

**I DON'T
HAVE
TIME
TO WRITE**



TODAY

**The Poetics-List Writings of
Brian Kim Stefans, 1999–2010**

Assembled from the UB Poetics List archive, 1993–2014

Edited, with an introduction, by Kristen M. Fabians

I Don't Have Time to Write Today

*The Poetics-List Writings of Brian Kim Stefans, 1999–
2010*

ABOUT THIS EDITION

This book was gathered from the public archive of the Poetics List, the discussion list hosted for many years at the University at Buffalo, where Brian Kim Stefans posted from April 1999 to a final flare in 2010. Out of several hundred messages, the ones carrying some substance were kept — the reviews, the essays, the arguments, a few poems — while the readings, launches, and website notices were let stand in the same stream, in the order they were sent, and the pure forwards and list-business were left out. Some one hundred and forty-eight posts remain, gathered into chapters by year, each carrying a short editorial note. Its title is his own — the opening of a post he wrote anyway, at two thousand words.

The Little Reviews — one book, one paragraph — are the most finished writing here, and are gathered on their own page as well as in the Contents. Around the posts three finding aids were built — a linked Contents, a Little Reviews list, and an Index of people and topics whose page numbers are live links — so that the record can be read forward or searched sideways. The plain-text archive was cleaned, collated, annotated, and typeset into the linked reading edition presented here.

edited by Kristen M. Fabians

for the personal records

A POETICS READING EDITION

New York · New Jersey · Los Angeles · 1999–2010

Introduction

The Man Who Was Always About to Leave

I came to these messages the way one comes to most things worth having: by accident, and then by obsession. What began as a favor — someone wanted the Stefans posts “pulled together,” a phrase I have since learned to distrust — became the better part of a year, and, I confess, a mild proprietary derangement, over the course of which I have formed opinions about this poet’s spelling, his enemies, his web design, and the precise season he stopped caring, that I am not certain he would ratify. The reader should know this going in. An edition is a haunted house; I am the ghost who moves the furniture.

Between April 1999 and a valedictory flare in 2010, Brian Kim Stefans sent the UB Poetics List several hundred messages, composed in the least dignified medium literature has yet devised: the listserv reply, typed fast, sent faster, and — the detail that undoes me — reposted an hour later “with fixed spelling.” I have kept the ones with some substance in them: the reviews, the essays, the arguments, a few poems. The readings and the website notices I have kept as well, in their place in the stream, because a life is not only its quarrels; the pure forwards — the relayed obituaries, the calls to action, the friend’s new book passed along without comment — I have let go, with a small pang, and mention here so that their ghosts are at least accounted for.

There are, by my count, three men in this file, and telling them apart has been the chief labor of my tenure. The impresario: curator of the Segue reading series, proprietor of arras.net, co-conspirator of UbuWeb, and in 2002 and 2003 the editor of the anti-war site Circulars, each dispatch signed, with a straight face, “CIRCULATE WILDLY.” The polemicist: author of the “Response to Standard Schaefer,” the “Defense of Jacques,” the open letter “To Kent Johnson” — a man who by his own admission preferred to “convert my feelings into some sort of ‘productive’ post rather than rag on someone behind their back,” and who converted, across these years, a great many feelings. And the critic, who from January 2000 filed the one-paragraph “Little Reviews” that are, whatever else I permit myself to say here, the reason the book exists.

A fourth figure haunts the other three and shows himself only in the From: line, where I have spent more hours than is entirely respectable. Watch the return address migrate — Random House, then Fodor’s, then the CUNY Graduate Center, then, at last and in triumph, his own arras.net — and you have a decade of

employment and a doctorate begun and abandoned, told wholly in mail headers, a little novel of rent and ambition that Stefans did not know he was writing and that I could not stop myself from reading.

One tic deserves a paragraph to itself. Beneath a great many of these messages ran the same masthead — “A R R A S: new media poetry and poetics” — trailed by a line of broad Scots that took me three readings and a dictionary to construe: “Hinka cumfae cashore canfeh, Ahl hityi oar hied ‘caw taughtie!”, which he glossed beneath it as “Do you think just because I come from Carronshore I cannot fight? I shall hit you over the head with a cold potatoe.” The misspelling is deliberate — a small monument to Dan Quayle — and I have left it exactly so. I have spared the reader only its ninety-odd repetitions, and set the thing here, once, where a good joke belongs.

What the file is mostly made of, however, is argument. Stefans arrived on the list already mid-sentence, as though he had been quarrelling with someone in the corridor and simply carried it through the door, and he stayed in that posture for the better part of a decade. He was, by his own account, a reluctant combatant who could not stop combatting; his characteristic gesture is the elaborate apology that concedes nothing. He will grant that a phrase of his own was “a rhetorical mistake,” pause to disarm the room — “pardon the overly-careful tone of the following, but I don’t want any bombs going off” — and then proceed to detonate, courteously, exactly the point he had promised to withdraw. One learns to read the throat-clearing as a windup.

