. I really believe that placing poetry outside of books and in the streets is one way to escape the death of language.

My experience and background tell me Popular Culture, not Literature, is the root of riskier experimental poetics. Looking critically (creatively) at what is happening on the streets, deriving the New from the Popular is one of the keys to experimental art right now in Latin America. This is the point from which I write.

The mixture of Popular Culture and High Culture is what Western sociologists call "Postmodernism." But I cannot remember a time in Latin America (from the Baroque to our Mass Media) when this mixture has not been going on. Latin America's literature and mind has always mixed Popular and High Culture... which means we have been postmodern all along.

I don't derive my visual poems mainly from literary authors but from the streets. The word-play, slang and jokes made by people who don't conceive of themselves as "poets" are the ancestors of every kind of poetry we can think of. That's why once I write my poems I do everything I can to return them to the place where they are not going to be considered literature but simply one more damn sign on the street.

My first writing was in the form of obscene poems and bad graffiti on the back of bus seats or on walls in my neighborhood. My first publications (and I'm very proud of this) were not in books or even in fanzines (which were the main media of my generation in Tijuana)



but were published as signs hung on stop signs and traffic lights.

During the 1998 *Festival de la Frontera* (Border Arts Festival) I made and installed a series of 24 signs whose text and texture were supposed to resemble other kinds of Tijuana signs. Some of them were written in English. The signs were made of transparent red acrylic and hung on posts, poles, streetlights and below traffic signs. They were installed in Downtown Tijuana and close to the International Border. The poems were short metaphysical sentences, sometimes ironic puns about the border, the streets and urban life.

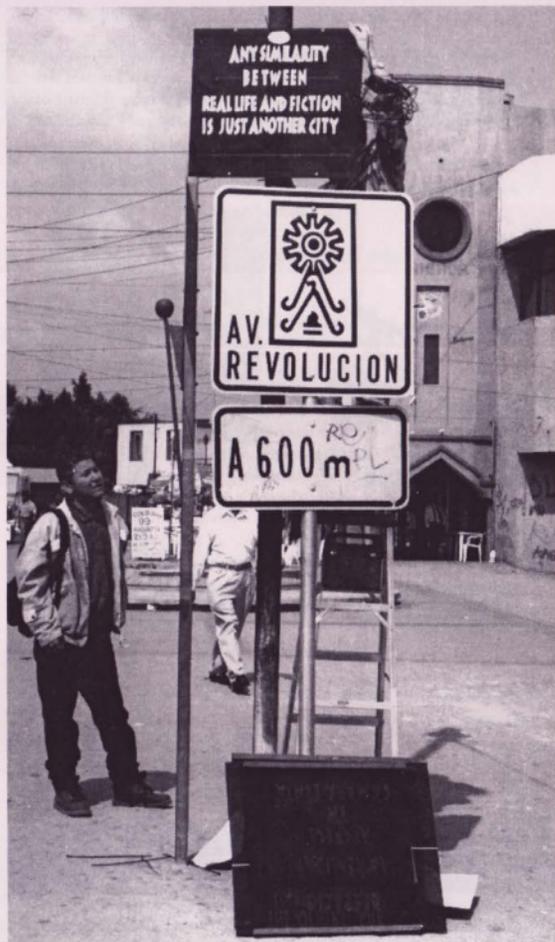
Each one of my sign-poems is a little chronicle about what happens to people on the streets.

When poetry assumes the form of another discourse (publicity or streets signs) it mocks it. Visual poetry for me is a comic resource.

During the installation process (which took two days) I interacted with inspectors, street vendors, business owners and passersby who didn't understand what I was doing and what the texts meant. Those two days of reactions, questions, comments and disapproval have been my best experience as a writer. Making Public Poetry is a way for me to get away from the safe and boring atmosphere of the literary scene in order to interact directly with the ordinary world.

Days after I installed the sign poems when I asked people on the street (not revealing I was the author) what those red signs were and what they meant, I never got a response that said: it is a poem. No. People always explained to me it was a new ordinance by the city government, a strange sort of political propaganda from the opposition parties, maybe a new strategy to attract tourism, some kind of announcement or traffic sign. At first I became frustrated by these responses because I felt I had failed to produce *recognizable* poetry. I then, trying to protect my ego, thought that the problem was not my style but the public's lack of knowledge of how poetry looks or is. But then, after hearing a lot of people, one after the other with the same reactions, I figured out what the real cause of this "confusion" was. Publicity and propaganda also use word play, the power of sound, humor, sex, ideology, minimalism, typography, multi-leveled meanings, so how could ordinary people, often non-literate, distinguish one of my signs from the other forms of texts which use the same language techniques? For them those red signs were simply another sign on the street (and certainly not the fanciest nor the funniest) using the same





language resources the others use. And after all, I had written *some* of them explicitly as parodies of traffic signs. So I became aware that there was no *significant* difference between my sign-poems and other verbal signs on the street. And I now believe that a poem is not different from a commercial ad or a campaign slogan, as it is not different from a primitive chant or myth, a modern essay or novel. Poetry has no privileged nature or definition.

[If somebody here has a Buddhist mind inside her or his material skull, she or he can understand that it makes perfect sense to say poetry has no essence.]

For the Frontera Sign Poetry project I chose a transparent surface because I wanted to make a poem in which the text could be read along with other urban texts (such as all kinds of advertising and political propaganda); I wanted a text written not over a neutral space but a text that had to be read with the city and other texts as its (literal) background. A text on a surface that lets the context be part of the poetic space. A page that is also a window. In our electronic era poetry is made in response not only to literature and tradition but also in response to the language of mass media and urban texts. I wanted to make that cultural fact visible in a poem, physically evident. There is no poetical text which is not thick. For me that's the meaning of texture: the appearance of a multiplicity of text interwoven. Every text is built of other texts, every text has texture.

Another interesting thing that happened thanks to their see-through-surface was that the sign poems were used as an urban toy through which one could see the other side in an unusual way. Many of the passersby, for instance, saw the signs as an opportunity to see the urban landscape in red. I count these simple aesthetic experiences as an essential part of my installation poetry art project.

A very strong and interesting tendency of visual or concrete poetry is to remove the semantic aspect of poetry. My visual poems don't pursue that, but the opposite. A public sign poem wants to compete with, mock or change the semantic element of other highly visible signs and texts on the streets.

As a writer I have a rule concerning the use of space: I should write everywhere graffiti is written.

I love the Internet, I love poetry, I love Visual poetry on the Internet,

but I am almost sure that the sort of fancy visual poetry that now is being made is going to end up somewhere in a museum or a website, which means that there's a risk involved in concentrating on electronic visual poetry. This risk consists of letting electronic visual poetry become another fantastic way to forget the streets as primordial page, another wonderful way to keep poetry away from the outside world.

A visual poem must be done primarily for commuters, not for computers.

Every thought that arises in the mind must eventually appear in the mouth, every word created by the voice must eventually appear on a page, and every poem must exist simultaneously on the internet and on the street.

Visual poetry exclusively done for a museum, a book or the net is like a rainbow in black and white.

Visual poetry means to make poetry *visible* for others. So, *visuality* is a technique to expand the audience and viewers of poetry in general—not a way to do a special kind of poetry confined to small circles of readers.

The visual aspect of a normal poetry book page is totally alien to common people (currently educated to see fancy newspaper, magazine and internet pages, and complex TV and billboards' verbal spaces). So, the role of design is to help poetry look familiar to people who almost never open a book.

No poem is made only of words. Every poem makes sense only in the context of sightings, events, exterior reality, people, otherness, which means that every poem is a context-poem.

If I wish to be coherent in my personal poetics I cannot say I make Visual Poetry ... I make Visible Poetry.

I consider my sign poems and other urban context poetry as an experimental writing whose purpose is to help make poetry available to everybody again.

The best part of making a sign-poem is that once I write it and put it somewhere on the street it no longer belongs to me. My poems



suddenly become other people's problem. That's why I don't include my name on them. Once I have installed a poem in Downtown Tijuana I can forget about it and leave to others its rewriting and final destruction. That's wonderful.

I am proud to say that all my sign-poems have found rapid death at the hands of graffiti artists, the police, the telephone company, a girl who thinks it might look good in her room or a taxi driver who wants to re-use the material somehow. I don't believe art must survive indefinitely. Art must be destroyed in order to not become merchandise or an institutional icon.

One of my main objectives in doing Context Poetry is to produce art that cannot enter the Market, because a context poem cannot be repeated and made into a saleable object ... in fact, it will be destroyed by the natural elements and people on the street.

Making sign poems is a good way to get rid of your own poems and all the anguish that usually affects poets. I encourage everybody to write poems that are going to wind up somewhere on the street, because this is the best way to get rid of all the bad poetry we have in our drawers, computer files and hidden chapbooks.

Empire State

I am a prisoner of bones
of keyrings habits teeth and hair
I am a tenant of torn skies
I am a runner in the air
of escalators that ascend
a hundred storeys to a chair
 high
 where Old Fireye
 punches the astral timeclock.

And from this mountain of aluminum
I loose strange birds upon
the city, poems in guise
of pigeons, doves by teletype—
creatures of bolt and cam
spun by my typewriter
 keys,
 mechanical mysteries
 flying over the watertowers:

Toggle Switch
Kicker Baffle
Drive Shaft
Disc Locknut
Alemite Fitting
Circuit Breaker
Bolts cal.
w/2 CP Hexnuts.

Raintatters trail
the skymast of my mountain: she
a ship asail through time and tearful thunders
and seismographic tremors
of shifts and faults in global marketplace,
is no less beautiful to me
than Fuji or far
Kilimanjaro—
especially seen as shadow in the rain

like those veiled mountains deep within
the mind's geography.
How many times of storm I've seen
her crown of crags hidden in clouds,
how many sea-mist mornings felt
old Rip Van Winkle's
rainbeard
blown from her summit over the shrouded city.
But dawns become her best: the traffic jam
of stars in a hurry to get gone
from night's graveyard shift, the subway express
dawns that come roaring to city skies:
below in the early chill streets a stir
of something about to begin, the stone
lions at Fifth and Forty-Second Street
shaking night's pigeons from their manes,
flophouses on the Bowery
shaking the night's fleas, as heaven
shakes the last pale stars:

And again it is
jobday another
morning in the gray
beginning when five million
alarm clocks salute the sun
in unison and the
Flow Indicator Top Connector
throws the Master Switch wherefore
on the Remote Control Panel
of the Photoelectric Scanner I'm
spotted
seized
swept sorted scanned
pinched punched processed pressed
dissolved digested
soulmashed
to join the oozing gray indifferent
lifesludge
of primal protozoan human logjam
that feeds
the great soul factory and
greases the great big wheels.

And deep down dark under
bedrock riverbed and tungsten
bones in subcellars
in the very solar-plexus of it all
I'm chewed spat cannonaded through lightyears
and awful vaults of voids
where all the money of the world is kept
past timeclocks punching in and out like mad,
till suddenly I'm there—
sole occupant and heir,
 the slave
 of the chair
 in the air.

O Radiant Element, O mystery
of Terminal Lug, Feed Nut
De-Ion Circuit Breaker
Safety Valve Cap Release Nut Cotter Pin—you
on the great master plan
must share the universe with me
and other oddments:
someone must make the world's boilers,
but by what depression of what star-crossed key
has the Great Univac selected me?
I'd better stop thinking.
Poems press at my skull.
My eyes are bursting horse-chestnuts.
Slivers of light, chameleons
wriggle between the keys
of an insane typewriter that has forgotten its name
and can spit only hexnuts
lockwashers eyebolts screws cams bushings.
It is the era of keypunch man.
O powerful totems
Colossi whose shadows
straddle the world—
what do you want of me?

I leaned from the tower of my skull
over the city and saw
the great skyscrapers of gold and porphyry
bend to the little golden god
in Rockefeller Plaza—but he

was busy trampling his words and he
godlike could only make the blunt reply:
"You can kiss my golden ass!" and therefore I
 lone wanderer over flattop wilderness
 make this my outcry to the god
 of cities:

There is a country deep within
Spacer Collar / Fixture Cap
a selfscape I alone may claim
Main Pole / Commutating Pole
of mountains vast and mountains veiled
Drive Shaft / Bushing / Governor Valve
and no flag flies there but my own
4 1/8 x 4 7/8
and none may buy
Oval Handhole Plates
its real estate
w/ Bolts and Nuts.

from *Cities and Deserts*, Roving Eye Press, New York, 1959.

Olga Cabral (1909-1997) was born in the West Indies of Portuguese parents, spending most of her life in New York City. She first published her poetry in the leftist and modernist magazines of the 1930s; her books include: Cities and Deserts (1959), The Evaporated Man (1968), The Darkness in My Pockets (1976), Occupied Country (1976), In the Empire of Ice (1980), The Green Dream (1990), as well as several children's books. Voice/Over (1993), a volume of selected poems, is available from West End Press (PO Box 27334, Albuquerque, NM 87125). Cabral worked variously as an office worker, art gallerist, and director of a children's art workshop. Having never accumulated any savings, she "worked right up to her death," according to publisher John Crawford. In Cabral's own words: "I have lived through all the wars of this century, together with the rise of fascism, the Great Depression, the cynical witch hunts of McCarthyism, the atom bomb, the Cold War—I've seen it all. The twentieth century. My century." —Eds.

Conversation on Elmgrove Ave.
with Carole Maso & C.D. Wright

Rosmarie Waldrop has published numerous books of poetry, prose and works in translation including texts by Jacques Roubaud, Paul Celan, and of course, many volumes by Edmond Jabès, the latest of which is titled *The Little Book of Un-suspected Subversion* (Stanford University Press, 1996). Her own books include *The Reproductions of Profiles* (ND 1987), *Lawn of Excluded Middle* (Tender Buttons 1993), *A Key into the Language of America* (ND 1994), *Another Language: Selected Poems* (Talisman House, 1997), *Split Infinities* (Singing Horse Press, 1998), and *Reluctant Gravities* (ND 1999). With Keith Waldrop she edits the long-running independent book press, Burning Deck.

CM: What are you working on now?

RW: I've been asked to write a "notebook" for a curious project called "Connect the Dots." A Danish publisher, Brøndum, has asked poets in different countries for notebooks, or "dots," which will be published bilingually, all at the same time, and then it is up to the readers to connect the dots into a picture. My dot is turning into a meditation on space in relation to writing. Edmond Jabès called his first book *I Build My Dwelling*. In Arabic, which he had in his ears, the word for "house," *bayt*, also means "verse." And in Italian, *stanza* is the word for both "stanza" and "room." This idea that our writing builds houses or at least rooms got me to think about space. With some immediate opposition in my mind because the room and the house are so much like a box, an enclosure, which is not a notion of form that interests me much. I want my forms more open. Pound talks about a form that is not so much "a box within which" as "a center around which." This is also how Merleau-Ponty thinks about both space and form: not Aristotle's container in which things are placed, but the means that makes this placing possible. Or in some scientific writings, space becomes a "manifestation upon occasion." These seem more fruitful analogies for poetic form, I think.

CD: I have a very elementary question. How did this business start, poetry this and poetry that. What made you choose poetry or why did poetry choose you?

RW: You call that a simple question? It's hard to say. If I try to think back to my earliest scratchings, I don't think I ever tried to write stories, it was always poems, small groups of words... Maybe I have short breath....

CD: Are you short-winded?

RW: I am now, but I wasn't then. (laughs)

CM: But it was always language for you.

RW: And music. But mostly words. I had a friend in grade school, in Germany, with whom I played word games. We alternated colorful insults, or chains of genitives (like: the policeman's widow's pension fund's director's...) and such. We also acted out stories. I must admit I lived, as I imagine many teenagers do, in a make-believe world, day-dreaming alternate lives, different worlds. But what I put on paper rarely went in the direction of fabulation. Not that I put very much on paper anyway!

CD: Do you find genre distinction very important to you?

RW: I feel in between genres. After all, I write mostly prose poems. Then again, my novel, *A Form of Taking/ It All*, works largely like a poem. But to go back once more to the question, why poetry?: Laura Riding's biographer says poetry offered the immigrant's daughter a "refuge where the fear of speaking in strange ways could be left behind." This might have been a factor when I started writing in English. Poetry being itself a "foreign language"—at least this is what Proust said—it can be a home for interlopers like me... I couldn't possibly write a realistic novel in English, for instance. I don't have that good an ear for speech patterns.

CD: In other words poetry would be suitable to a kind of formal tongue that you would learn as a second language.