The quarrels are worth naming, because they are the spine of the thing. The first real one is about William Carlos Williams — [his defence of Williams](#) and its [unbidden postscript](#) — in which Stefans, who regarded Williams without irony as the source of his own development as a poet, lets himself be backed into a fussy dispute over whether a dog in a story is a symbol, a [dog-analogy tangle](#) he tries to leave with the words “I’ll happily retire from this one” and, naturally, does not. It is the template for everything after: a large love, a small provocation, and a constitutional inability to surrender the last word.

Then there is Pound, who occupies the summer of 1999 like weather. Stefans takes up the [Bollingen Prize](#) and the old, unkillable “Politics of Poetic Form,” and, in the post I find hardest to shake, sits down with Pound’s prose beside an Oxford anthology of Fascism and reports, from [the modernists in the basement](#), how little daylight he can get between the tone of the essays and the tone of the ideology. He does not flinch from the anti-semitism and he does not use it to close the case;

he keeps the poems and the politics in the same hand, which is harder, and which is the whole of his method when a subject is dangerous. Four years on he is still at it, confessing in a one-paragraph notice that “Pound was my first great poetic love in high school” — the sentence of a man who has never entirely forgiven his first teacher.

The middle years bring the specialties of the house. There is the [Atlanta Poets Group affair](#), in which an offhand line about a “ghost double of language poetry” earns him weeks of anxious [walking-back](#) and the immortal parenthesis about the bombs. There is the long defence of the digital — the [cyberpoetry threads](#), the argument over [the “resistance of the medium”](#), the [Angel of Soliloquy](#) exchange with a skeptical Patrick Herron — Stefans insisting, against a room that mostly wanted to change the subject, that work made on a screen might carry the weight of work made on a page. And there is my favourite of his set-pieces, the answer to Ron Silliman’s charge that visual and sound poetry are merely antiquarian, in which Stefans replies to “adventures in poultry” — see [his reply](#) — not with a thesis but with a list: McCaffery, Finlay, Cage, Wershler-Henry, Christian Bök. It is how he argued whenever he suspected the other man was almost right.

Not every fight is grand; some are pure pedantry, lovingly indulged. He will interrupt [a quarrel over negative capability](#) to observe that the idea is “actually, I think, Coleridge’s idea,” and that Coleridge also coined “psycho-analyze,” in a notebook nobody read — a footnote given the force of a position. He writes an [open letter to Kent Johnson](#) as a backchannel and posts it unrewritten, tedium and all, and takes David Bromige’s mocking rejoinder as his due. He answers [Standard Schaefer](#) on the vexed subject of careerism, mounts a [“defence” of Jacques Debrot](#) with the scare-quotes doing a great deal of the work, and, when the talk turns to critics and commodities, notes with satisfaction that “the age of Brians has survived glam.” He is never happier than when a disagreement lets him show his reading.

And then, from January 2000, there are the Little Reviews, which are the reason this book exists and the best writing in it. The form is one he invented to be unfinishable — one book, one paragraph, no throat-clearing — and it fits him precisely, because it forces the two things he does best into a single breath. The first is to quote the book and let it perform before he says a word: he opens the [Eunoia](#) notice with Bök’s own “Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script,” lets “Isn’t it glib? Isn’t it chic?” hang in the air, and answers, dryly, that it is; he opens [Comp.](#) mid-complaint, on Davies’ “the robots

are doing / my job, but I don't get / the money," so that the poem's comic desperation is established before a word of criticism arrives.

The second thing is the swift comparative placement, the device named in a phrase you could teach from. A poet is fixed by triangulation — Coolidge set beside "Ashbery in his recent 'Girls on the Run,'" Rankine's naming-conventions filed "à la Zarathustra and De Chirico's Hebdomeros" — and then the form is read, without strain, as politics: Wershler-Henry's single sentence becomes an argument about "the criss-crossing of information flow," and [Derksen's](#) lines are traced to "the same semantic gumbo" that yields Spiro Agnew's "nattering nabobs of negativism." It is criticism that reads form as a stance in the world without ever making the poem fill out a survey, and it is funny — a [freewheeling manual on the intoxications of love](#) is "a poor career move in a day when Victorian mores... have sent everyone willingly back to a public, post-60s sexual civility" — in the way criticism is almost never permitted to be.

A word on their status, since it matters. These are the originals. Shorter versions of several later ran in Publishers Weekly, cut to column length by a friend and editor there — the same friend who let the drafts appear on the list in the first place, copyright be damned, and who did as much as anyone of his generation to smuggle avant-garde poetry into the magazine's notoriously narrow columns. What survives here is the longer version: the judgment taken at full length, before the [Pound notice](#) was made to pretend it did not contain a whole unwritten essay.

And then, as these things do, it thins. The torrent of 1999 becomes a stream, the stream a trickle. The list was a New York and Buffalo habit — a kind of weather — and Stefans spent these years drifting out of its front. He had been in and around New York and New Jersey, the doctorate at the CUNY Graduate Center begun and, in time, abandoned; then he left the city for Brown and two years of an MFA in digital literature, a field he had a hand in founding; then, meaning to come back to New York, he took a teaching job in South Jersey instead; and then, around 2008, he was in Los Angeles, which lies a long way outside any listserv's weather. His public literary writing had by then migrated too — to his blog, Free Space Comix, and to the Boston Review, where much of it can still be found — and the list had become one venue among several, and not the liveliest.

What remains here at the end is mostly notice of new work, and one item that turns out not to be an ending at all. His last substantial post — a quiet dispatch about scanning and circulating out-of-print Los Angeles poetry — was, though the list could not have known it, the first public announcement of a research project

he has been conducting ever since, and is conducting still, some eighteen years on. A man may leave a room slowly, over eleven years; but he does not always leave it to do nothing.

I have set each post in the order it was sent and placed before it a short note in my own voice — some of them, I am afraid, less kind than the post strictly deserves, particularly where the post is a flyer for a reading one had to attend to enjoy. Where he addresses a bare first name and the list makes the surname plain, I have supplied it; where he alludes to “my other comments,” I have, meddler that I am, led you to them. It is, as he asked, for the personal records. I have merely proven unable to leave it alone.

— Kristen M. Fabians

Little Reviews

30 reviews — one book, one paragraph. Each links to its text.

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Claudia Rankine, *Plot* · 30 Jan 2001
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Renee Gladman, *Juice* · 15 Feb 2001
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1999

Sachler / Sackner is a collector of concrete poetry books

31 Mar 1999

Barely a post — a URL for the Sackner Archive of concrete and visual poetry, a pasted paragraph, and a Rutherford native's genuine curiosity about caravans of poets crossing the South. Stefans corrects the collector's name without ceremony and grants him the faint praise of being "probably worth knowing."

...and is probably worth knowing, though I guess by the tone of your post he's not the most charismatic guy. I don't know what's happening in Miami these days, and it's great to hear about caravans of poets crossing timelines in the South — sounds very interesting and fresh — so if any of you do get around to visiting this archive I'd love to hear about it. Here's the URL for their website:

<http://www.rediscover.com/sackner.htm>

And here's the first paragraph on the site:

Ruth and Marvin Sackner founded the Archive in Miami Beach, Florida in 1979. Its initial mission was to establish a collection of books, critical texts, periodicals, ephemera, prints, drawings, collages, paintings, sculptures, objects, manuscripts, and correspondence dealing with precursory and contemporary, internationally produced, concrete and visual poetry. The precursory material had at its starting point, Stephane Mallarme

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Bruce Andrews and Brian Kim Stefans Reading

14 May 1999

A reading at a Williamsburg bookstore, with directions from San Francisco that involve quaaludes and a sleeping puppy — the three-dollar contribution being, one assumes, the least of what was asked.

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Readings @Clovis Press

Clovis Press Bookstore 229 Bedford Avenue , Williamsburg, Brooklyn

Directions from Manhattan: Take L Train to Bedford Ave. Walk 4 blocks on Bedford to North 4th Street.

Directions from San Francisco: Watch "Matrix" on quaaludes with a sleeping puppy in your lap. Walk 4 blocks.

Friday May 21

BRIAN KIM STEFANS' books include Free Space Comix (Roof), Gulf (Poetscoop/Object) and, with Sianne Ngai, "The Cosmopolitans" (Tripwire). He also edits Arras (<http://www.bway.net/~arras>).

BRUCE ANDREWS, besides performing his notorious live editing of poems and mixing of prerecorded vocal sounds in collaboration with the solo dance improvisation of dancer/choreographer Sally Silvers, is the author of such noted books as Love Songs, and I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism). A new book Designated Heartbeat from Sun & Moon is due soon. The just-released AERIAL Andrews issue will be available for purchase day of the reading.

Introduced by MELANIE NEILSON

READINGS BEGIN AT 8PM SHARP

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COFFEE TEA WINE Come early and buy books!

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Response to Standard Schaefer (vers.II with fixed spelling)

18 May 1999

In the "telic or not" argument, Schaefer had pressed a fair question — whether radical poetic theory ever becomes radical practice — and asked for some working frame of aesthetic judgment; to the room it read as a raid on the Language poets. Stefans answers at two thousand words, reposts the same day with the spelling fixed (the version kept here), and Jacques Debrot writes in on his side, which on this list constituted a majority.

Dear Standard,

I think you are doing yourself and your ideas a tremendous disservice by focusing on this issue of careerism which your statements have not demonstrated to be a very well-considered, historically-conscious position. It seems to me quite obvious, for example, that very few of the Language poets had any idea that their ideas would obtain for them the degree of academic acceptance that they have, in the past decade, received, and if you would like to argue this point, I would ask you to return to the numerous staple-bound, yellowing and otherwise low-tech and low-print-run publications that were circulating in the 70s and 80s when they were first looking at each other's poetry and seeing a common set of interests developing, and cite those instances where you think 1) any of the those poets thought they were writing in a style that would eventually become something like

the norm in academic studies, or maybe how their writing styles and ideas actually gelled with what was happening in academic studies at the time, 2) where you think that this "careerism" seriously or even moderately compromised the general goal, aura or collective effort at investigation (as opposed to exploitation) that is, I think, one of the nobler aims of a group effort in poetics, the uncovering of lost ideas or perhaps the refocusing or "make it new" of dilapidated ones, 3) how many of the poets who were writing at this time who are not of the "language school" were actually resisting assimilation into what, to you apparently, was a very obvious upward track into the academe, which is to say, would a poet working in primarily "speech based" poetics at the time (some of whom were professors) be considered resistant to an obvious "spectre haunting America poetry" or were they working in a tradition which, to some, had itself run its course and was not likely to produce anything more interesting without a degree of revamping.