RW: Yes, in your second language you have a more analytical attitude, you are more aware of the mechanisms than you are in your native language. This is maybe more suitable for poetry, poetry being more of an exploration of language itself. Though, on the other hand, there are more prose writers writing in a second language: Nabokov, Conrad, etc...

CM: That's very interesting. You talk somewhere about trying to forge an American past for yourself, I think when you were working on *A Key into the Language of America*, and it sounds like it's the same sort of thing in poetry making, and I wonder how successful that was, or how important it is to you to make a home of sorts, both in your poems and in your translations?

RW: Yes, this is again the idea that in writing "I Build My Dwelling." In one of my early poems, "Between," I call myself an amphibian,

"a creature with gills and lungs" that never got out of the Atlantic, got stuck halfway. I'm not quite at home on either side of the Atlantic. In "Between," I acknowledge this as a condition of shallowness, without the "deep" dimension of roots, but also as a possibility of horizontal scope, vastness: "I live in shallow water/ but/ when it rains/ I inherit the land." I've always liked the idea of Edmond Jabès' that the writer's home is the work, that this is the only real place we have. So, in working with American history, as I've done in *A Key...* and in *Shorter American Memory*, I rather feel I have come closer to "appropriating" this country than by simply living here—though it's always with a lot of irony, in quotation marks as it were.

CM: I love too, that you say that you speak no language without an accent which is so fascinating!

RW: And disturbing!

CM: Yes, and disturbing, I was going to say!

RW: When I first realized it, I was really upset.

CD: I like that. I'm an advocate of accents.

RW: When I go back to Germany, my little nieces say, you talk funny! I was upset enough to do some research and found that in bilingual people it is common for their phonemes to settle somewhere in between the two languages. In mid-Atlantic, as I had said!

CD: In your recent works, beginning with, *A Form/ of Taking/ It All*, I've been interested in how it is less and less certain, the genre in which you are working, and maybe again in terms of constructing a home for yourself, a hybrid society, thinking of Benjamin's declaration that all great works are special cases—they either create a genre or destroy one. I think a lot of poets working today are creating not necessarily great works, but necessarily special cases. None of the terms fit the shoe, a term such as creative prose for instance is very unsatisfying...

CM: As opposed to that non-creative prose....

CD: It sounds like art prose, static and self-conscious and dull.

CM: Amphibious is best, amphibious prose.

RW: That's not a bad term for *your* prose, Carole. It's definitely prose, but with the rhythm of poetry. The French poets started using "text."

This wouldn't be bad if it weren't so overloaded with political/theoretical associations! But it's not a bad solution in that it cuts across.

CM: I'm very interested in *The Reproduction of Profiles* and also in *Lawn of Excluded Middle...* there seems to be a real narrative element, there does seem to be a story in motion and yet it's utterly lyric, simultaneously, it seems like you're right at the center of that back and forth... Do you see it that way?

RW: Mmmhm. I think of it as a *tease* of narrative rather than real narrative. The narrative elements that are there come partly out of the sources I was using. In *Reproduction I* used Kafka's "Description of a Struggle" where two men take a walk, and one tells the other about his woman. I modified it to the man telling a *woman* about another woman. So there is a situation of jealousy. But I couldn't imagine writing an actual "narrative poem." I didn't *develop* the narrative. I played with the situation, veered off into statements about language, logic, the female body, more abstract concerns if you will. But I like a narrative *matrix*, especially for a sequence of poems. It helps to make it dynamic, helps turn the page.

CM: Right. It's interesting that you see it as the Kafka. Of course it is, but I think that at some point it takes an independent narrative line as well. All very mysterious, and very, very fluid. I get the sense of your work, but for me, each time I read it is a different book and a different experience. I think all books are to one degree or another, but very much so in your books. And I love that, I love that they're not stable on the page.

CD: I think that's true. Your work doesn't stand still.

CM: Can you talk about that?

RW: I think it must come from the fact that I cultivate ambiguity, multivalent play. From puns like "you took my temperature which I had meant to save for a more difficult day" to ambiguous syntax, even just incomplete sentences that leave things unresolved. It is meant to keep the form "open," to allow the reader in. Even the veerings, from one semantic area to another would contribute to this effect. As with "aesthetic distance," the problem is where to draw the line, how much you can leave open, how much play of possibilities you can leave in balance and still have "form."

CM: Do you have a similar process for each book?

RW: No, it varies, especially what I start out with. Often it is a text I

steal from, or a procedure. The only constant is it's slow. I have to dredge up words from the "word-hoard," I don't get "the swarming of bees" easily. If I don't start with collage I often arrive first at a kind of bone structure that is too skeletal. Then comes a long process of putting meat on the bone, not in a linear way, but layers of accretions.

CD: I've been interested in your formal adventure, developmentally, and I remember from previous interviews that you talked about Tristan Tzara's comment that the poem will resemble you, that this was a very succinctly articulated moment when you understood that you didn't have to worry about your obsessions, they would dog you anyway, so that you didn't have to pursue them in terms of expression, and I wondered if there were any other moments when you saw the way out of an old order into a new order of writing, or if it was ever that epiphanal in any other way.

RW: This was a major one. After all, it is pretty startling to think that you can pull words "out of a hat," and still, once you write them down, the poem will resemble you. And it's true. No matter how "objective" my procedures, the poems at that time were always about my mother! But there was another big epiphany, when I realized that *any kind of constraint* is actually liberating and generative. When I expect a free flow of words, a "swarming of the bees," I tend to get stuck. If I set formal limits things happen. That was an epiphany. It made me realize why rhyme and meter have hung on so long. It couldn't just be for the euphony (though that is a powerful factor), it had to be the generative power. But *any* kind of restraint makes you think harder, stretches your ideas. It does not have to be rhyme and meter.

CD: So now when you work with a nonce form do you work with a form that you create for discrete poems or for an entire project.

RW: It depends. I don't always know if a poem will grow into an entire project. I often start out with some idea, like making a collage from a particular work. Halfway through, other things start happening. Then I'm happy because if I go beyond the initial stimulus, if I can work it *out* of the text, then something is on the move, then I am really working.

CD: Right, it's not enough just find the terms and abide by them, you have to transgress the terms once you understand you can meet them.

RW: That's how I feel about it. I once talked about this with Jackson MacLow. He was appalled. He said, "Once I set the rule, I follow it

to the letter." And then added, "I am a pedant!" Which of course made us all laugh. Not even the OULIPO poets are that systematic. They use an image from Democritus' atomistic theory. In the beginning all the atoms fall in the same direction, and there is nothing. When they begin to swerve and collide, the world comes about. The *clinamen*, the *swerve* makes things happen. And in any case, I feel if I make the rules I can also break them.

CD: You're obliged to. In that same spirit I've wondered about the fact that your work is so various, I don't identify you as being a sort of signature writer, even in the sense that some of the writers with whom I could think you share parallel concerns—Berssenbrugge or Scalapino or Susan Howe, I think of your work as still being more deliberately and willfully various. I wonder what you think of that.

RW: Actually, this sometimes worries me. In my weak moments. In my lucid moments, I'm not at all concerned with the idea of the voice, the *I*, the signature. Especially not the signature. There are enough poets who write the same poem over and over, like a hen laying her daily egg. Always beautiful, always the same. (I'm not thinking about the poets you just mentioned. But this is my theory of the secret connection between poetry and poultry!) But seriously, I cultivate the variety. When one vein of work runs dry I try to find a project that is very different, to rev up my energy. Using collage is a help in this because different sources lead to very different things.

CM: It's wonderfully inclusive and generous. You say somewhere that you have a problem with the authority of voice in the work of Paul Celan. That to me was a revelation about where my problems are with that work as well. Whereas Jabès is inclusive. I am more at home, I'm much more at home in your work than in a more definitive Poet or Novelist...

RW: Yes, but Jabès' multiplicity is always there simultaneously, in a "mix" that is recognizable. As in your novels, I think. The different voices you bring in are always contained within a tone. Whereas I string the variety out between works. As you do, C.D. *Just Whistle* is very different from *String Light*, for example.

CM: I bet it takes you a long time to work out one project, one set of ideas so that at the end of it you must be exhausted for the moment.

RW: Yes, the post-partum blues. Or "The Book of Torment," as Edmond Jabès called the period in between projects. They can be rather long in my case. However, after *The Reproduction of Profiles*, this didn't happen. It was the first time that I wanted to continue

almost immediately, and in the same vein. It was a thematic pull. I realized that the theme of the "empty center" could be developed further. It became the center of *Lawn of Excluded Middle*.

CD: I wonder if you could talk about this empty space at the center of the poem, it's a strong motif in *Lawn of Excluded Middle*. I find it both unnerving and exciting. I have this quote from the poem which points to that idea of emptiness in the middle: "Why do we fear the dark as unavoidable defeat when it alone is constant, and we'd starve if it stopped watering the lawn of dreams." Would you elaborate on that.

RW: We tend to forget how important emptiness is, and the negative in general. We're so trained to look at the "positive" only. But even on the simplest, physical level, it is the empty center, the resonance body of a violin, say, that makes music possible. The womb has to be an "empty" organ to allow the embryo to grow. In a conversation, we need empty spaces, silence, space to *listen*—or we'll get two monologues instead. So emptiness immediately goes beyond the sense of "nothing" into resonance, resonance, fertility. The sentence you quote refers to a very crucial "emptiness," the hole in consciousness that allows for dreams—without which we'd go crazy. And this is of course also the excluded middle between true and false, which, if the law prevailed in general, would make our lives very poor indeed. In the poems, I think of an empty space at the center to allow the reader in—this would, I think, be all that is unresolved or at least not totally fixed—what we talked about a moment ago. But there are also "bigger" ramifications, e.g. the emptiness at the center of the definition of light, which allows it to be sometimes waves and sometimes corpuscles. Then notions of identity and self come up, and here it gets disturbing. We are so used to thinking of having a center, a soul...

CD: A core.

RW: A core, yes. Musil, in *The Man without Qualities*, has this nicely paradoxical formulation that our character is the most impersonal thing we have. Because our character traits are those qualities that have gotten most reinforcement from others, from the outside. Part of this notion is that we are different with different people, that we have many *I's*. An *I* that is a bit like the notion of space I mentioned at the beginning, a "manifestation upon occasion." I always picture an array of potential selves clustered around a core, a hub, which in itself is nothing, is empty, is pure relation, simply holding all the possibilities together... Gottfried Benn, the German poet, called his prose style *Orangestil*, "orange style," because it did not proceed in a straight line, but clustered around an unstated center like the segments of the

orange. Again the center not as something solid, but empty. This strikes me as a similar image.

CM: Poetry gets nearer to what I think of as the oddness of that. I think of fiction as not being entirely capable of those things. But for the most part poetry and music can because of a central strangeness and I think it's true that at the center there is a....

RW: Maybe because poetry is more abstract, like music, as you said.

CD: Do you associate writing or poetry with any particular responsibility/ies? Do you worry about a central function of poetry or its lack thereof?

RW: I do worry about it. I assume you don't just mean the responsibility of craft, of being precise, etc. Picasso said, I didn't paint the war but I am sure the war is in all my pictures. (This must have been before "Guernica.") I think our sense of responsibility is one of the things which is in the work even if we don't address it explicitly. Even just in the kind of counter-stance that we assume by writing poems...

CD: I didn't especially mean moral obligation. I wondered if you thought the practice had become isolated from other aspects of contemporary life and even from contemporary thought.

RW: No. The individual poet may feel isolated, but working on poetry means working on the language, on the very basis of our culture. I think of poets as the maintenance department of the language, and keeping the language alive does something toward keeping society alive. After all, it is through language that we define ourselves as human. So I would like to believe that changing the language, working on the language, has a social function. Confucius certainly thought so. If he were the ruler, he said, he would first of all try to improve the use of language. Because, but let me quote it:

If the words are not right, what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not meant, work cannot flourish. If work does not flourish, then customs and arts degenerate. If customs and arts degenerate, then justice is not just. If justice is not just, the people do not know what to do. Hence the importance that words be right.

I want to believe this, but I also have doubts about it. The effects are not very traceable, certainly. As for me personally, it is when I'm working on poems that I feel most "connected." It's because writing always involves reading for me, so I am in a dialogue situation. It is

one of the beauties of the collage method that it acknowledges and foregrounds the fact that we never write on a blank page, that no work has one single author.

CD: Do you believe a radiance is still possible?

RW: Radiance. The numinous? What strikes me about your question is the "still." You seem to imply that it is a thing of the past? This sounds to me like the Romantics—at least the German Romantics—sense that there had been a time when the gods walked among humans, namely in classical Greece, but that in modern times the gods have withdrawn—out of compassion for the weaker kind of human we are: we might not be able to bear the "fullness of the divine." This is Hölderlin, and it leads him to ask his famous question, "why then poets in destitute times?"—*Warum Dichter in dürftiger Zeit?* He answers that poets are "like the priests of the wine-god, who wandered from country to country in a sacred night." Heidegger paraphrased this as meaning that the poets "attend, singing, to the trace of the fugitive gods." But I have a hard time with this nostalgic stance. Are the gods fugitive? For me it is the human imagination that created God(s)—and the wonderful paradox is that the invention is larger than the inventor—so why should He/they be gone, why should radiance, the numinous no longer be possible? There *is* still imagination! But, on the other hand, I am perhaps an example of what you are talking about: I tend to bracket the whole metaphysical realm. So maybe it's rather us, the humans who are the fugitives, who are in flight from the gods, from a side of our own imagination that we've grown uneasy with.

CM: Language still does transform, makes all kind of lives possible even if they are only imaginary. It seems to me a source of great hope and inspiration, not only to a small group of people but to anyone who imagines or dreams.

CD: I liked what you said about the maintenance department.

CM: Yes we keep things going.

CD: Roto rooters.

RW: If you want any direct kind of action, though, I think you have to use other means than poetry. Rhetoric is more effective for that. Write letters to the editor, demonstrate, like any citizen. There is Oppen's example of not writing poetry for—how long? Thirty years? In order to work as a labor organizer.

CD: So, you think there are things poetry can't contain or abide...

Do you think poetry can contend with evil?

RW: Oh, you put it in really big terms. I just meant it's not very effective in terms of action. "Evil" is not a category that I connect with poetry. I suppose you could write a poem denouncing some particular instance of evil, but what would that do? Ethics and aesthetics don't have much to do with each other, to my mind. But more generally, if you say poetry can't contain such and such, somebody is sure to come along and do it. I love the story how the French, after the Revolution, wanted a monument on the Place de la Bastille to commemorate the razing of that notorious prison. The contest winner was a statue of an elephant. A wooden model was put up on the site. It's mentioned in *Les Misérables*: Jean Valjean hides in it. But a little later, the French Academy decided that the elephant was "not a suitable subject for art!" Instead, they put up a column with a little Greek "genius," which is still there.... It's a wonderfully mad statement that an elephant is not a suitable subject for art! Anything is.

CD: So in that case, have you any tenets? Three bags full...

RW: A credo about poetry?... I no doubt have, subliminally, but I get disturbed by "mysts" for poetry or any other art. And I don't buy the poets as the "unacknowledged legislators of the world." Not even with Oppen's twist: "Poets are the legislators of the unacknowledged world."

CD: The newspapers all want to know.

RW: What did Stevens say: It must change. It must give pleasure. It must... I know there were three things. Yes: it must be abstract. I might say it-must have both order and disorder, form and energy. And if you want a "larger" tenet I might say poetry, like any art, can help us to live by helping us to bring form into the disorder we live in and yet keep us aware that order is always in danger of ossifying and needs injections of disorder to stay alive.

CM: How important were the German Romantics to your education as a poet?

RW: Enormously. Even to my formal education. Going through a German high school, you don't get away from them...

CM: What would that mean in terms of the great German writers?

RW: Mostly Goethe and Schiller, who are considered Romantics (or Pre-Romantics) here, but are called Classics in Germany. Of the Romantics "proper," Novalis, Schlegel, Brentano, Arnim, Eichendorff,

E. T. A. Hoffmann, Heine. Romantic prose was often whimsical and very innovative both in form and content. Just think of the fragment, which both Novalis and Schlegel cultivated as a form—in protest against all the system-building that was going on in German philosophy. But poetry also came through song. You know, Schubert, Schumann, Mendelssohn, Wolff all set reams of Romantic poems, not just by the big names I mentioned, but even more by the minor poets. So there are many lines I know more or less by heart because I have heard them sung so often.