In terms of this last point, I would relate that in talking to several New York poets who were around at the time and who were not part of the "language" thing — indeed, being excluded from the publication of that name and being quite miffed by this fact — still are far more generous to what happened with the magazine and the "movement" than many of the poets of my age or slightly younger, understanding that at a basic level what those people were up to was something quite different. Which is to say, these poets who were there at the time were well aware of these several factors that I allude to above, that it was really a "grass-roots" kind of thing that didn't have a Marjorie Perloff or Hank Lazar (the mile-long shelf of critics raising the LangPos to the lofty height of canonicity) to give it the sort of guarantee that you seem to be believe — again, I challenge you to find where this assurance is — was there to push on their efforts. There was very little money circulating in that community for publications of any nature, that the lifestyles of these poets were often at least as radically "outside" as the more standard boho lifestyle of a Lower East Side poet (and they mostly lived in the Lower East Side, anyway), blah blah blah. Before "language," all of these poets more or less did the same thing, went to see music, art, read at St. Mark's and went to the readings, commented, complained, wondered if Olson was what he was cracked up to be, etc. (I would note that despite what people think of the New York poetry scene, the crowds mix here quite a bit and continue to do so, the real lines being present only in the minds of those who seem to need them to get by.)

I would suggest, if we want to talk about the "co-opting of the arts by institutions," that your own method of publishing your magazine plays more into the basic method of a fast-track to institutionalization than the publishing method of the

Language poets, which, again, was very cheap, community-based, spontaneous, hard to find "closure" in, etc. A new issue of Rhizome — and I am not criticizing you for publishing it, I'm just asking you to put it's parameters under the "socratic light" in a way that I would ask you to put the LangPos publications under the same light, and tell me which is more "radical" — arrives on my doorstep from an anonymous publisher to whom I had sent a check in much the same way that Art in America would (were I to subscribe to it) or October, etc.

Here are some quotes from your post and responses:

"What I was trying to contend in my essay is that "radical artifice" and "indeterminacy" often coincide with a poetic practice that looks an awful lot like a struggle between academics and their discursive efforts to control the determination of good poetry."

— You fail to establish this point in your essay, but as I don't have this with me I can't argue with that text. But I would like to ask where you find Charles Bernstein, for instance, talking about "good poetry," in those very terms since you obviously are very happy with taking other terms of his out of context. I would also like to argue that Charles would not make the mistake that you are making in your comments here, as he goes to great lengths to establish any sort of new terminology with a wealth of often very rich material, whether it be Veronica Forrest-Thomson (whom I would suggest you read before deciding that "radical artifice" and "emotion" are as incompatible as you state) to Langston Hughes. This is an effort to show exactly what he is talking about "looks like." You might want to illustrate, also, which "struggle" you are talking about, perhaps a lengthy quote from one such struggle, and compare this to, say, one of these poems you are talking about. As a final point, I would add that a comparison with Pound's "discursive efforts to control the determination of good poetry" probably resembled the mainstream and academic effort of his time to make these very same value judgments, though in form rather than in content or even style of rhetoric, than Charles' do his own mainstream contemporaries.

"In concrete terms, this means that we who believe that radical politics is at least possible cannot mistake the act of simply writing vague, fragmented, ambiguous etc. poems with the changing of the business of poetry."

— Yes, you cannot, but there are many other mistakes that can be made, such as that of an emotionalism unmodified by recourse to the data at hand.

"The business of poetry is all the various devices, contraptions which do the actually judging of poetry and that lead to a belief that the only important writers are those who are being written on (cf. the writers of dissertations)."

— One thing I would mention, again looking at this Pound / Bernstein dichotomy, is that Bernstein has struggled to come up with a critical apparatus with which to gauge the "quality" of poetry which is decentralized, open to anomaly, not focused on the racial or gender make-up of the group with which he is most associated, non-canonical in the sense that many of the poets he writes about were not "universal" writers in the sense of Goethe or, closer to home, Frost, etc. While there are many ways to argue with his essays — and I have several friends whom you would consider "stooges" (I think you use this word twice in your essay) of the Language Poets who have taken essays such as "Poetics of the Americas" to task — the essential contours of the project are very admirable and deserve very close attention, and the method, which relies on incredible amounts of research, thought as to the context in which the statements will appear, etc. not to mention focusing on that context, which indeed is often an academic context — who has been a more strong and legitimate critic of the practices of the academy (which, despite our coolness in pride in being "non-academic" and "street-wise" is a major cultural institution which, unless you want to throw it out completely, is worth attempting to review and rebuild) than Charles Bernstein? I'm sure there are dozens of people who are willing to claim that it's "ruining poetry," blah blah, and that Charles is just another cog, but there has been a subtle shift in the attentions of his essays that has been toward a consideration of that very institution to which he belongs — a very pointed, angry, to many annoying, specific, meaningful, researched, criticism which, if anything, illustrates the integrity of his project. That is, he is not in denial that he is part of an institution of which he is highly critical, and in fact may find abhorrent (though I shouldn't advertise this point, he would be the first one to dissuade you from attending the Buffalo program if he didn't think it was worth your time). Well, I won't go on here, unless this really bugs you.

"What I commend Jeff Clark for in my essay applies to Garrett Caples, Martin Corless Smith, Cathy Wagner, Tracy Grinnel, Emily Grossman, Brian Lucas and other "non-allied" poets."

— They won't be much longer, if you or anyone else decides to group them that way. The "Non-allied Poets" will be the subject of Marjorie Perloff 2010's famous book, the "Poetics of the Oops Decentralized."

"I commend these poets' refusal to use theory as a way of justifying their own work as either socially relevant or "radical" or even "progressive" or even necessary. I also commend them for not falling into the (fake) hermeticism of the mainstream. A refusal to play poetry for tenure, promotion, etc. may be the most politically effective gesture yet because as long as poetry resembles business,

some way to join the firm or succeed in school, we cannot have "radical" poetries."

— But the turn has to be made to suggest how these poetries are "radical" apart from their apparent break with the fake, in your terms, radicalism of the previous generation. In other words, let's find positive terms rather than negative ones, and the "challenge round" could be: let's find positive terms for these poets' poetics without being Ezra Pound, i.e. finding a tradition for them to be in the line of defending. I don't find anything radical about the poetries of these writers, but I am more than willing to be convinced that they are "radical" — but then again, they certainly don't have to be, either, for me to like them, as I read all kinds of stuff that's politically luke-warm and like it bundles. Consequently, it's very depressing to me to think that this is the most "politically effective gesture yet" since, well, that's a pretty narrow sense of politics. I wouldn't be able to explain that to my mother.

"I commend their humility and I believe that it will go along way farther to counteracting the self-aggrandizing, self-promotional careerist tendencies that have arisen out of an american poetic-theoretical nexus associated with "collapsed subjectivity". The decentered poem does nothing, but when it is consecrated by a host of Hank Lazars, Marjorie Perloffs, and so forth a very real subjectivity is made: the celebrity poet."

— I'm sure they are very nice people, and there are, without a doubt, a few "self-aggrandizing" poets of the Language ilk whose purported interests in collectivity and objective, informed consideration of cultural politics, etc., runs counter to the obviously (not necessarily masculinist but certainly mostly) pride in being as learned as they are, and being able to muscle through the most abstract conversation about issues that, in the end, are pretty dead as soon as they hit air. I could tell you a few stories. But there just aren't nearly as many as statements like the above would suggest, and, again, I am not sure why we choose to criticize poets who have done the kind of reading that their ideas deserve in order to make them fuller, more informed, etc. As Pound himself would write, do we commend a musician for bragging that he/she does not know how to play Mozart? (Yes, Paul McCartney never took singing lessons, hurrah.) It's also a terrible reduction, again, to think that "collapsed subjectivity" has been the primary modus-operandi of the recent American poetics, especially since you suggest, above, that "radical artifice" is the main axis point — you like to work in scare quotes, with interchangeable targets. I think many of us are not nearly as oppressed by the catch phrases.

"One of the most important points Perloff makes in POETICS OF INDETERMINACY is, if I recall, in the chapter on Stein where she discusses the

difference between indeterminacy and ambiguity. There her formalism is at its finest: she shows in detail what made Stein great and what her imitators were not too clear about."

— Please elaborate on this binary. Despite what you might think, I agree with you that cartloads of writing has been produced out of a very vague, un-aesthetic (I mean non-self critical in terms of whether the art at hand is really "working") sense of praxis, and that, in bulk, it is likely to turn off anyone to what we call "postmodern" or even contemporary poetry. On the other hand, when I approach this work and my teeth start to gnash, I have that little line of Bob Dylan's floating around in the back of my head — and if I could sing it the way he does right here I would — "Don't criticize what you don't understand." And so I try to understand, and gnash later. This language of "imitators" is very Poundian, but so again I ask you to look at these ideas — innovation, imitation, originality, etc. — divorced from your obvious aesthetic biases and see if they really work, or are even necessary. "Imitation" has a certain "radical" (a word I rarely use, actually) potential which, well, I am investigating.

"It is in an interesting time to consider whether or not a writer should possess a strong ego and whether or not the language school's post-humanism was every anything but the proliferation of the ego by new means, in new modes."

— This is any easy one to answer: yes. Of course, but from there, let's see what these particular egos have managed to produce, what are the contours of the work, how to they operate socially, when and where has the ego been sacrificed for something that could be called (for lack of a better word) "constructivist," how is the ego played off of this construction, is it really as closed and negating an ego as we at first feel, is it charmless and sterile, etc.