CM: You've had a deep influence on me in certain ways. You were a role model, a woman doing work that wasn't sentimental, wasn't confessional; a woman in the midst of a great experiment.

RW: Good heavens. But there are lots of us.

CM: Not lots, a few. But I was very aware of Burning Deck as well, and that being a real place, an alternative to the mainstream. So when I began writing, publishing, it became possible in my mind to think of doing it in alternative ways. So I wonder how you got this way, unconventional, audacious.

RW: Thanks. But you know, I started out like everybody, by imitating. First Rilke, then, when I started writing in English, the confessional poets. Very slowly I got more adventurous. Keith played a role in that, also meeting Anne-Marie Albiach, Claude Royet-Journoud, Edmond Jabès. And reading Creeley, Olson, the Objectivists, Gertrude Stein, Mina Loy...

CM: Were you a rebellious child?

RW: The priests thought so, and my mother. But in school I wasn't. School was always a haven for me. I loved school. I was sorry when it was interrupted. As it was from about February 1945 till January 1946. There was no school at all in my town, probably not in most of Germany. I had almost a whole year of running wild, playing in the woods or ruined houses.

CM: How old were you?

RW: Nine/ten. It was pretty chaotic. Actually, in the summer and fall of 1945, I was part of a theatre group that went around the little towns and villages in an American army truck. In the afternoons we played *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves*, and in the evenings, Frank Wedekind's *Love Potion*. I was a dwarf in the afternoon and, in the evening, the son of a Russian nobleman.

CM: How long did you do this?

RW: About six months. In some ways it was great, but it got boring. I was relieved when school started again, something different every day...

CD: Did your parents accompany you?

RW: No. But there were days without engagement, when we would come home.

CD: Were you afraid?

RW: I don't think so. It wasn't like air raids!

CM: And that you remember vividly.

RW: Yes.

CM: But when you were out of school and running around in the woods...

RW: No that was great.

CD: I remember Carole saying that the day Kennedy was shot, all she felt was relief because she didn't have to go to her piano lesson. It's so different for the children.

RW: Yes, we loved playing in the ruined houses. Though there was an edge of terror that we might find a real body in our imagined dungeons.

CM: How did you experience the presence of the war, for instance during the air raids.

RW: I have some lines: "war was a surface to live on" and "war as sufficient explanation." Life went on. But the raids were frightening. At the sound of the siren we would run down into the cellar. I remember trying to burrow into a heap of potatoes as the ground shook.

CD: To make yourself as little as possible.

CM: How long would you be down there at a stretch.

RM: If there was only one wave of bombers flying over it would be over in half an hour or so. If they didn't sound the off signal soon,

you knew there were more on the way... In 1943, my town was bombed. When we climbed out of the cellar there were no streets, no rows of houses. It was a desert of craters, heaps of rubble, mortar, stones, walls broken off, the air thick with dust. A few houses were left standing. They seemed out of place, incongruous. Many people had gotten buried in the cellars. So afterwards we jumped on bicycles at the first warning and tried to get to the woods or, if the planes came too quickly, threw ourselves into ditches beside the road.

CM: Did you write as a kid?

RW: Yes. I think I was copying one of my sisters, who was always writing.

CM: An older sister?

RW: Yes.

CD: Did she continue to write?

RW: Yes she did. She never got much published, but she has written several novels. One very good one.

CM: Did your parents love language?

RW: My father did. He was a compendium of quotes, Goethe and Schiller mostly, Heine poems, *Eichendorff*. With my mother it was rather music. She was a frustrated singer. But I remember that I would come to her when she was at her sewing machine, my nose just about reaching the level of the machine, and ask, "What shall I do: *Was soll ich machen?*" She would say: *Tanzen und lachen*, "dance and laugh." Which annoyed me. I wanted some more concrete suggestion. It sank in only many years later that she had given me a suggestion, namely a perfect rhymed couplet! And that I had taken it up!

CD: Something I have been curious about is that while you have translated such a prodigious body of work, especially by Jabès, you have avoided artistic assimilation. So that while it's obvious what you have done for translation I wondered what it had done for you. What has it taught you.

RW: Lots. For one thing, Jabès' work is so rich that engaging with his thought and language as intensely as you do in translating is extremely rewarding. I know it has changed my thinking considerably. Also, it allowed me to "write" something I could never have written. For instance, he talks about God, which is something I could never do.

It's true his god is metaphorical, shorthand for the void, the infinite, silence, death, all that calls us into question. But it addresses a metaphysical dimension that is normally closed to me. It has allowed me to enter into a radical otherness and transcendence I wouldn't have known.

CM: God is such a spaciousness in that work, having a place in it...

RW: Plus, there has been the reward of friendship with a wonderful person. But in my writing I have had to defend myself against Jabès. Because his writing is so powerful.

CD: I see another book of his on the shelf there that just came in, *The Little Book of Unsuspected Subversion*.

RW: That's right.

CD: I wanted to ask you about experimentation both from the perspective of a reader and a writer. How do you distinguish between experimentation, mannered writing, something innovative and something that simply stinks.

RW: I know what you are asking, but it's not just a matter of experimental work. How do you know of any work if it is good? I guess we all have that little bell in our head. I love that phrase of yours, C.D., "Poetry is like food. You don't want to put just anything in your mouth."

CD: I always know whether I like or don't like. But it can be hard to nail the why.

RW: The great objective criterion doesn't exist, I'm afraid. I kept looking for it throughout my undergraduate years, maybe even longer. It took me a long time to come to trust my sensing a creative energy, say, even if I could not articulate why.

CD: I remember a sentence of Ron Silliman's in which he says every time I write in lines it just degenerates into aesthetics. I wonder if you think there is a unit of poetry—line or phoneme.

RW: Phoneme! Would you want to go that small? I'd say it depends on the poet. The single word. The line. With Olson, the field. I started out with the single word, which I treasured as a talisman. But I think Olson is right: what matters is not things, or words in this case, but *what happens between them*. So the line is already a better candidate. But my own sense of it has kept growing, so that by now my

unit is the whole poem.

CD: So it's the whole surround.

RW: For me this goes with the fact that I have become more interested in syntax, in putting together, in collaging, juxtaposing disparate elements, rather than in having the perfect phrase, line—let alone the perfect, magic word.

CD: I used to think it was the line that was the basic unit of the poem, and when I felt that I thought I knew what I was doing, and once that feeling started sliding away, my first reaction was paralysis. Then I got energized again even by the fear.

RW: Oppen once said, "when the poet gets afraid of a word, then he is really getting started." It's a fertile fear, but scary as hell.

CM: The shifts of belief systems, the unpredictability, the terror, the devotion to the thing—kneeling as we all are at the altar of the unsayable. The joy of writing for me is that it pushes you as a person, as a human being to be something different, more...

RW: If you're not terrified, then it's too easy. It could become glib.

CD: I do sometimes feel concerned about the intensity and acceleration of specialization within the genre, the constituencies of one. We are so committed to difference, that it's useless to find any commonality, everything isolated from everything else, word from every other word.

RW: But this solitude is basically the condition of the artist. It's not a new development.

CM: The conglomerate of poets writing for the so-called people, the so-called United States of Poetry—I think it's false. I don't trust it.

CD: I don't believe that communication doesn't have a part to play.

RW: I think you have to do your work and send it out into the world and hope it will speak to somebody. It's futile to try to control it beyond that, to write for a particular audience. Except for your friends, you don't know who reads you.

CD: Charles Bernstein says that poetry instructs us to count differently.

RW: Yes. Claude Royet-Journoud was asked by another French poet,

Roger Laporte, how many readers he thought he had. Claude said, "Maybe ten." Laporte replied, "What, that many? I have only five." And after a pause: "But they are really good ones."

CD: Is there any other art or discipline with which you feel a great kinship.

RW: Music. In my teens, I survived by playing the piano.

CM: You should have a piano.

RW: There's not enough time. Now it has to be the music of language. Funny, I used to think the music was in the line. And yet I've moved more and more toward prose. Where the music is much less obvious, though it is of course there.

CM: Very much there in your prose...it's a coherent...

CD: What do you think of the role of silence?

RW: For me it's the *matter* between words, the ground on which we write. It's what allows words to sound, what allows speech to become dialogue. You could say, just as thinking is stimulated into activity by the dark and hidden rather than by the clear and evident, so words need silence to sound against. This is something I have taken from Jabès. He defines writing as a translation from silence ("the silence which has shaped the word") into more silence ("the silence of the book: a page being read") though he admits that we can only glimpse it if it is surrounded with words. But also, think about the definition/etymology of *verse*. Verse refuses to fill up all of the available space of the page. Each line "turns the plow" before it reaches the edge of the page. Each line acknowledges silence, and all that is not.

CM: Sometimes, in work I admire, the silence resonates, because of word or syntactic decisions, or larger formal decisions—the silence has a different quality. Palpable in a different way, than a mere void.

RW: I think the silence we are talking about is connected with "the radiance" you brought up, this ungraspable quality that we're all hoping for, but is so impossible to talk about. We can talk about techniques, we can talk about strategies, but how do we talk about the essence?

CD: Speaking about the sound value in a poem, the sentence, the prose blocks that makes up the poems in *Reproduction of Profiles*, could you talk about the structure of that particular text?

RW: Sound values in a prose poem are very hard to pin down. But the structure I can maybe approach by talking about its genesis. The matrix there was Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*. I had for a long time been writing poems where one sentence tumbles into the next, where the predicate of one sentence is also the subject of the next. E.g.

a cigarette frays
analogies out of
too frequent a departure
leaves only an ash
of memory itches for words...

It was going full speed down the highway. But there came a moment when I thought it would be nice to meander into subordinate clauses, take little strolls to the side, off the main-clause-highway. Reading Wittgenstein, I was attracted by the complex sentences and at the same time repelled by the closure of the logical propositions. This proved fruitful for subverting them. So each poem as it were pivots around poles of logic and the body. But for the structure of the sequence as a whole I used Kafka's story, "Description of a Struggle." I let the narrative situation dominate sections 1, 3, 5, whereas the poems in sections 2 and 4 are more abstract interludes.

CD: Were you reading Wittgenstein and Kafka in English?

RW: Not Kafka. The *Tractatus* I have in the bilingual edition (translation by Pears and McGuinness) and I looked at both sides. But I looked more at the English because I wanted to trigger English phrases.

CM: I was just looking at Kafka's *Blue Notebooks*, so interesting, a whole other part of his project and yet totally related.... Are you writing poems now?

RW: I feel interrupted right now by the "Connect-the-Dots"-project. Actually I'm trying to write a third volume to go with *Reproduction of Profiles* and *Lawn of the Excluded Middle*. More of a dialogue, though. You remember, the first two books constantly use the pattern "You think this, but I know that," where the you is just a kind of rhetorical foil. This time the second person is to get equal time. Each poem has four paragraphs, coded He says/She says. I thought about making them characters, giving one all the science references, for instance, but I decided against it. I want the possibility of reading the voices as belonging to the same person.

CM: Is there a Kafka or Wittgenstein in this?

RW: No, Musil, mostly.

CD: What do you think is your strongest aesthetic plane?

RW: Good question. I always feel I am fumbling along, muddling through, but in the end it's maybe structure. Do you know what yours is?

CD: Probably idiom... Actually, it would be a misnomer to call it an aesthetic plane, but there is some quality I associate with your work, a rhetorical measure, almost a quarrel, a sense that this is a lifelong discussion.

RW: If there is an interrogative quality in the work, then I haven't shielded myself from Edmond Jabès as much as I thought! That would be a good thing, of course. I will soon have to put together a selected poems. That should make strengths—and weaknesses!—clearer.

CM: Do you have any notion of the feminine in your work.

RW: I think it's one of the obsessions that come out no matter what I write. In *Lawn* and *Reproduction*, the female perspective is overt, there is a teasing back and forth. But it means more to me when it comes about subliminally. Take the sentence tumbling in *The Road is Everywhere* or *Stop this Body* that I quoted earlier. I realized long after that it is a procedure with feminist implications. I eliminate the hierarchy of main and subordinate clauses plus make the function of subject and object reversible. I feel this also proposes a social pattern where gender roles could be fluid and alternating, where the woman would stop being the object *par excellence*.

CM: Tumbling, of course! (big laughs)

CM: But it is not conscious to you in the writing of it.

RW: It wasn't.

CM: I love when form comes out of need or out of the obsessions, the predicaments, if you will.

RW: Yes, Zukofsky: "Out of great need."

Sculptures & Installations

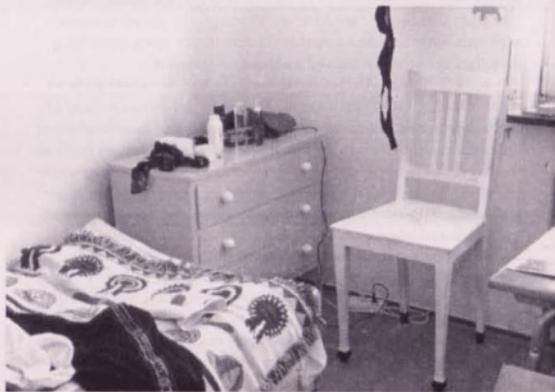
German artist Axel Lieber splits time between Malmö, Sweden, Berlin, and Düsseldorf, producing sculptures and installations that are both conceptual and architectural. Working with everyday materials, from clothing to food to furniture, Lieber constructs a relational syntax of transformed objects, home-life and memory. His sculptures often empty out or fill in conventional objects to either reduce them to bare structural elements or to transform them into bloated masses. The sculptures become semantic units strategically placed to interact with each other and the context of the installation space, provoking narratives of both semiotic and architectural interplay.

Lieber's "Private Architectures" are sculptural narratives made to travel; carrying with them domestic sites of origin, memory-traces of psychological and emotional effects, and the retooled functionalism of industrial design. His skeletonized and compressed sculptures (such as the "short cuts" and cut-out wardrobes), while concerned with concrete sculptural "problems," also conceptually address labor's relation to use and function. Prefab furniture and clothing become, through physical and intellectual labor, dysfunctional manifestations of a former "productive" value. Commodities, stripped to the bare skeletons of their supposed use-value, reveal the labor-power congealed within.

In his "Base and Superstructure" installation at the Villa Zanders in Bergish-Gladbach (2000), Lieber counterposes his "At Home and Away" sculptures against the upper-class drawing-room setting of the villa, placing his miniaturized cut-outs (his standardized home furniture reduced to only the corners, at one-tenth the original scale) on a large platform resembling a game board. On either side of the "gameboard" are two oversized "umpire's chairs," putting the small-scale domestic life of the sculptures into play against the backdrop of the elitist setting of the villa's drawing room.

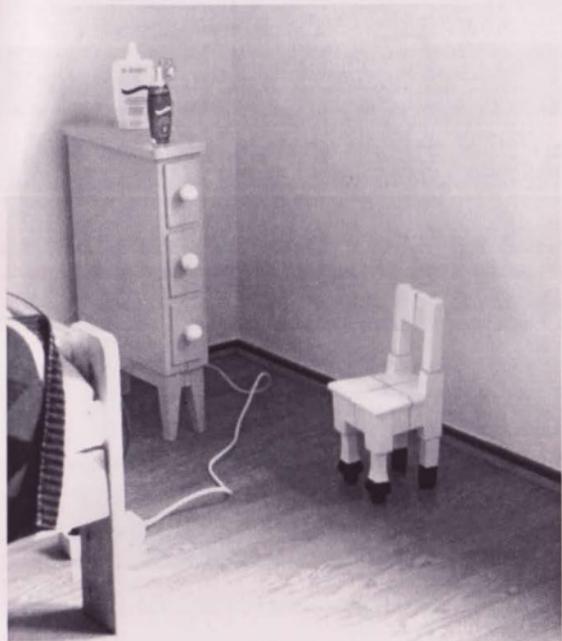
One's relation to objects, both "everyday" and transformed, becomes a field for social, psychological, and perceptual interrogation when among Lieber's sculptures. Spatial relations—between cut-out sculpture and "original," objects and their value, commodities and their social environment—are heightened in a manner that evokes both child-like wonder and a pull towards the base materiality of those commodity objects that inhabit our own private architectures.

—Editors



Chair and Bureau in Simon's Room, 2000.