I think that your essay, and this particular post, are part of a trend that I sense very strongly write now in poets who are, say, generally within my age range, some older some younger (so that would be mid-twenties to mid-thirties) who are prone to making very over-arching, "emotional" (most more often hysterical) statements about how the Language Poets have completely subtracted a certain variable — "emotion" — from the poetic equation in America. I would suggest two quick things to read, Max Weber's Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism for an idea of where "our" sense of emotion has gone — it's gone quite far, but far away, I think, such that now we don't really know how rich "emotion" can be, or how complicated — but also Charles' exchange with Louis Simpson in one of those books that Lazar published a while back, an exchange that reappears, I think, in the Politics of Poetic Form, in which his ideas on "emotion" are most misunderstood and most strongly stated. I certainly don't think it's wrong to take CB up on his ideas — that's what they're there for, in fact, and few welcome

strong criticism of his ideas like he does — but the "ambiguous, not too clear" criticism the likes of which appear in your essay are none too productive.

Well, I could go on, but, luckily perhaps, am out of time.

Sincerely,

Brian

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A "Defense" of Jacques

21 May 1999

The first of several defenses of Jacques Debrot, a reliable ally in these years; Stefans mentions having already said as much to Debrot "in a backchannel." Little on this list stayed backchannel for long.

Dear Mark,

I think you point out many interesting and relevant observations about Jacques Debrot's post the other day, things I noticed myself and conveyed to him in a backchannel — we had an interesting correspondence. Regardless of what I think about the Rhizome essay, I disagree that Debrot's post plays into this quasi-paranoic (I'm not using this as a pathological diagnosis but in the funny "Pynchon and the Jesuits behind the radiator" kind of way) belief in the interconnectivity of all literary figures who, in Schaefer's term, would be called "celebrity." You write that, in the lack of a "major statement... analyzing what these compromises, blind spots and hypocrisies are," that: "Clearly JD is throwing in here with SS's 'Perloff cronies seizing power' thing," but I think this is not accounting for the context of his post, which is that it is a post — scrawled rather hastily when the bosses aren't looking — and I think Debrot is was quite capable, in this case, in alluding to the larger argument without necessarily having to provide all the goods. His tone in what was probably going to become a "heated" discussion was extraordinary, and to associate him with a word like "cronies" to JD is a bit past the mark — if he wanted to use the word "cronies" he probably would have. I was actually more concerned about the line: "The various stories I've heard about the background of *In the American Tree* would surprise a lot of people I think," since, on the one hand, this could have touched off a few nerves, but on the other, yes, I've heard these stories, too, but my tendency is to think that these are undocumented, hence merely "gossip" until someone steps forth to take responsibility for them. (There is some content to these stories, as there is content to the decision to exclude key non-Americans from the anthology, all of which is worth discussing once the cards are on the table.) (He also didn't make one very obvious point, however, which is that Perloff is in no way a "Leftist.")

I also agree that "no one has made anything "unavailable," and that it the Ashbery approach is a good one (never heard the line myself, but it'll become part of the personal canon), but I think you missed, as I did originally, what was said in the final lines of his post:

"The contextual bias of Language Writing — its overwhelming emphasis on the role of subjects in the situation of communication seems a very difficult topic for further aesthetic development (an observation which, I realize, needs to be qualified to a much greater extent than I have time to do here). To the Language Poets this must seem like giving up ground already fought over and won, but new negotiations & reconsiderations of, among other things, the place of the emotions in poetry, & the scope & variety of their presentation seem to me especially timely now."

I know it's impossible to point out at every turn how rushed we often are in writing these things for the list, but I think Debrot was pretty honest here in making clear that he realizes that his arguments were being compromised by time, but also in making a corrective to the earlier statement that certain poetic elements are "unavailable," which is of course not something any poet should believe about what "can" or "is to be" done in their writing. And the observation about "giving up ground" is also good, and he's pretty much right, but I would add that (using the Kuhnian "paradigm" paradigm for a moment, from *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*), that we are probably in a moment of "crisis", in which the anomalies are coming forth and rendering older paradigms ineffective — i.e. they can't assimilate it — which puts all of us in a rush for a "new language" and until we find it we are heavily oppressed by the old one (which, in a darkened room, wouldn't be able to find a lit match) and in such a situation something like "giving up ground" would look very different to a poet with a different "paradigm." In other (laughably reductive) words, poets of the old "paradigm" not only look at the data (in this case, the poetry, polemics, statements, depressions, anxieties, poor spelling, senses of "progress") of the new poets with very different interpretive eyes, but don't even, in some instance, acknowledge this stuff as "data", but rather as ephemera — the "lowbrow" — that will be washed away once the heavier engines of their own paradigms come back into play. This is more than saying that the generations are shifting, so-and-so are crusty and narrow-minded, etc., since if we could just say that nobody would be nearly as "hysterical" (to quote myself — again a word I use in a cartoonishly Freudian sense) as they, sometimes, appear to be. (Kuhn attributed suicides and all kinds of strange behavior to paradigm shifts.) This is interesting in terms of "Left" and "Right" since, for example, I know a number of poets in the scene here who would be termed by the older generation as being "reactionary" (not backwards, but