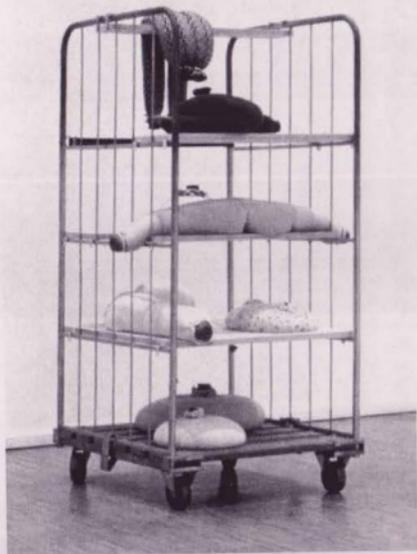
next page: Short Cuts in Simon's Room, 2000.

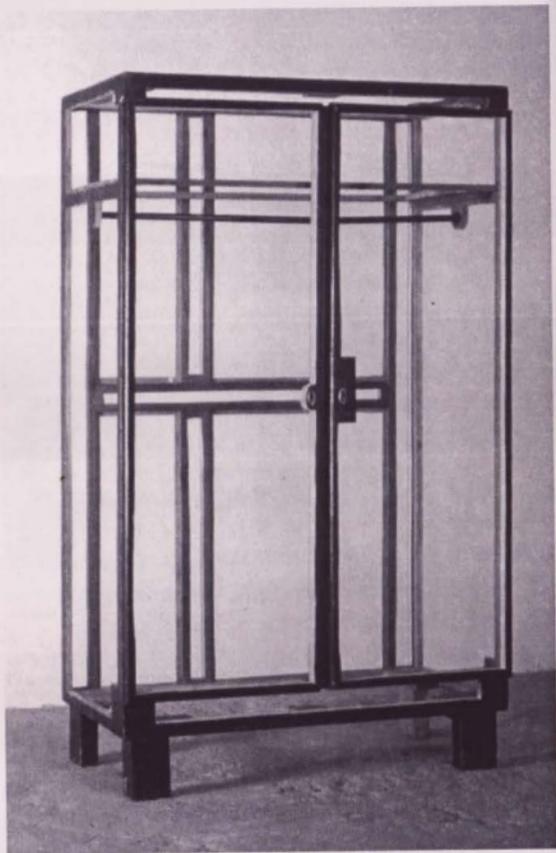




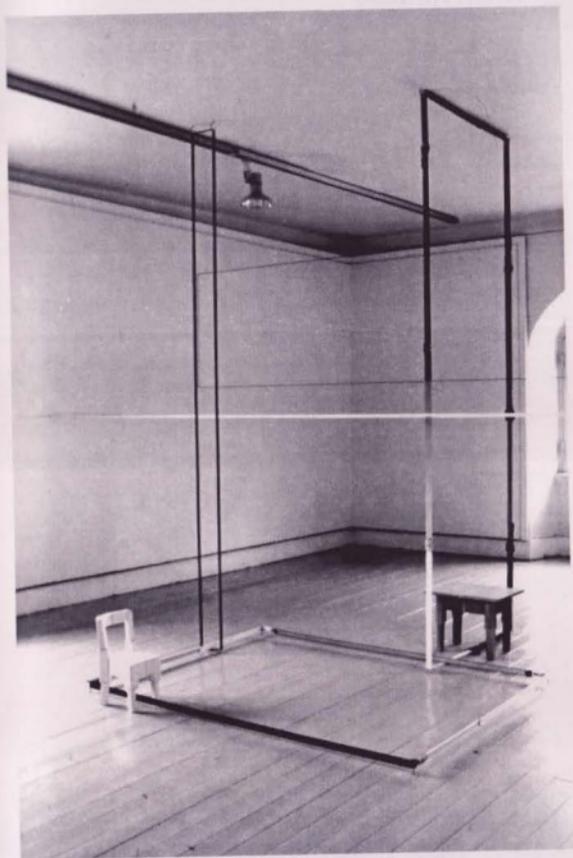
without title (Breadshoes), 1995.

next page: *private function in progress*, 1997. Wheat-filled clothing on supermarket cart.





untitled, 1989. Wardrobe cutout.



Group Dynamic, 2000. Cut-out chair and table, belts.

Metropolis 27

to hold his pants up. what are the ugliest
trousers ever worn? what are your organiza-

tion's top priorities? how are these deter-

mined? when can you be said literally to
"drink in" music? what are the toughest
challenges you currently face in your job?

why are these particularly challenging? what
are you doing to meet them? what kind

of dress lasts longest? Describe a time when
you were dealing with a lot of uncertainty

and needed to change directions several
times in response to changing conditions

ions. how did you feel and what did you do
about? why are so many politicians like lob-

sters? describe your management style and
philosophy. how do you ensure effective ex-

ecution against organizational objectives
and goals? why can a blind man see his fa-

ther? why does a young woman prefer her
mother's fortune to her father's? what flo-

wer is what the landlord does when he
turns off the heat? what are some of the most

important principles by which you operate?
cite some examples of times when these

the principles were challenged and what you did about them? what is better than an id

idea? what is appropriate material for a filling-station operator to wear? why is th

the window of a jail like a nutmeg? describe how you ascertain whether or not your c

clients are fully satisfied with your work. because it is the ends of them that pe

people enjoy most. first they fell on their knees then they fell on the aborigines. t

tell me about your working relationships with clients. how would you characterize t

these relationships and why? how do you keep food on an empty stomach? why am I lik

use a telescope? describe an experience when you encountered considerable opposition

to what you felt to be a very good idea at the time. what did you do? what are exa

examples of some of the most creative things you have done to improve your overall per

formance and contribution to the business? what a great many rogues who deal in th

them ought to be put into. how do you decide whether a new idea is viable? what guid

elines do you use? why is a lead pencil l
ike a perverse child? in what ways is you

r function operating differently than a y
ear or two ago? why? spell auburn locks i

n two letters. why is a door always in th
e subjunctive mood? in what ways could yo

u be more innovative? tell me about a cur
rent, ongoing issue that is causing a pro

blem within your organization. what are y
ou doing about it? as mr. sew and sew. wh

at burns to keep a secret? what was the m
ost difficult adjustment you have ever ha

d to make in your career? what did you do
and what was the result? did you ever hea

r the story about the two holes in the gr
ound? because you are no sooner on than y

ou are better off. one who takes life che
erfully. because ALAS is an interjection.

Taking Inventory: a conversation

BA: Why don't we start. ULTRAS. Here we are in Florence, January 2000. And I want to know about the prospect for poetry, as it affects your generation & younger writers, as evidenced by your *Object* anthology. And you're using this Ralph Waldo Emerson essay in your class that seemed like it had some direct bearing on the problematic facing the poets that you've assembled. And since you're teaching it tomorrow, maybe you could give us a little primer. So what's up with this "American Prospect?"

RF: A place to start: "We sought a brother and lo, a governor."

BA: Some people talk about inter-generational poetics & the problems thereof, in Oedipal terms. And that would be: we sought a governor, & instead, we found a brother.

RF: Well, for the young Oedipal poet, it would be: you wanted the person in your lineage to be your brother & you got a governor.

BA: If it's a lineage, it's not brothers. You don't think of your lineage really in terms of brothers; it's more uncles, fathers, grandfathers.

RF: Immediate authority, in some ways.

BA: Right. When people are in school contexts, often it seems like they're looking for a governor. And it seemed like what you're doing with this *Object* issue was to renounce that. No need for poppa. Poppa's got a brand new bag. No, it's more like Poppa's got the old bag; we don't need to play that Oedipal game any more. We're going to be the brothers. Or the sisters.

RF: I think what Emerson's referring to in this case is the academy, or any institution of learning. And so you want to be on some kind of equal terms with the institution & have an intellectual journey as a brother. Not as a governor, or tyrant... "the book becomes noxious," says Emerson. Emerson's emphasis is on America finding its own art and ideas independent of England. It's written in 1837, so it's specifically linked to that post-independence moment.

BA: Almost before there was much that the Americans had put

together.

RF: Right. But his proposal is that an American revolution in culture comes about from the "whole man"—independent and free thinking—and not from the "scholar" or intellectual.

BA: That's what he wants?

RF: That it's domesticated, that it comes from the "common, low." I'm not especially interested in Emerson's anti-intellectual, vernacular model. What I do find compelling is his insistence on embracing all aspects of the culture, and how that generates new ideas for each new generation.

BA: Transposing this into the generational issue: I've just been reading this book of writings taken off the Poetics List [*poetics@*, ed. Joel Kuszi, Roof 1999], & there's some interchanges between Steve Evans & [Ron] Silliman, a couple years ago, G1 & G2, the *In the American Tree* generation & the *Oblek* anthology generation. And so, if you transpose it, Europe becomes the old babyboomer Language Poets, or people who are now in their 50s. And the problematic for the younger writers is how to get out from under that. Or what to do. Just like you propose in the introduction to the issue and Jeffrey Nealon talks about. So, the equivalent of anti-intellectual would be work that maybe doesn't have such an obvious relationship to theory, to high academic discourse, but that brings into the picture a more direct engagement with vernacular, just like Emerson is talking about: pop culture, everyday life, it's less bookish...

RF: That work interests me if it is engaged in the cultural dialogue of today. The avant-garde in poetry continues to show considerable influence from tendencies in experimental music & in visual art, and is interested in that dialogue—which is also defined in high theory, for the most part. And is an extension of an experimental brand of modernism. I think that almost every author included in this issue is heir to that tradition, as is 'language writing'. There's some negative capability at work, but ... These are not the authors that would say, well, Language Writing, that was this thing & I'm not very interested in it & I'm doing this other thing. Rather, these are all authors who have digested the work, & grappled with it, & to a large part, incorporated it into their way of thinking about writing. In other words, Language Writing obviously did not just come out of a vacuum & can now be discarded. Other poets of my generation might say, e.g.,

Language Writing was some weird phenomenon but it doesn't have anything to do with me. That makes me nervous because, in a way, it dismisses the 'culture' from which that work sprang.

BA: So I can't make the crude analogy of Emerson here: Europe/America, youth, life of the street, everyday life, life of the interior person versus some kind of classical... Almost as if: experimental writing with the old guys is a classical heritage that we young writers have to figure out a way to break away from & do something totally new. No, because there's no totally new—like you're saying in the introduction [to the *Object* anthology].

RF: It's interesting to break those shackles of 'make it new'. Even 'make it new' can be oppressive. Nealon's "make it fucked up" is pretty interesting as a kind of replacement maxim. For the *Object* Anthology, each author was invited to send work which uses appropriation, cut-&-paste, sampling—which is anti-new or quasi- or faux-new, which is really about recycling material & accepting a kind of inundation or sensory overload.

BA: So is that the opposite of Emerson then? In other words, why couldn't Emerson have proposed this? Could Emerson have just said: let's get over our hang-up about Europe & let's get over some sense that we need to get out from under the European heritage & make something new; let's just sample, appropriate, juxtapose, cut-&-paste, the European heritage without lending it authority. It doesn't have any authority anymore, but we're still part of it, we come out of it, we're going to mess with it. And we don't have to have a generational identity. We can just take the available stuff & mess with it.

RF: And pervert it. That would have been really interesting, but that's not what he proposed. Emerson realizes that to use the forms available from a previous culture is to buy into a kind of established idea of art, a kind of ruling class... he talks about this in terms of 'books'. The book class. He talks about how reading and the danger of books' authority should be subordinate to one's own "experience" or one's own dialogue with nature.

BA: So he could criticize those writers.

RF: Absolutely.

BA: He would say they're just still hung up on this bookish, elitist &

now academically canonized stuff. And they should be out digging the vernacular.

RF: Yes, in order to break away from the established (British) culture. It's all very dreamy for Emerson. Another quote: "Our day of dependence, our long apprenticeship to the learning of other lands, draws to a close. The millions around us are rushing into life, cannot always be fed on the sere remains of foreign harvests. Actions arise that must be sung, that will sing themselves."

BA: Because I hear this among younger writers—a generational anxiety of 'what are we going to have that's distinctive.' And that's the anxiety Emerson's speaking to.

RF: Yeah, & that's the postwar anxiety of every art movement in America.

BA: And yet this whole sampling idea would be criticizable by an Emerson for being totally artificial. It's the opposite of being natural. That, in fact, just being derivative in a conservative way of what you're given can come across as natural if you don't look into it too deeply. If you just adopt a classical lineage & do the thing that's always been done, & you take it for granted, you could delude yourself into thinking that that was natural. Whereas if you're cutting & pasting or appropriating & being much more aggressive about choosing different things, clearly that's all artifice then. And if you were prone to being anxious about having your own authentic thing—well, authentic isn't the right word... having your own distinctive thing—then the level of artifice involved would really heighten that anxiety.

RF: Or, the anxiety of the new doesn't jibe with cut-&-paste. Because cut-&-paste invites a democracy of 'not new' plus 'new'.

BA: So this is an extremely confident posture. Or extremely relaxed. It's like 'What Me Worry?' I'm just going to make something up—whether it's European classical heritage, like Emerson's railing against, or not, I'm just digging it. It just seems what fits the era. It's bold.

RF: Yeah... bold it is; I don't know if it's relaxed. I think it's unformed & unidentified, which I think has been healthy. I don't think anyone's going around collecting examples of this work in any cohesive way. And I'm not sure that anyone really thinks I've done

that either.

BA: Well, haven't you?

RF: Well, I set out to do that.

BA: In the introduction you talk about what you proposed for people to submit. This was solicited work & you asked them to deal with this topic, somehow. Did anybody complain? In other words, did anyone get a little antsy about being roped into some rubric?

RF: No, I only invited people that I thought were already down with the tendency. What I received, I didn't always see it that way.

BA: OK, but nobody expressed any problem with this.

RF: None.

BA: Which is interesting—*that* seems either bold or relaxed, to me. Because people do seem to be very nervous about labeling. Or stereotyping. Or else maybe they're a little overeager, doing this polemical deal of trying to carve out a whole new brandname for their team.

RF: Those are all good reasons to leave things as open as they are for the moment, anyway. The sampling net that one could cast is wide. Poets from a range of different aesthetic situations could say they're doing something similar to this. & a lot of the practitioners are women who are less prone to make a lot of noise about what they're doing different than when young boys are setting out create something 'new'.

BA: That testosterone rush.

RF: And I'm not sure what there is to define here. I'm following an obvious lead from contemporary music and art. As an editor, I wanted to group together poets that had similar interests in these tendencies. And these tendencies are an extension of other experiments in the avant-garde tradition. It doesn't come out of an MFA aesthetic, which often values a return to 'established' forms or a justification for combining established forms with new techniques.

BA: So if these people have a fairly positive or close relationship to experimental poetry heritage—language stuff, or other forms of what

Steve Evans is calling oppositional poetry—are there people who are equally coming out of that heritage who *aren't* doing this? Would it be possible for somebody to be a young, maybe even self-conscious 2nd generational experimental poet, that *wouldn't* be doing work of this sampling sort?

RF: I think almost all of the poets included in this issue have worked inside and outside of appropriated texts. With few exceptions. I don't think Stacey Doris is doing much work outside of this kind of cut-&-paste model of borrowed structures; I don't think Kim [Rosenfield] is doing work outside of borrowed texts. Just very few others.

BA: OK, almost everyone else does some of both.

RF: Dan Farrell's new work seems to use appropriated texts exclusively. Jeff Derksen has several lines in his poems that are sampled, yet the poems overall, structurally, seem like his own invention. Whereas someone like Miles [Champion] is doing something where all the forms or structures are borrowed in a more macro superstructure. So there's a lot of variation; there's a spectrum.

BA: Would it be possible for someone to just be a derivative 2nd generation type [so-called] language writer, without any interest in this appropriation/sampling. Could we even conceive of that?

RF: As a possibility...

BA: Or is it a null set?

RF: Possible, but wouldn't that position buy into a kind of other 'establishment'? Because what was happening in 1975 in the culture & in the dialogue of art is very different from what's happening in 1995. I'm interested in poetry that's *relevant*, that echoes the culture we live in. I would like to see a poetics that reflects this.

BA: Without mentioning any names that will end up in print... I'm just wondering if anyone comes to mind?

RF: Of a 2nd generation...

BA: ...non-sampling type guy or gal who...

RF: ...is trying to do a kind of straight-up... "Language Writing"...

BA: Thinking in Emerson's terms, somebody who would just seem like a derivative Europeanist, without any engagement in this new technology... Because, see, if it is a null set, then I would wonder whether the sampling technology had actually infused the heritage from which they were deriving.

RF: It seems to me that anyone who's younger & writing today has to come to grips with the inundation of media: junk, tech, sensory overload, etc. "Sampling" in music documents this phenomena in interesting ways. Others say, the culture sucks—fuck it. And then there's that return to "paradise" or to a tradition *outside* of culture ... like a cure.

BA: That's why I am getting interested. Because this inundation of media... my first thought is that that's outside of the literary heritage. These poets, in their regular lives, away from the desk they'd—you're saying—have to notice this media inundation. Without the possibility of filling the null set with someone who's so bookish, who doesn't have any relationship to the vernacular, to our nature, our nature is media, second nature. What's natural now is what's artificially constructed by the media outside the literary arena. And yet it does seem possible for somebody to be... let's say, an experimental version of a [highly 'literary', classically well-schooled] type. Somebody who's also unaware of this media inundation, everyday life changes in the social world... sitting at the desk too much. Not involved with sampling, because sampling isn't as much part of the literary heritage as it is of the social world we live in now.

RF: On some level, you know, literary heritage... shmeritage. I mean the point is to be in touch with the intellectual dialogue of your age. If that intersects with interest in subversive literature—which is the only interest I've ever had in literature—then that's great. But if you're only interested in literature & you're reading Bruce Andrews or Lyn Hejinian as a literary scholar and writer, you run the same risk that Emerson was suggesting.

BA: But I'm thinking that if you can't come up with people who are coming out of more experimental writing of the 70s & 80s, maybe it's because the more experimental writing of the 70s & 80s was already imbued with the social world outside. It was already less bookish.

RF: In some ways, yes. It already challenged the "literary" tradition significantly.

BA: So that means a null set. In other words, the engagement with this phenomenon of the inundation of the media, or with the vernacular, or sources from outside a purely bookish heritage, is already part of the project of the generation before.

RF: Absolutely—an extension. Or it gets absorbed or "covered" and then intersects contemporary culture. In other words, the shift is more a cultural one that aesthetic—the project isn't anymore or less "intellectual".

BA: Intersects with the culture, that's like inundated by the media. If we flip nature into culture, then we get Emerson.

RF: But the thing about Emerson is he throws in God.

BA: Aha. Or even nature, which is fucked enough.

RF: Yeah, they're interchangeable in his lecture.

BA: As soon as he uses the word vernacular, my ears perk up. But the idea that he could put vernacular & nature in any proximity makes no sense. Nature is more like going out & looking at the trees. That's not vernacular. Vernacular is the life of the people, everyday life, workers, farmers, struggle of raising children, the family, all that. That's all culturally loaded. But he doesn't cop to it, though?

RF: No, he does. For Emerson, wildly simplified, when you study nature, you study yourself; the farmer transcends his role (by studying nature) and becomes an active participant in defining/expressing the culture.

BA: So if you drop the God part, & we think of nature as culture, you'd be saying: get away from your desk, plug into the culture, check out what's going on around you... Get out of the library. And we could say the same thing.

RF: He says that.

BA: We could say: stop making Literature an unidisciplinary art form. Start realizing that literature should be connectable to art, to

music, to theater, to dance, to pop life, to TV, to photography—all those things. And the people who would be the losers here, people who are out of it, would be the ones just thinking in pure literary terms.

RF: Right. That analogy is interesting: a poetry disconnected from the culture hangs its hat, instead, on some grand literary tradition hook that purports to be “timeless.”

BA: So it's almost as though we could just be liberated from that danger by... certain threads in the literary tradition. And also by checking out what else is going on, culturally. And these are the kind of people you've been interested in. That's what you put forth.

RF: Yes, I've been interested in work that wants to be in touch with the ideas of the day, as they say.

BA: But now what if there's somebody who did both kinds of things—things that were more explicitly sampling-oriented & other things that were maybe more personal expressivism or more neo-classical... bookishness. Would you have been able to say, “hey, you sent me the wrong ones, could you send me some of those other ones that I know you've done, because that's really the focus. It's not just good work by you that you happen to have unpublished at the moment...”

RF: No, there weren't any cases of that.

BA: And nobody surprised you & just gave you stuff that was inappropriate, you couldn't use it; it would just stick out.

RF: No, it didn't really happen... I think what all of the contributors for *Object Inventory* understood was that I was collecting work influenced by sampling or appropriation. The definition of those terms is slippery & varied, but I was open to a range of interpretation. Still, overall, as a group some definition does take shape.

Object 9: Inventory

special anthology issue

ed. Robert Fitterman

archived at www.arras.net

reviewed by Bruce Andrews

ULTRAS

1.

a. OBJECT. The name itself = great textual expectations: “this is the world. / this is the if if.” “I am compromised by my object.” A generation seeks not just “trained tones,” “living and working under Literature Sorters.” Neither a nostalgic classicist modernism, nor a copycat plunge into high gloss consumerist pomo, a sampling aesthetic revisits the claims for The New, raising “possible question ... of stock provocateur.”

b. Amidst cultural inundation, how do we select? What principles work? How do we get beyond fretting over the “false and manufactured” or “the inauthentic” (notice Jeffrey Nealon's preface slapshot of “inauthentic repetition of a remaindered inventory”). “Invent where nothing was yet another / Time.” But do we really expect any genre to be permanently inventive or reliably disruptive? As if: “For only school is real.” “As if something ever happened happening / is not the same.” So “let be finale of seem” with existence made up of moments of *production* rather than captive to illusion. Sampling—against any triumphalist transparency like Emerson's “I become a transparent eyeball”—rather than / points where the distraction meticulously crafted for contemporary tastes.” To get out from under the past's tight confining straps: “geeze this triumph of responsibility over the orgiastic really sucks.”

c. Instead, “stay distorted,” a timelier agenda, a “mental hinge / queasy w/anticipation,” given “our absolute freedom to amble.” “Nudging the entropy,” within “syndicate quarrels of object” takes flight within “a wholesale dissimulation of form / of writing, of mood, of of”—“insatiable paradigms of transcendence relegated to the sundry court of a charm beat / white out of / ... its essence.”

2.

a. The writing still an incitement (& excitement) on the plane of the sign, with the basic adventures of signifying. “One thick

word." An experimental heritage taken so far as to "alarm every letter to random": "the surface is a complex / shattered, masked / torment to carry sound / so far." "Paper cut cut cut" as a way to show up the phoniness of the organic & the transcendent; "the finite reasserts a body." A costuming of words, a "curio suspension" makes "molecular locatedness" possible—"it it it:" "working the vocabulary into a doughy mass."

b. This project offers an excellent chance for triumphs of tone & attention to detail, language nuance, for "choice's delay // nominative" given the elusiveness of signs even when "exact and systematic." Here, "hingefinity's" "inked is yield" & far from any traditional "procedural moping."

c. "Scribbleishousness." "Grammatically moody examples" enlacing us in "giant, disoriented / and blackest / data-sensitive tasks." An activated reading as "tone ink" "no less thematically affected heap of it collapsing" "jujitsu all the dislocated way home."

d. Pure linguistic atomizing isn't the answer. "Everything that could have been mood-lit, but a pattern / weighs transiently deploring the divisibility." "Constellations... bump." An informalist mutual implicatedness of the atoms, "phrases tending together" "and words going behind each other instead of after." Relationism: "The systems are the seizures." "I'm happy but boy is there a lot of commotion."

3.

a. But doesn't commotion need a subject, or need us to project a subject?: "Language / doesn't do." "When very little if any motivation seemed to accompany the acts... I could only suppose the sympathy such acts were meant to convey." "I, um, ah, ah, um; I, ah, um, um, um, ah; ah, I, um; ah." "So-called traumas of lapsed selfhood go figure." Or would that just be nostalgia?—prosthetic, deluded.

b. Identity as resolution. "Say a miserable 'something-to-prove' / meeting the description of the subject / in chronic synch." "Authors of themselves... Their passive aggressivity." Or therapeutic seizure, "temporary nestings, trust in someone"—in the cross-hairs—where "fettered agencies / Resort to 'real-life' rhetorics of will" as compensation. "The point, however, is to change *it*."

c. And to be more open to the social's convertible currencies. The possessive grasp, the 'gold standard' of the personalized clenched

fit: not porous enough. Too much of a filtering device, "the existential hum cups the readerly minutia in its guppylike beginnings." "Minor modes bubble up the surface. Freeze into false cadence of solitary snowmen." Resolved, complacent, compensatory, complicit. "Feminish / nomenclature comes into the offish close to closure / contemporary prefab." Or is it: "Free people, not merely pawns / of self-created behavioral science." "I thought that they / could see inside me // but I had no inside"—in a contemporary culture of "brains pratfalling."

4.

a. Sampling. Not even the unique is unique—"not a product but a promo." A shadow from the copy stains any original, tempers its pride; the swarm's shadow darkens any individual mood, or makes it less trustworthy—"raw / data, close to, apprehend / dispel." But "these incidentals that / stagger, stagger me / whole in the other"—"sampling a likely story." And "likely" whiffs statistical, based on cues, collective effects—not anything that personal expression could validate as singular: "the archives invite / an awareness principle." "Stains versus marks..."—& so pointillism too individualistic?

b. Let's start looking for meaning as "the topological," instead of "optical delusion / ... the strong weak forces of / this sedimental education," as we "REPOSE PARAPHRASE." Meaning as reception, messing with the norms. "A writing of listening." Let's array.

c. The style modes in which we store the social raw matter do not get hammered & smashed open like a nutshell to let us pry out the meat inside. We eat the shell too. Read me the code: "meaning pudding" so we can "recast the mold." With what? "replicas of visions, hopes, mores" "license on the whole timorous innuendo that's foraging."

d. Plunge into "vernacular hell of" "how to work the inventory otherwise... a re-inventing of the seemingly old." But how? Each author's differing slant on this re-inventing reveals a personal agenda almost indistinguishable from a selection procedure. Self-control becomes the means, almost purely instrumental, not an end to celebrate but the prerequisite tool. "As the sensation of secondary roles / As they say, takes on a life of its own." "And if everywhere ready, everywhere weak." Or instead, less porous: "as a ream / of sovereign subjects / set up their own web sites."

e. Sampling, in the most engaging work, is not of familiar formal strategies within Literature but of 'rawer' material in the social body (or is it the social baby). "Expansion as focus." How extended is the scale, the work of implication—is it circumambient enough? Only skindeep? Shouldn't the intertext be an all-inclusive discourse, universalized (or a nudge in that direction), more encyclopedic than just 'my Desert Island Shelf'.

f. Appropriation: a punched-up emphasis on *part* of the heritage, the context, the discursive compost heap, syncopates the *whole*. It sets it dancing, in motion, even in 'pedestrian movement'. If "a fragment of the beat disappears and of this disappearance, rhythm is born" (Catherine Clement), & what about a *social* beat. Where we operate surgically on the pounding, repetitive insistence of social habit—to give it a buoyancy, an *internal* contrast. That'd be a social syncopation. To shake up—or even light the fuse for detonating—the social raw material. Where we try to help readers "unearth the unblurred / exclusive machinery"—"the music is moved to syncopate / an all-at-once momentary candor / the provocation of which / update the tools, leave the metropolis / unfinished / the material unforgiving."

5.

a. Start with Hannah Weiner's quote: "don't over obey." To stage "a stake in spontaneity." To "let be be the dance hall," to risk, crazily enough, the monad-like closures of inwardness & stylistic pre-occupation. Otherwise, we run into the younger writers' "concern that we have devolved into a set of socialist one-liner writers." How dissonant is production? What's the noise quotient? Where did the quarantine lines get policed?

b. "Here, the society for nonnarrative municipal government." Set or dress the collective stage, with allegorical energy, "where the one of a kind stands among its own ilk." To be "contrarier" in its "pop-up contour." For the stylistic surface tends to renounce its neutrality. (As if the thematic depth models presume something more *static*; here, instead, a Heisenberg principle kicks in so that we acknowledge how much our (even) tentative mapping will rearrange the outlying territory. Every *terra incognita* now subject to redecorating *in order* to make its changeableness known.)

c. The norms (outside) aren't superficial. So, how deep (into the socially tilted inventory) do we want to go? We amortize our code

"into the fiscal structure / of feeling." Unwittingly? "And so blister nation cans smaller portions of pop scrape factotum to the grand theme of trust." "You want assurances, *choke*."

d. "Self-penetration is dispersive." The social viewfinder takes in "a cross-stitched sampler of cries for help," as the "sorrow of numbers hangs transfixed." "Cashspeak." "Disposable culture"—or "unlike dada"—in a commercialized landscape, always already plenty disjunctive enough where "culture stocks the innocent tourist." So let's unbother: "I had had uncharacteristics drilled into me once"—as "the *disappearance* of an extinguished conditioned response with positive reinforcement"—"to hold its shape as a world / and none to bond it to." Not just a social but a critical social vision. "Replace the world / [I want to get on]"—less complicity—"and send deenforcements."

Quotes, authors from issue cited:

[1] 1a. Rod Smith, Dan Farrell, Steven Farmer, Robert Fitterman, Elizabeth Fodaski. 1b. Chet Wiener, Kevin Davies, Wiener, Judith Goldman, Wiener, Farmer, Smith. 1c. Tim Davis, Jessica Grim, Andrew Levy, David Buuck, Fodaski, Fodaski, Brian Kim Stefans. [2] 2a. Farrell, Sianne Ngai, Farmer, Smith, Melanie Neilson, Yedda Morrison, Neilson, Levy, Deidre Kovac, Grim. 2b. Miles Champion, Goldman, Smith, Champion, Grim. 2c. Neilson, Ngai, Fitterman, Sherry Brennan, Ngai, Neilson. 2d. Stefans, Stefans, Grim, Ngai, Buuck, Smith. [3] 3a. Grim, Farrell, Farrell, Buuck. 3b. Ngai, Levy, Farmer, Rodrigo Toscano, Davies. 3c. Smith, Buuck, Ngai, Kim Rosenfield, Goldman, Ngai. [4] 4a. Morrison, Goldman, Goldman, Tim Davis, Fodaski, Ngai. 4b. Champion, Goldman, Farmer, Levy. 4c. Grim, Toscano, Toscano, Stefans. 4d. Davies, Jeffrey Nealon (Introduction), Wiener, Stacy Doris, Jeff Derksen. 4e. Wiener. 4f. Goldman, Fodaski. [5] 5a. Weiner in Goldman, Farrell, Goldman, Davis quoting Derksen. 5b. Davies, Ngai, Farmer, Farmer. 5c. Derksen, Ngai, Toscano. 5d. Doris, Smith, Farmer, Toscano, Ben Friedlander, Davis, Grim, Farrell, Farrell, Goldman, Neilson, Davis.

Three Bell Zero
Miles Champion
Roof Books, 2000.

reviewed by Bruce Andrews

WE'RE

"A wildly / little gesture" to help readers switch off & on their favorite musical scramble. To court the unsettle, to put aside most cautionary punch-pulling literariness. A textual dial-up with thematic come-ons to abbreviate the bent. Cultural bent. Sudsy elusive—"and 'it' and 'that' are everything"—language picante. Move text up... "tried to genie perfume back in" semantic glidepath. Eat your technique: "brain, discradled, infinite, in love with display" & chamois rigor of erasure. Reduce pt. size. Just a single line break here.

These days we operate, quicked-up, wanting to read everything, in a surgical amphitheatre of recent poetic tradition. Even with "the inner beats," there is restlessness at the tool level—a hedonism of "debunking—libidinal" go-betweens. "No connectives / or interval music / inside / the wave"—so you be process, I'll be structure; or vice-versa. Word does the splits, outside of the prize competition. Splishsplash system. The carefulness gets particularized down to the syllable level—since the smallest bits, the neutrinos even, have rights. The task: to brink out on itsy turbulence. "Dispersals / and recombinative pleasures" will be the currency, not just showy fucking the unbinding. SMALL CAPS: Consolidationism. Or "the miniature headset of the transitive" to help us cough up some matrix.

Calling The Dextextive—for clues to the poetic body politic, already a little roughed up by the vehemence of its 'peer review' & the blindness enjoined (& the pleasures missed) by its thrust toward the new, its push for ever aggressive invention. As an alternative: "less virulence / such a pattern." Scoop = denial. Whereas formal shaping, the delight in patterns of 'the already' might help tame the appeal to (& of) the heroic (& yet appropriating) 'outsider' stance. This is vibrating insides—of extended, traipsing, excrephysical spaces. And here, the outside is inside with us. "A dry / eye, but / coagulate, self" atilt within a discursive wonderland of possibility. What was so glamorous about norms? Cashiered self doesn't advertise characters—"self [o.k.] [Alp]." Charm the fastener, disbelief subtracted, "robot capsizing" a wily goofy paranormal contrast. INCREASE / LEFT / MARGIN / you're a good sting. Let me be sentimental—we can eat the catalyst, "practices—practices," we call it 'abbreviating the witness'—"lopsided hope."