quite contemporary, just "Right"), while to poets of their own ages they are quite clearly "Left" in their politics even if their poetry is of very different forms than what the prior poet would consider progressive. It also interesting in light of how actions of individuals and the actions of institutions are often confused in these "hysterical" statements. I mention Kuhn and paradigms since I want to try to explain this feeling of ubiquity in terms of "power control" when related to the Language poets — in the Kuhnian scheme, it's not power control so much as paradigm control, these poets being very much assimilated into a scheme of knowledge that is for the moment in the ascendant (in our very small circle), and which, quite involuntarily, renders newer schemes of knowledge impotent by the rejection of the anomalies they produce _until_ they complete that paradigm shift which assimilates the anomalies. Which is to say the sense of rejection many poets seem to feel by, for example, Charles Bernstein, is partially, if not completely, the result of the sense of rejection a certain rather disembodied paradigm creates rather than something a single person could be said to have affected — I only mention CB since he is probably one of the most passionately disliked of poets today and probably has more nonsense attributed to him than anyone I know, and yet, for those who read him (and certainly by those who know him), he enjoys, defends, criticizes, and understands a tremendously wide range of poetry which, in the abstract, he technically "shouldn't like" (again, why he is often confused with an "institution" or a system of knowledge, regardless of his obvious reality as a passionate, flawed, interested, and in my eyes excellent poet). This isn't to take the "human element" out of it — I'm sure CB, for example, has been ripped (I mean, "pissed" in the English sense) at a few parties and been less than generous to all ranges of fauna and flora — but to point to the justification of terms like "unavailable" in Debrot's post, since I think many people do believe — and are justified in believing because, heck, belief is necessary, usually has it's basis in experience — that Language poetry rendered many types of writing impossible. As you (Mark) point out, in poetry nothing is out of the question, especially if you can steal — so why do so many poets feel oppressed by what is a wealth of material to steal from? (Note: I'm a shameless klepto.)

Well, longer than I expected. In any case, I look forward to what Jacques has to write in the future, and I felt that, finally, his post was quite suggestive, not to mention diplomatic.

Cheers,
Brian

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The Naif and the Bluebells

03 Jun 1999

The soft launch — a lightweight “preview” of a web-poem for slow modems, floated on an admittedly “pretty ugly” Arras site while Stefans warns everyone off the sugar free.

I wanted to announce a "preview" version of a web-poem called "The Naif and the Bluebells" that I've been working on for the past several weeks. This is a short version of the whole thing, which will find it's final home on www.ubu.com, the concrete/sound poetry site that Kenny Goldsmith runs.

The short version — about 30% or so of the long-version — contains no Javascripts, fewer applets, and lighter images, and was made especially for those with 3.0 generation browsers or slow modems and processors. It can be found at:

<http://www.bway.net/~arras>

Please check it out, and certainly tell me if something doesn't work!

(This is also the Arras site, which I'm presently updating — it's pretty ugly right now. Stay away from the sugar free!)

Cheers,
Brian

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The Naif and the Bluebells: full version live

10 Jun 1999

One week later the full version arrives, now with Javascripts that break on Macs, warnings about cache, and embedded tricks you should watch for but not “get crazy with” — the web-poem as obstacle course.

The full version of my web-poem, along with much new material (two full Saroyan books, Hausmann sound files, etc.), is now at Kenneth Goldsmith's ubu site, which can be reached at:

<http://www.ubu.com>

There are some problems with the html which make it look pretty horrible on a Mac, and until we get this fixed, Mac users can check out the full version at:

<http://www.bway.net/~arras>

Some notes: — only 4.0+ browsers will be able to get through the full version as some of the javascripts will not work (I haven't had the time or resources to debug on all browsers, and not even sure if they will work on 3.0) — if you are running a 4.0+ browser and get a script error, then the files (most likely the images) haven't fully downloaded; let the files finish and then inter-activate — remember that the files are cached, so you can look at it again later at a much quicker speed

(provided you don't clear you cache) — there are some embedded tricks in the pages, such as mouse-activated java poems, clickable areas in the images and text masses, etc., that you should watch out for, but don't crazy with it — if nothing's happening, then nothing's there (hint: the black dots always work eventually) — re: "Atlanta", I take what appears a dig at Atlanta, but I really do like what's happening there, the poetry group and the ideas; read the "Credits" page to gather what I mean

The poem is dedicated to Kenny and Cheryl's new baby, Finnegan Francis Donegan Goldsmith, born this past Friday, May 29th.

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Edmund Berrigan; Barbara Guest, *Disarming Matter* · *Rocks on a Platter*

30 Jun 1999

*Two reviews written for a trade journal and cut past recognition before print; holding the rights, Stefans posts the long originals. The Berrigan (*Disarming Matter*) is a debut notice generous to a fault; the Guest (*Rocks on a Platter*), of an elder he plainly reveres and thinks the New York School too chauvinist to have credited.*

Speaking of reviews, here are a few things I wrote for a trade journal that were altered completely (mostly cut) prior to their publication. But I have permission to "publish" the original versions, so voila.