Comp.
Kevin Davies
Edge Books, 2000.
110 pages, \$12.95

reviewed by Mark Wallace

It was once said of W.C. Fields that what made him funny was that he knew how to hate hilariously. The same might be said of the work of Kevin Davies, Canadian poet who has either fled to New York City or been trapped there, and whose second book, *Comp.*, exposes an even wider range of social neuroses and absurdities than did *Pause Button*, his debut. Although it makes inventive and exact use of the page as field and has a precise understanding of how to deploy inflection, *Comp.* is not a subtle book in terms of poetics; it doesn't have much use for indirection and only occasionally bothers to fracture its syntax. But Davies knows that poetics per se isn't the issue; he's more concerned with money, government and other institutions, the rhetoric of technology, imperialism, lies and hypocrisy and banality and whole buckets full of other crap. *Comp.* is an extended rant against everything that nobody right now is able to do much about. But the book shows that outrage against bloated social abuses will only take readers so far; comic outrage might just bring the walls tumbling down. Or not, more likely, which is all the more reason to laugh.

The book is divided into five extended sequences; in the first of these, "Apocryphon," Davies to some extent is just warming up. "Apocryphon" establishes the basic form of the book; discrete chunks of language, some just parts of sentences and some as much as several sentences in length, are connected with each other not by narrative or extended argument but by associations of annoyance. One thing pisses Davies off which reminds him of another that pisses him off, and so on. Davies uses the field of the page with a precision of timing worthy of a great stand-up comedian; white space, line breaks, and italics draw the most inflection possible out of the words, create just the right pause before the kick. Davies understands the use of tension and restraint in building his effects; he doesn't fly off the handle immediately and in "Apocryphon" he's still talking, not shouting, but he's beginning to rear back further with every phrase. It's almost as if it takes him a while to remember how angry he is; after all, such fury is not something that anybody wants to carry around every minute.

The next section, five poems generated through one of Jackson MacLow's methods of repeating lines, heats up to a more

tense but still controlled rage. "My bones seek Nixon in the cloak-room," Davies writes, and then repeats and varies that line along with others, including the insider poetry joke "Anselm's fisting Cheetos," which is funny whether you know who Anselm Berrigan is or not but funnier if you know. "*Right now*, before they abolish welfare or something" repeats in the last of these five poems, and at last Davies is beginning to froth.

The 52 furious pages of the sequence "Karnal Bunt" are simply as funny as it's possible for outrage and despair to be; while reading the sequence I didn't know whether to blow up a bridge or jump off one, but I never did either because I was too busy laughing to put the book down. "Karnal Bunt" is a sequence of one-page sections that's littered with unforgettable lines: "Will fuck for books, no weirdoes," "That's why we stand puzzled before elevator/ shafts, all alone," "Stroke my residency permit," "*Two years* undercover as a transvestite hooker given head to mob slabs and bent cops, now you're telling me it was all a practical joke?" and many more. Although Davies points out in a small note in the book's front matter that "Karnal Bunt is a grain mold at the heart of a recent Canada-U.S. trade dispute," his frequent references to sports within the section make the title of the sequence also read like one more slam of a world given over to money driven games, full of banging and crashing, in which the poet can do little more than advance the runner along. Each of the one-page sections in "Karnal Bunt" adds a new layer of outrage and ridicule about "the psycho-socio trance" that leads people to be "Sexually attracted to the bandaged/Sexually attracted to the head wound type."

The book's final two sequences, "Untitled Poem from the First Clinton Administration" and "Overkill / a protocol," don't quite foam at the mouth in the same degree as "Karnal Bunt," but then again, nothing could. Still, "Untitled poem" is a more extended single piece than elsewhere in the book, allowing Davies perhaps his fullest single elaboration of exactly what's wrong with the U.S. and its related spectacles, and in "Overkill" he eases on out with any number of "numberless adjectival transformations" as well as perhaps the book's most unforgettable image, "cops on ostriches swinging hams." Think about that one for awhile and then try to be convinced that you're eager to climb the barricades.

As such a line shows, in *Comp.* Davies is hardly afraid of idiosyncracies in his presentation. It's social criticism, sure, but it's *weird* social criticism. Davies is hardly guilty of standardized leftist piety. Any worthwhile review of the book needs, for instance, to mention his frequent use of animals, which stand in for humans, or

become human, or resist the human or variously don't notice it or are abused by it. This use and other oddities anchor the book in a significant particularity; Davies is furious about things many of us haven't even noticed. The startling juxtapositions of terms throughout the text is in fact the main source of its humor; the joke's in the phrasing, in the way he uses words that consistently surprise, or connects and disconnects words unexpectedly.

Having finished *Comp.*, I wondered how to see it within the context of contemporary poetry and whether it was necessary to see it in that context at all. It's linguistically dense only at moments it needs to be, but its direct use of detail and image never seems philosophically retrograde because the interaction between the sections never becomes sequential or additive; Davies isn't trying to fit the sections to some centralized commentary. Nonetheless the sum of the book's various concerns adds up to an amazingly broad critique of contemporary disciplinary spectacles, while at the same time its specificity helps it remain accurately micropolitical; the devil is literally in the details. *Comp.* is not offering an overarching theory of the contemporary social landscape so much as it sees that even theory is burning on the scrapheap. In *Comp.* Davies ultimately isn't interested in solutions that themselves easily become new objects of ridicule. Like all insightful social comedians, in *Comp.* Davies doesn't want to pave the way for a new set of bureaucrats. Instead, he wants to remind us that whatever organized social resistance might or might not be capable of, laughter is more valuable than organization could ever be.

Verisimilitude

Hung Q. Tu
Atelos, 2000

reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

"Like omelets / nations fold" writes Tu at the opening of the series "Short Subject," and in this spare and careful book not only nations but discourses and idioms of all sorts—the personal, the ideological, the lyrical, the global, the funny and the earnest—collapse into themselves revealing both their intercontextuality and competing degrees of relevance. The opening sequence, "It's Just Your Basic CYA (The Streets of San Francisco)" demonstrates the many virtues of Tu's style: his precise readings of public symbols enmeshed in human interactions ("Mutual Taunt Theater / a squad car rolls by / the masses: "You got any donuts" / the cops: "You got any crack" [23]), his assured uses of the specifics of place (California) contrasted with global corporatism ("over the table — mergers / across the mesa — maquilas" [25]), and his always poignant, yet ironic, sense of history: "in 1855, Mt. Diablo served as the summit / from which northern California and Nevada / were surveyed by army engineers / 150 years later, pickets reinforce their imagination" (23). Each of the seven medium length sequences of this book display different facets of Tu's project. In "Verisimilitude" he matches the sprawling public spectacle of capital with the private, responsible and somewhat damaged spectacle of a disaffected misfit: "with the installation of cameras / epistemology is really moot / the patron saint of / the illuminated porch / vintage Balzac of nineteen / '97 democratic straw men [...] / this push cart your kingdom / this counter your moat / the action-hero genre / and juice bar explosion / power is frost and tasty / no one forgot 19 whatever / but everyone tried" (41) "Uneven Development, Uneven Poetics (Simon & Simon)" takes the local, class based concerns of "It's Just Your Basic" to an international scale, wrapping several complex strands of thought in democratic, almost haiku-like simplicities: "China Embraces Liberalism! / consequences live in neighborhoods / but since this is literature / I'm interested in the term FOB" (50) "Dated" links several smaller fragments together into a stream of subversive aura ("There's a little American / imperialist in every / Australian trying to / get out of its coral box" [67]), while "Short Subject" and the "Birth of Cool (Cash)" return to the fragment, and "Market Psychology" straddles both modes: "o the rally cap / Noah's Ark school of diversity applied to Noah's Bagel / two women a focal point over coffee and danish / her decision making process applied to tattoos" (105) Tu seems to

have mastered the very short political poem, somewhat following in the line of writers like Bruce Andrews and Jeff Derksen who have made their poems lyrical channels of crushed and compressed social codes. But Tu has a facility with the lyric that these writers either lack or choose to ignore; as he takes the field of values as his subject over ideological manhandling, the tone is one of disaffection and responsibility, and of an imagination that is thoroughly disgusted with it all but able, however bitterly, to be amused. This is a remarkable book coming at a time when many younger writers are retreating to a humble, apolitical bohemianism in their effort to be conversational, as if social critique couldn't exist in poetry because it doesn't exist in "speech." Tu shows that you can have it both ways.

Dailies

Tim Davis
The Figures
111 pp. ISBN: 935724--77--X

reviewed by Brian Kim Stefans

Writing of another city poet, Baudelaire, Jean-Paul Sartre describes an ethical and aesthetic background (or battleground) against which a description can begin of Tim Davis's unique idiom in *Dailies*:

In order for liberty to be complete it has to be offered the choice... of being infinitely wrong. It is therefore unique in this whole universe committed to Good, but it must adhere totally to Good, maintain it and strengthen it in order to be able to plunge into Evil. And he who damns himself acquires a solitude which is a feeble image of the great solitude of the truly free man. In a certain sense he creates. In a universe where each element sacrifices itself in order to converge in the greatness of the whole, he brings out the singularity, that is to say the rebelliousness of a fragment or a detail. Thus something appears which did not exist before, which nothing can efface and which was in no way prepared by worldly materialism. [...] The deliberate creation of Evil—that is to say, wrong—is acceptance and recognition of Good.

This may seem an enormously oversized frame in which to place a poet who is often noted for his quirky neologisms, improvisationally resonant (very American, part bee-bop part-Olsonian) rhythms, stream-of-consciousness near-hysterical joke-making, and desire, it appears, to mask a natural sincerity behind a hard-core urban irony, but that is because we are not living in a country known for its attention to a complex (and significantly contradictory) moral/ethical universe, or at least one that is not easily thrust into parody by the note of a sexual scandal or backdoor money, or subsumed under the blanket term of "pragmatism." Davis, like all poets of roughly thirty years of age in the United States, was an adolescent during the Reagan years, when the Christian right was pulling the marionette strings of American politics, and in which the idea of flattened, readily-accessible "good" was infiltrating public-speak in the nefarious forms of both "family values" and the "politically correct," a virtual minefield against which any significant detail—any dive beneath the glass floor of narrowly ethical expression (or shall we say *being?*)—was rendered perfectly visible and perfectly condemnable in a single gesture. Against such a background, any adolescent wary of the terms of

socialization—and in some ways any member of the marginal classes who happens to be situated in a non-marginalized social sphere (like a college)—becomes "something... which did not exist before," that which, by not dissolving into the background of the social fabric being described, endlessly, through channels as diverse as aerobic commercials and U2 videos, could only situate itself on the side of "evil." But America also has a rich counter-cultural tradition, one in which Davis finds a place. The names of Lenny Bruce, Ed Sanders, and Frank Zappa are often heard of when discussing Davis's work, and it is perhaps on this seamy side of comedy, rather than in "evil," that one would want to situate his writing (not to mention his author photograph, of the author hanging naked from a Joshua Tree). The problem, of course, is that Davis is a poet and not a comic, and he uses words, lines, sentences, often in fragmentary forms, the entire machinery of which rebel *on the page* against this dissolution into the fabric of the whole (there's a bit of Mallarmean melodrama in any poet who strikes out against the dominating whiteness), and so the category "comedy," and even "satire," does not extend wide enough through the universe to contain what is happening there. Hence the recourse to "evil," at least in the Manichean sense—productive evil, or the detail that is found in and against the void—which is not a native product of the United States.

So the question, then, is regarding details. The work is called "dailies," the reference being to the uncut film shot during a production as it is observed after a day's work on a movie. Oddly, two other books of poetry were released at about the same time with references in their titles to the same activity. Perhaps there is something in the zeitgeist that is asking, after so many years of "non-referential" writing (which is how Language poetry is often, inaccurately, described), there is a desire to touch ground with the physical and personal (as if it were that easy), and hence a return to the "lunch poem" ethos of Frank O'Hara or the heroic "dailiness" of Mayer's *Midwinter Day*: what I see *matters*, this little ephemeral moment which I will alchemize with my training with words can, itself, be a poem. There is a need to break past the epistemological torments and sublimities of the "French lyric," or the post-Marxist syntactic social subversion that seems difficult to discern while easy, and prestige-enhancing, to describe. Hence, I will write one a day; after two years I will have 730, most of which will be kept in my underwear drawer until they are discovered by loving peers. This sort of bravado—"moral exhibitionism" in Benjamin's term (describing the surrealists)—becomes the sad activity of bankrupt literati when it decides to stay within the frame of O'Hara (or Ashbery or Koch), not even adopting the full range of possibility that these New York poets pointed toward but

adopting their symbolic value. David Lehman's *Daily Record*, in fact, seems to derive entirely from one element of one single tone of one of O'Hara's poems, and never leaves that safe area lest it risk being a unique, sovereign poem. Davis, conversely, only touches down with O'Hara in an oblique instant, perhaps somewhere from the heart of "The Day Lady Died;" from that point on, he is traipsing off into the wilderness, a maximizing effort outside of (though not above, which would be hard to do) O'Hara's urbane and catty scripts. His details, then, are not Coca-Colas, the names of his friends and De Koonings over the mantles, but the pantheon of poetic techniques and political contradictions that have surfaced since the fifties in a world of increasing globalization. The rush of comedy and torquing of reference takes on a tone of invective despite itself; it becomes the harsh discord that Adorno describes in serial music, that scream that is the natural speech of the post-Romantic crisis of subjectivity. But this is not "dark" work in the manner of Baudelaire or a German Expressionist, but because there is no room for it (in the offices of New Directions, where he was working at the time and where he wrote the poems), the "oppositional" tone of invective seems to take over, at times. Here is the entirety of "Shy Riot":

history pimps itself it
depletes itself I say
history is a selfmade man — and worships its creator
history hanged itself to avoid the daily task of dressing
like mackerel by moonlight it
shines and stinks

[germany sent seven thousand gasmasks to Israel today]
history is a despotism tempered by epigrams
there is no other granola like this
on the board of *who am I* incorporated sits
lists deposed by history's inquisitors
times you've yelled you whoreson zed
times it befell the three little sows
trade in houses for hotels and
heft the rent

[flying tigers]
why should men eat shrimps and avoid cockroaches
methodology of the fucker [flying
tigers]

history is the worship of jackals by jackasses
pickle-herring in the puppet show of history
say *steering clear* — all arks are off
nobody can beam and warble while
chewing pressed history and diabolical mustard
fresh baby cranium peelback [context]
dust on the saga
basta

We are nearly entering the rhetorical universe of Pound's "Usura" canto, here, but whereas the modernist found a central theme, even an area of placidity (in the Platonic perfection of forms) against which to judge the failures of history, Davis is flying into the open: "why should men eat shrimp and avoid cockroaches." There is kind of an inversion in all of Davis's poetry, each sentence (or line) turning back in on itself so as to avoid any chance of easy comprehension. "Shy Riot" is one of the easier ones to "understand," it seems to point outward to coherent "meanings," but in general *Dailies* is a drama of never quite breaking away from the language and soaring to the next thought, the next "utopic" vista, the satisfaction of the abstract promise of... abstraction. Nothing is very abstract, the philosophical words take no hold, nor do ideals ever surface beyond the things (from "Smart Poets Society"):

(rodrigo'd get a village reargaurd hard on)
1-800-COLLECTIVISM side of frics
the body is (quickly, fill in "duck-billed raven")
a place for forest fires
if not full on fusion (tear it torrid)

The complex of *Dailies* is that it seems to exist in contradiction to the basic tenants of pragmatism and the "good works" of our Puritan forefathers; it doesn't want to succeed as product, something that can be added to the great heap of American literary achievement (the literary equivalent of a green lawn), and yet it chooses the daily over the ideal, parataxis and improvisation over the metaphysical ideal of the "well-made poem." There is a New England moral tone resonating through these poems, and yet this tone can never escape the clanging, equally opinionated units of phonemes that suck it back into language. Sometimes the book is difficult to read because of this; one waits for Davis to soar—into invective, fiction, reverie, lyricism—but because meaning is never surrendered, and because the erotic, sophisticated and, perhaps, comfortable semantic slippages of deconstructive poetics are never explored, one feels as trapped in the details of history, culture and the ceilings and floors of the ethical sphere as Davis, the "self-made man who envies its creator." Perhaps this is true freedom, or the closest one will get to it, not as a solipsism but with a sense of oneself as "detail," that which stands against the whole and creates but which, then, cannot speak but through inverted or negating gestures.

Beyond the Safety of Dreams

Mike Amnasan
Krupskaya Books, 2000.

I Married an Earthling

Alvin Orloff
Manic D Press, 2000.

reviewed by Kevin Killian

UNEARTHLY

No one but Mike Amnasan could have written his new novel, except perhaps Robert Walser at his most obsessive. Sometimes I think *I'm* feeling dissatisfied, but then I pick up *Beyond the Safety of Dreams* and like the Drifters climbing right up to the top of the stairs ("Up on the Roof"), and all my cares just drift right into space. Amnasan's storyline must be picked out of a mass of first-person observation, but basically its protagonist, a construction worker in San Francisco of the 1990s, finds himself at a critical point in his life. His girlfriend has left him for another man, he gets laid off from his job, and he comes to realize that his dreams of becoming a world-class playwright along the lines of Shakespeare and Chekhov, have evaporated in the face of a thousand social and economic realities. He meets an interesting woman, a professor at Berkeley, who quickly loses interest in him once she susses out that he's "only" a student at San Francisco State. He begins the long, painful process of figuring out why, why, why did this happen?

"I should have a fool's cap and bells for what I've done with my life," he jests. In theatricalized monologue, he picks apart his own character with a merciless, and at times, excruciating display of self-consciousness that will remind some of the "tormented self-tormented" of Dickens' *Little Dorrit*. That's pretty much the action of the book. What makes it so marvelous is the steely, maniacal drive to pick apart every scab, to wring the pathos out of every thought, every eradicated impulse. As a result of this drive a terrible poetry is born; from out of profound darkness a light shines from the page's face, almost a Buddhist release in surrender to the trials of life. Sex is a great if primitive consolation. "I can sit here naked slowly squeezing and relaxing my grip on my cock and that's all there is. I'm not a symbol for anything. I don't know that anyone has felt like this before."

I could quote other passages from *Beyond the Safety of Dreams* to illustrate this poetry, but Amnasan is no longer the quotable writer of fragmented consciousness and political awareness that he once was when, under the name "Michael Amnasan," he exploded in the mid-

1980s with his first works, *I Can't Distinguish Opposites* and *Five Fremont*, extraordinary novels which he now seems almost to retract as youthful follies of ambition and delusion. The times have changed and the writer changes, too. It's a bitter pill of a lesson and the knowledge is more painful for that reason. So I won't be able to quote from the new book, seeing as all the power is in the extended, tortuous process of soul examination. It's an unearthly book, with some of the vulnerability of Frankenstein's monster catching a glimpse of his own reflection in the still waters of Lake Geneva. (Does the title, so like the Lovecraft titles of the 1920s, hint at this allegory?) It's a horror story about the fatal presumption that writing makes the slightest bit of difference.

Alvin Orloff's *I Married an Earthling* is pretty out of this world, too, but from a way different angle. Indeed these two novels might be read as correctives to each other. Orloff uses the structure of Faulkner's *The Wild Palms* to tell two different stories in alternating chapters. In one, a gawky, chubby, acne-prone gay Goth kid from a suburb of Ohio learns to make the best of himself, and others, by moving to San Francisco and finding a boyfriend. In the other, Norvex 7, an academic from the planet Zeeron, receives funding to launch an anthropological mission to Earth to determine the origin of a handful of 1960s sitcoms ("Bewitched," "Gilligan's Island," "I Dream of Jeannie" among them) picked up by Zeeronian broadcasting satellites. These sitcoms, Norvex postulates, are the first proof that Earth is capable of creating art with the zany, surreal, and above all glamorous qualities prized by super-advanced Zeeron—where a good hairdresser has the same status as a Bill Gates does here on Earth—and he dubs this brief period of cultural production the "Terran Miracle."

In Orloff's writing, the poetry is in the details. Not a page goes by without some inspired piece of invention—the two yapping dogs, Cosmo and Gimlet, of the fairy hairdresser, Mr. Larry; the superannuated hippie clown, "Sudsy Mudsy," who passes as a celebrity in benighted San Francisco; the induction of André Courreges into the Museum of Glamor History. The forced switching back and forth between Zeeronian and Terran points of view becomes alternately predictable and reassuring—a structural problem even Faulkner never managed to lick!—but chapter by chapter *I Married an Earthling* could be a primer for how to write a comic narrative in the post-Patrick Dennis age, and I give this book high marks for the convincingness of its satire and the sheer joy of its insight. We learn lots

about the misery of life in an academic department that doesn't really believe that "The Beverly Hillbillies" is all that good a show, as well as the misery of life in high school where all the jocks want to beat you up just because you're a fag wearing Goth makeup to gym class. In the end, the two heroes meet up, fall in love, get married and return to Zeeron (no spoiler space required because it's all in the title). I get the feeling that Orloff's camp hijinx mask a desperation and loneliness at the heart of his novel that matches the more explicitly delineated angst of Amnasan, and both writers come to the same basic conclusion, there's no place on earth for guys like us—for writers—in a world of commodity and money reification, our world. Amnasan's narrator feels that he hasn't the right to feel anything, not even his own pain. "I'm left with nothing between me and my impending death. We don't think about people like me," he writes. Norvex 7 muses, "Seeing billions of sentient beings wallow in misery and ignorance has left me more unsettled than I'd anticipated. It's especially hard to think of the more intelligent and sensitive ones . . . having to spend the rest of their lives in such a dismal milieu. Furthermore, the mystery that propelled me to Earth remains unsolved. How could such stupid people transcend their idiotic surroundings and create works of such genius? I may never know." What's interesting is that these two fellows, Amnasan and Orloff, of equal ability, but from different perspectives on the art and writing world here in San Francisco, should come to such a similar take on our city. Once the beloved mecca of poets, the "cool gray city of love," it is now a place to flee from—Status Babylon the Abhorrent. *Beam me up, Scotty!*

Art Poetic'

Oliver Cadiot

Translated by Cole Swenson.

Green Integer Press, 1999.

reviewed by Ramez Qureshi

"The exclusive concentration of artistic talent in particular individuals and its related suppression among the mass of people is a consequence of the division of labour," writes Karl Marx in *The German Ideology*; he continues, "In a communist society there are no painters, but at most people who among other things also paint." Following this is his famous quip:

In communist society, where nobody has one exclusive sphere of activity but each can become accomplished in any branch he wishes, production as a whole is regulated by society, thus making it possible for me to do one thing today and another tomorrow, to hunt in the morning, fish in the afternoon, rear cattle in the evening, criticize after dinner, without ever becoming hunter, fisherman, herdsman, or critic.

Marx's confederate, Friedrich Engels, elaborates on the division of labor in his *Anti-During*: in capitalism, the new social system which Marx and Engels were dissecting, "the situation is not that the producers control the means of production, but that the means of production control the producers...by far the most powerful" is the "division of labour." Marx disapproved of the concentration of artistic talent in the hands of a few painters (we may add poets); yet, Marx expressed indignation at the pittance Milton received for authoring *Paradise Lost*. Though Milton represented an unjust distribution of artistic talent, his labor went exploited, earning him Marx's sympathies. Later Western Marxists, such as Adorno and Bloch, would show even more empathy for artists.

I don't know how much Olivier Cadiot received in pay for his fantastic 15 section first book *Art Poetic'*, his second to be translated into English, in a deftly transparent effort by Cole Swenson, herself a first-rate poet whose books include *Noon* and *Try*, but Cadiot does not hesitate to begin by issuing an apology for the labor involved in producing art, a theme manifested by the book's very title. Cadiot begins his maiden voyage into poetry with an epigraph from Flaubert, himself an arch-aestheticist: "*The life I've led this past winter was made to kill three rhinoceroses.*" Cadiot's selection of Flaubert is no accident. By quoting an author who was an early champion of the "*l'art pour*

l'art" mentality, Cadot highlights the self-consciousness of artistic production, and, perhaps without hyperbole, indicates its purported toils. There is more to this epigraph. The quote appears at the bottom of the page and in italics—two formal devices, one stylistic, one pertaining to lay-out, which, through typography, spotlight the materiality of Cadot's ambitious volume: Cadot establishes himself at his text's onset as self-conscious producer of material text.

Cadot's self-conscious presence as poet is everywhere, one of many subtextual moods of the work. The implied author always leaves his traces, reminding the reader of the labor he is performing. Cadot writes in section 13, "lan-des-cap-e," "[The leaves [noun and verb complement] The leaves become yellow yellow [adj. and linking verb] and red [noun, adj. complement and linking verb] red and falling and falling one by one." Cadot repeats the grammatical components of his syntemes, as if to point out the material units, signs, with which he labors. It is as if, in a much less technical sense of course, a computer programmer were explaining to an onlooker his or her work. Cadot interrupts his text with this sort of grammatical explication several times. Cadot employs other devices to display writerly labor as well, such as the use of superscripts to denote accentuation. Take this line from the ninth section, "The West of England," *"And! all I a'sk is a v'all s'hip and a s'tar to s'ceer her b'y."* By emphasizing his metrics—when he is metrical—Cadot reveals a poet at work.

Yet, all writing has grammatical components. While all writing in principle may be scanned, not all writing is verse that is intended to be. This raises a crucial distinction in Cadot's poem: that between "creative" writing, and the more "mundane" sort of writing which is performed all the time and which is not labor—writing a check or a letter. Writing is the central theme of this book; it appears constantly. Yet the two kinds of writing are distinguished. Tangentially, let us return to Marx, this time to *Das Kapital*. In his well-known chapter on commodity fetishism, Marx discusses the myth of Robinson Crusoe: "In spite of the variety of [Robinson Crusoe's] work, he knows that his labour, whatever its form, is but an activity of the one and the same Robinson." He does not experience, as Marx first put it in *The Holy Family*, "human self-alienation," that which Marx perceived as a singular pathology of capitalism. Robinson Crusoe's experience is pre-capitalist, "naturalized." Let us return to Cadot. I have discussed Cadot's authorial presence. Yet there is a consistent "I" in this book, and this "I" is not Cadot. Rather, it is an ironic "I" (evidencing that this trope of the moment is not yet exhausted). Cadot has done a historical back-flip. He takes the per-

sona modernized by Pound, an "I," and attaches it to a full-fledged Romantic lyrical ego. Hence we have an "I" writing poetry, who is neither a confessionalist nor a romantic lyrical ego, but a persona of the latter, "thus establishing a traditional speaker whose voice, as we shall see, is pivotal to Cadot's aims.

This "I" is obsessed with writing, and serves Cadot's purposes of foregrounding writing, the artistic writing of the world of divided labor, and the mundane writing which is not labor that issues a product of exchange-value but of communication—though which of the two is "naturalized," as we shall see, is problematic. Charles Bernstein (who, incidentally, translated Cadot's first book to appear in English, *Red, Green & Black*) has written, half in jest as is his manner, that if one word should be banned from the English language it is "natural:" the word "natural" elides the social forces involved in the construction of whatever subject to which the word "natural" is applied. When Marx is speaking of Crusoe, he is speaking of the pre-capitalist, the non-alienated laborer. I think "utopian" would be the better word choice here, the issue being which of the two types of writing, "creative," or "mundane," participates in a *lebenswelt* freed from the capitalist system of divided labor. As we have seen, Marx himself would not cast his vote for the "creative," but might have little trouble with, as Habermas would put it, "communicative action."

But how much faith does Marx, or Cadot for our purposes, have in "mundane" writing? Is it really free from division of labor? For the Marx of *Kapital*, commodity fetishism obscures the relations between subjects, as owners of the means of production veil themselves behind commodities, which in turn corrupt the true characteristics of relationships between producers. Cadot's work is full of the sense of writing as mundane, "naturalized," communication of the *lebenswelt* somehow interfered with. In his very first section, "an extreme adventure, an adventure extreme," the persona breaks out, "What hasn't he written? Why / hasn't he written?" This is the first mention of writing in the book. Initially the reader thinks Cadot is referring to artistic labor. The second line, however could refer either to a stunted artist or to a relationship gone wrong. By the book's last chapter we know we are dealing not with the realm of artistic production, but with the *lebenswelt*. "The wind whispers in the trees.—He wrote a letter," Cadot writes in "Will always have courage." Personal letters though, are entwined with the world of commerce; writes a broken persona: "Do you have... paper ... pen and ... ink that you need?—... business papers take the same postage as letters—... India ink never breaks down." In between the opening and closing chapters we are given a *lebenswelt* of chaos, of uncertain

and unstable relationships. It is also very much a world of divided labor, of which the persona is aware:

I am building a house by the sea

could mean:

(1) I am building the house myself

or

(2) I am having the house built

It is a world of nonconsummated relations: "I've been thinking of her for two months, but I haven't written/to her yet," writes Cadiot in "(n-1)," his third section; something is certainly wrong here, perhaps innocuous though—this could be an adolescent crush. Matters are drastically worse, on the other hand, in the tenth section, "Anacoluthon:"

I fear that Peter won't come

and I fear that Peter will not be coming

I wrote to him: Come as soon as you can

He told us we'd be saved

I wrote to him come or that he
come as soon as possible.

The sense of urgency here, centered on the words "fear," "saved," contribute to the sense Cadiot delivers of a chaotic, *lebenswelt*. And "mundane" writing by no means approaches its utopian communicative function here.

Cadiot's text, incontestably formally accomplished as it is, is bound to provoke dissent. Cadiot simply cannot seem to see writing as a way out of "human self-alienation." Interestingly enough, the only fulfilled relationship in his book is in "The Lady of the Lake," a full-fledged "one-act opera," for which one may find answers in Adorno's essay "Bourgeois Opera," in which Adorno writes of the non-alienated singing subject in harmony with nature, a libretto itself not being "literature," Cadiot hence opposing "art" within the text. In today's America, there are many people, who, to paraphrase Marx, among other things also write, paint, photograph, or play in a rock band. As for those who do participate in the "field of cultural production," Cadiot leaves little hope for, as Lyotard would put it, shuffling "desire into the infrastructure;" writing as leisure, labor's antithesis for which Marx ranted, never comes up. Nor does the therapeutic possibility of writing (though sickness is a motif in Cadiot's text and the persona is a schizoid one, suggesting he is pessimistic about this as

well), nor the efforts of those who engage with it politically.

Modernity has seen the rise of specialization, the division of labor, and Postmodernity has seen an end to hopes of Marx's utopia.

Although democratization has provided more opportunities, many striking inequalities in education persist. Cadiot's text suggests a decentered Lacanian self, and the scapegoat may not be capitalism, but—as the theme of "presence," "leaving" in the text indicates—writing itself. By writing, one enters an alien, symbolic language, contaminated by Althusserian ideologies. The culprit may not be Marx's historical disease, but a more universal post-structuralist one. "Your singing makes me see blue sky again," says the persona in Cadiot's second section: things are almost fine here. At the close of *Art Poetic*, Cadiot introduces a third person: "He looked at the sky and the sky was blue." It is the same sky under which Marx's fictional Robinson Crusoe labored.

Letter to the Editors

Dear David and Yedda,

I am plowing my way through *Tripwire 3: Gender* and must say the testimonies/compositions of Stefani Barber, Jocelyn Saidenberg, Sarah Anne Cox & you, David, are amazingly heartwarming and inspirational to me, not to sound GIRLY I think Leona Christie's drawings are fabulous too (& Linda Russo's "Gender Quiz" exhibits much of what I want to say here quite clearly. But I want to say it again.)

I want to point to something that disturbs me a bit and that is this framing in your Editors' Notes: "Despite the increased participation of women within the traditionally male-dominated 'avant-garde,'" This framing to me is exactly the problem. It seems to me that you're playing into the false historical mode that David takes Ron Silliman —far too politely for my taste—to task for in his essay. The problem of erasure is *everreal*. It is never, I've found, that women weren't there, but that they were there and it takes us forever to re-figure it out. When I as a writer look to, say, 'the Modernists,' who do I think of first? Obviously Stein, also Barnes, Loy, Butts, Hurston (& so on—what about Mae West?—who was writing fiction and drama to great success and controversy in that same era)The fact that I first stumbled upon (in high school) Hemingway, Fitzgerald, Faulkner, and (in college) Joyce is the real problem there, in the canonical framing of that now-historical avant-garde. It occurs to me that one might argue that Zora Neale Hurston—or Ella Deloria, or Black Elk for that matter—did more to render "the American grain" than William Carlos Williams.

I remember having a lecturer in college insult us by saying "undergraduates always think history started with the Victorians." So, like, it's cool we can say "hell" on TV now. Like no one was ever vulgar before. So it is with the women writers. I went through real pain in trying to relate to boys/men in college who I felt I was the intellectual equal of (if not more so—but hey, we all wanted to have sex), and who I really believe, at least somewhere lurking, thought so too. But then the classes. Because of them these guys could one-up me in a flash, and didn't listen when I mumbled once or twice of writerly ambitions I'd had since I learned to read and had a little later discovered books were—mindblowing at 6 or so—by someone. A professor said, in a course called English Literary History, "it's not my fault we don't read a woman till the spring (Toni Morrison), that's the history." Um. Aphra Behn? Sarah Fielding? (Henry's sister who was more popular and influential in her lifetime.) The same year (1986?) he said this (& this in a nutshell is why I left that school) to us Dale

Spender published *Mothers of the Novel*. 15ish years later at a used bookstore I find it, this book about women as KEY—central, dude—inventors of the novel; I also find more women modernists in print, etc. But I find reviews, in local papers, at the same time, of the anthology *Women of the Beat Generation*, reviews that oh-so-knowingly indicate that women in the 1950s were pushing into such *utterly new territory*, just by virtue of having the "balls" (here I quote as George Oppen—in Rob Halpern's essay—quotes "domestic") (& thank you Mr. Norman Mailer) to take pen to paper.

So it's the erasure that's the problem. It's not that the ladies are a bunch of locked-up dainty wall flowers—or burnt witches—(though of course they are both at times) (poor Virginia Woolf worrying to her diary that *A Room of One's Own* was too strident and her (male) writer friends might not like her anymore) in each previous era, as I know you two know. The (female) person historically figured as 'wallflower' or 'witch' (or 'marginal' writer), she's composing in her own head/voice; the (black, red, etc) person historically figured as 'savage,' s/he's composing in his/her own head/voice; and so on. *The whole time*.

I guess I'm arguing for a wider vision of history, for an absolute refusal of the 'academia' (see Mary Daly) that would have us forget all those Other People. (I'd also argue for a wider definition of both 'literature' and 'avant-garde.') Those of us who find ourselves figured as Other—in whatever era, in whatever way: *We are never silent to ourselves*.

I worry also if we can so easily assume this period of mini-Enlightenment, such as it is (is it?) will last. I have to admit I found Rob Halpern's essay impenetrable (unenvelopable?)—despite the fact that I know him to be an interesting writer and a kind, lovely person. But, a very male search for a very male search for a truthful feminine I? (My site of femininity—the spelling is purposeful—privilege here, David?) What a relief to come to Carla Harryman and Lyn Hejinian's two-headed, plainspoken adventures(es). I just wonder though, as I will say to Sarah Anne Cox—this refers to her essay—are you sure we're never going to have to reinvent that proverbial black canvas all over again?

A really great issue.

Fondly & respectfully, xx—

Elizabeth Treadwell

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K R U P S K A Y A 2 0 0 0

Mike Amnasan Beyond the Safety of Dreams

Made strange, indeed—how else to walk pass people, how else to walk pass things, how else to walk pass surveillance cameras in the natural world. Eat compete, indeed—how else to dodge draft, how else to cross hair, how else to get laid as a measure of suck up. Read fiction, indeed—how else to brace boredom, how else to not said, how else to fake friends in the real world.

Then why else would I feel like Frankenstein sociology and kill psychology while the chips fall *Beyond the Safety of Dreams*. —Hung Q. Tu

Stacy Doris Paramour

A box of prosodic bonbons with exploding centers, offering the burst of intensity only artificial flavors can provide. Shimmering with assonances and anagrams, Stacy Doris's latest technical marvel comes stacked with Warnings to Daughters, battle scenes, a Pull-Out Bonus for girls and truly excellent gore-yielding remarkable new insights into our culture's fascination with the perpetual interplays between aggression and love. *Paramour* works like the best of highly-engineered lipsticks: compact, sexy, and always a little scary, it encourages kissing but won't kiss off. I'm completely besotted! —Sianne Ngai

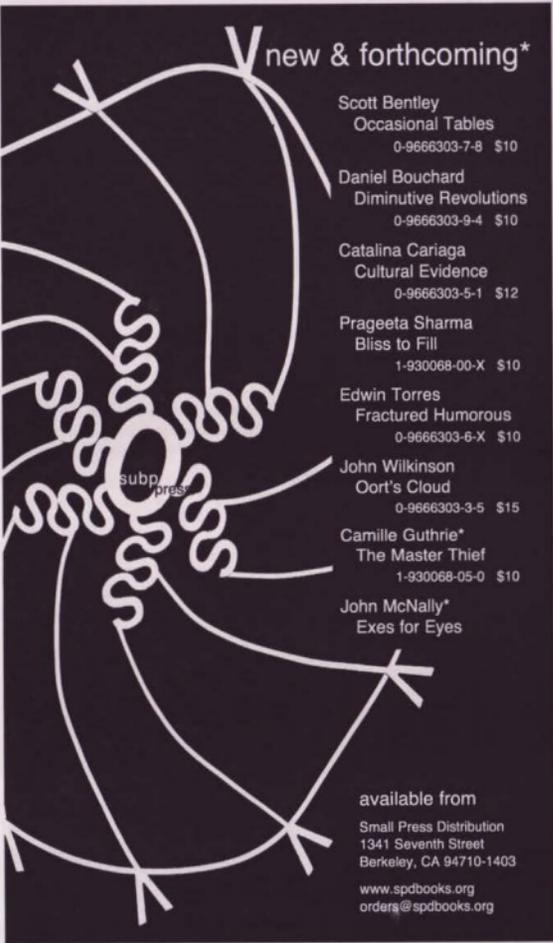
Benjamin Friedlander A Knot Is Not a Tangle

Diving into the viscera, Ben Friedlander arrives at a poetry fierce with pleasure and dis-ease. *A Knot is Not a Tangle* offers a splendid trip through the lurid truths of the world, tied together by a lyric entirely haunted, stark, and clear. —Lisa Jarnot

Laura Moriarty Nude Memoir

In this *Nude Memoir*—a roving gallery of nude torsos, nude cadaver toes, nude female lover and dead male lover, nude bride undoing God's and Duchamp's imposed abstract nakedness—a woman is born. She is born of words formed when "a sex (is) offered to a face." She is terrible and she is wonderful. She is film noir married to Baroque. She is sentences, magnificence, lust. She is an edifice of loss materializing and de-materializing on a line between poetry and prose that Laura Moriarty casts with the hand of a magician. I, too, dream of stripping bare this figure that the poet has so gorgeously decked out, to get to the heart of her namelessness. *Nude Memoir* is an entrancing work of love, mourning, and resistance by a major poet. —Gail Scott

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Contributors' Notes

Bruce Andrews' essays are collected in *Paradise & Method: Poetics & Praxis* (Northwestern U.P.); *Aerial 9* is a special issue devoted to his work. Forthcoming books include *Lip Service* (Coach House) and *Designated Heartbeat* (Green Integer). He is the musical director of Sally Silvers & Dancers.

Pyé Banbou (Pierre Banbou) is the pen name of Dr. Ernst Mirville, who in 1965 founded in Port-au-Prince *Mouvman Kreyòl* (The Creole Movement), also known as *Sosyete Koukoy* (The Firely Society), which has active branches in the US and Canada. Many of its members' works, along with Banbou's, are part of *Open Gate*, the first major collection of Haitian Creole poetry, translated by Jack Hirschman and Boadiba and forthcoming from Curbstone Press.

Boadiba is a Haitian poet and, with Jack Hirschman, co-translator of *Open Gate*, the first major collection of Haitian poetry, forthcoming from Curbstone Press. She lives in Oakland.

Stephen Callis is a photographer and educator living in Los Angeles. He received his MFA from California Institute of the Arts. His most recent work, "As Water Stories Go..." a documentary project about the L.A. River and land development, has been exhibited at El Camino College Art Gallery; University Art Gallery, Cal State L.A.; and Orange Coast College; and published in *Architecture California*, *Framework*, and Blake Gumprecht's book, *The Life and Death of the L.A. River*. His photonovels dramatizing the lives of immigrant workers have been distributed nationally as well as exhibited throughout Southern California and Mexico.

Catherine Daly is a software developer and poet living in LA. Her work is extensively published, particularly online, with e-chapbooks at Duration Press, POTEPOETTEXT, and XCP's *Streetnotes*.

Jeff Derksen: jd@sil.at. New book from Hole: *But Could I Make a Living From It*, other work through the lot site www.lot/at/mynewidea.com & /politics. Just finished a dissertation on globalism & the role of the cultural.

Laura Elrick currently lives in Brooklyn, NY. Previous work appeared in the on-line journal *How2*.

Leslie Ernst is a visual artist and writer living in Austin, Texas. She received her MFA from California Institute of the Arts. Her photo-based works have been exhibited throughout the United States and Mexico at venues such as the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery; Art in General, NY; Randolph Street Gallery, Chicago; and *Centro de la Imagen*, Mexico City.

Steven Farmer is the author of *Coracle*, *Tone Ward*, *World of Shields*, *Standing Water*, and *Medieval*. Recent work can be seen in *Big Allis*, *Primary Writing* and *Philly Talks*. Educated at UC San Diego and Sonoma State University, MA in English. After many years in the restaurant business, he now works as a technical writer in the Bay Area.

Robert Fitterman is the author of *Metropolis*; Book 1 is out from Sun & Moon Press, and Book 2 is nearly completed. Several of his other books are collaborations with visual artists, including: *Ameresque w/Don Colley*; *33 States w/Klaus Killisch & Sabine Herrmann*; and *cedars estate w/Dirk Rowntree*. He is the editor-publisher of *Object/p o e t s c o o p*.

Alan Gilbert has recent poems in *The Baffler*, *First Intensity*, *Snare* and on-line at *The East Village Poetry Web*. Essays related to the one in the current essay of *Tripwire* can be found in the most recent issues of *Xcp: Cross-Cultural Poetics*, *Open Letter*, and in issue #2 of the on-line review journal *Lagniappe*. He currently lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Jack Hirschman has published more than 75 books and chapbooks, including translations from eight languages. He's also a painter.

Kevin Killian has written *Arctic Summer*, *Shy*, *Bedrooms Have Windows*, *Stone Marmalade* (with Leslie Scalapino) and *Little Men*. His new book, *I Cry Like a Baby* (Hard Press, 2000) is a collection of stories, memoirs and theoretical pieces. *Argento Series* is forthcoming from Krupskaya. With Dodie Bellamy, he has edited 93 issues of the writing/art zine they call *Mirage #4/Periodical*. He lives in San Francisco.

Carole Maso's most recent books are *Aureole* (Ecco, 1996) and *Defiance* (Dutton, 1998).

Eileen Myles is a poet who lives in New York and Provincetown, MA. Her novel, *Cool for You*, is now out from Soft Skull Press.

Rubén Ortiz Torres was born in Mexico City in 1964 and currently lives between Mexico City and Los Angeles, CA. He has a BFA from the Academy of San Carlos (E.N.A.P.) in Mexico City and an MFA from CalArts in Valencia, CA. His work is represented by Jan Kesner gallery in Los Angeles, CA, and the OMR gallery in Mexico City. He has participated in several international exhibitions and film festivals and has work in the collections of The Museum of Modern Art in New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York, the Los Angeles County Museum of Art, the California Museum of Photography in Riverside CA, the *Centro Cultural de Arte Contemporáneo* in Mexico City and the *Museo Nacional Centro de Arte Reina Sofía* in Madrid, Spain.

Bibiana Padilla Maltos (Tijuana 1974) has been a contributor to the independent cultural magazine, *Auñur*, and in 1991 served as its co-publisher. Her first poetry collection, *Equilibrios*, was published in 1992. Her experimental/visual/collage/photography and text work has been shown at various festivals and exhibitions including *Escuela de Ciencias Sociales y Políticas* at UABC (1993), Southwestern College (1997), the *Bienal Internacional de la Poesía Visual* at the Chopo Museum in Mexico City (1998), Mexicali's A.V.TEXTFEST (1998, 1999, 2000) and an A.V. TEXTFEST retrospective at CECUT in Tijuana (1999), the Mexicali's city gallery (1999), SDSU Campus Imperial Valley gallery (1999) and *La Casa de la Poesía Cultural Center* at La Havana, Cuba. Her work has been published in magazines and newspapers such as *Yubai*, *Tierra Adentro*, *Fiction International*, *Diario 29*, *Zeta*, *El Solar* and *Minarete*.

Ramez Qureshi has a B.A. from U of Pennsylvania, and an M.A. from Bath Spa University College. Published poetry and criticism in *Jacket*, *Read Me* and *Cauldron & Net* among other places. He will be part of the inaugural class of the M.F.A. program in poetry at Otis College of Arts & Design in Fall of 2000, where he'll be teaching Semiotics & Critical Analysis.

Camille Roy is a writer and performer of fiction, poetry, and plays. Her books include *Swarm*, (Black Star Series, 1998), *The Rosy Medallions* (poetry and prose, Kelsey St Press, 1995) and *Cold Heaven* (plays, O Books, 1994). In 1998 she was the recipient of a Lannan Writers At Work Residency at Just Buffalo Literary Center. She is a founding editor of the online journal *Narrativity* (www.sfsu.edu/~newlit/narrativity) and her work is available online at <http://www.grin.net/~minka>.

Gail Scott is the author of six books including the novels *My Paris* (Toronto: Mercury Press 1999), *Main Brides* (Toronto: Coach House 1993, Talonbooks 1997), *Heroine* (Coach House 1987, Talonbooks 1999); the short story collection *Spare Parts* (Coach House 1982), the essay collection *Spaces like Stairs* (Toronto: Women's Press 1989), and *La théorie, un dimanche*, co-authored with Nicole Brossard et al. (Montréal: remue-ménage 1988). She was co-founder of the journals *Tessera* (bilingual English/French) and *Spirale* (French-language). She lives in Montréal where she teaches creative writing and works as a literary translator.

Brian Kim Stefans lives in New York. His latest book, *Angry Penguins*, is just out from Harry Tankoos Books; essays are forthcoming in *Shark*, *Talisman* and *Facture*. His poems in the persona of Roger Pellet can be read in *Jacket # 4* (www.jacket.zip.com.au), an essay on Martin Johnston in *Jacket #11*, graphical work at www.ubu.com, and his literary magazine, *Arras*, is available at www.arras.net.

France Théoret is the author of numerous books, including *Laurence*, *The Man Who Painted Stalin*, *Nous parlerons comme on écrit*, *Nécessairement putain*, and *Entre raison et dérision*.

Rodrigo Toscano's two books include *Partisans* (O Books) and *The Disparities* (Sun & Moon). He is currently at work on *Platform*, commissioned by Atelos Press. He lives in Brooklyn, NY.

Mark Wallace is the author of a number of books of poetry. *Temporary Worker Rides A Subway* won the New American Poetry Award and will be published by Sun & Moon Press. Along with Steven Marks, he has edited *Telling it Slant: Avant Garde Poetics of the 1990s*, forthcoming from the University of Alabama Press. He lives in Washington, DC, where he runs the Ruthless Grip Poetry Series and teaches at Georgetown, George Washington, and American University.

Bobbie West spent her early years on a farm. After drifting into various jobs as a waitress, union machinist, translator, and teacher, she discovered poetry. Since then, her writing has appeared in a variety of literary magazines. She's the author of a chapbook, *Scattered Damage* (Meow 1998), and assistant editor of *A Wild Salience: The Writing of Rae Armantrout*, forthcoming from Burning Press. Currently she works at the public library in the San Diego inner-city neighborhood where she lives.

C.D. Wright's most recent books are *Tremble* (Ecco, 1996) and *Deepstep Come Shining* (Copper Canyon, 1998).

Heriberto Yépez lives in Tijuana, Mexico. He is the author of *Por una poética antes del paleolítico y después de la propaganda* (poetry) and *Ensayos para un Desconcierto* (essay). He regularly publishes articles, short stories, reviews, translations and poems in Mexican magazines, and is currently working on the first anthology of Jerome Rothenberg's work translated into Spanish. He considers himself not a serious writer, but an obsessive-compulsive graphomaniac. E-mail: hyepez@hotmail.com

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