Edmund Berrigan, *Disarming Matter*
0-9669430-07, The Owl Press

"I have a desire to transcend conscious speech / not to the exclusion of words or letters, / it is not a scholarly wish, must be removed / from the present past future inclusive everything / beyond understanding," writes Berrigan in "The Orbit Room" (76). While not always so heady, the underlining feature to this debut volume — ranging in tone from the beat goofiness of a Gregory Corso to the Symbolist-tinged collages of early Ashbery, from the rich dailiness of a Bernadette Mayer to the more heated "boheme" of Rimbaud — is a negotiation between the dream-like unrealities of daily life, a polyvalent sexuality that is not out of tune with much Gen X flirtation with extremes, and a figure called "God" who occasionally drops in as something like a placeholder for the channel to the "other" world. The beautiful long sonnet sequence "Cross House" is a mysterious affair, like a trapeze through a virtual haunted mansion, with figures of love and desire teaming among the threat of limitless possibility: "The persons I have seen in patterns / were so torn as to be absolute traips / [...] She had never seen him trusted above all / earthly things. They were leaning on the / screen before the fire. 'You bear your / wrongs more gently than I can bear / mine.' He bent over the group / in a caressing way, with renewed violence." (54) The quiet surety of

Berrigan's meters are perfect for the wavering between "violence" and the "caress," and he resembles a 17th century methaphysical — Herbert the closest — in his decorous rhetoric, which he dons most strongly when asking the "big questions": "I have something, a major contribution / to the record of life, in a world winter-obscene, that / works with fingers peel back a series of inventions / for mortality. Armchair comfortable for those who desire it. / Absence from the physical being as strong a security as any." (34) These are big issues for such a poet in his mid-twenties, one who, consequently, never takes himself too seriously, and is as pop-sensible, funny and crazily improvisatory as any grunge lyricist: "I am a heartfelt bulging crotch / when I take on the swiss initiative / [...] I made love to Nico a lot, I dug her a lot / it was like hanging out with a guy except / she had girl pants." (16) This combination of addresses to the higher powers with a mischievous running-with-the-disaffecteds of the present makes Berrigan a Hamet-like figure for the nineties -- not the highbrow of Eliot, but a thoughtful, late-century rebel engaged in his deep, "irrational" discourse with Yorick while the world only dreams.

Barbara Guest, *Rocks on a Platter*
0-8195637-22, Wesleyan

Rocks on a Platter is a book-length work by a poet who has, over the past decade or more, increasingly come to be seen as a major force in innovative poetics. Guest is often associated with the "New York School" of poets (Ashbery, O'Hara, Schuyler) but is traditionally overlooked by chauvanistic scholars preferring a homogenized version of the literary/art nexus of activity in Manhattan in the 50's and 60's -- notably David Lehman in his recent history *The Last of the Avant Garde*. It appears that she may have the last laugh, as the yet-living poets of that group have retreated into blase irony and, occasionally, the poetic equivalent "pot-boilers," while Guest has forged onward with her near-flawless ear and synaesthetic eye for word values, in the process breaking down her syle into a more spare, but never less than rich, idiom, for which she has come to be praised. As if echoing Ashbery, the poem starts: "Ideas. As they find themselves. In trees?" but nonetheless moves on to a declaration of intent peculiar to herself, finding "Dreams set by / typography. A companionship with crewlessness..." Though the figure of Rimbaud doesn't appear in this work -- Shelly, Byron, H.D., Ovid, and Eliot are among the figures inescapably alluded to -- Guest displays a "taste only for earth, and rock," as her carved jewels of word-clusters illuminate the white space: "Pockets jingle highly responsive place in the shelter / of those rocks at last the jingle of your pockets / HEARD ON THE PAGE." Time, presence, the ability of the eye to create time out of word patterns, are perhaps the central subjects here -- though she writes blankly "suspicious / of fragmentation" this poem is highly "fragmented," though joined symphonically in the play/space of

the page as “score” -- a concern that exhibits itself in what can be read as commentary on the poem itself, making this an essay in poetics as much as an epistemological cat-and-mouse. “Without shyness or formality /// ‘a gesture of allowing oneself time’” she writes (the immense white space between these spaces, where this gesture occurs, cannot be reproduced here), and later: “‘flotsam of the world of appearances’ / drifting by and out of the picture,” pointing to a Herecletian, but also defiantly feminine (i.e. non-determinate both rhetorically and ideologically) poetics. This is a very approachable book by a poet who is bound to show you something you didn’t know was possible in American poetry, though the French may have been trying to tell us this for some time: that the whiteness of the page can be radiant.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Williams

15 Jul 1999

Home-field advantage, pressed for all it is worth: the boy from Rutherford whose doctor was Williams's son opens on the modernists' anti-Semitism and immediately complicates it, sorting Williams's “speaking through the other” from the tracts of Eliot and Pound. Three numbered questions, no answers offered — the characteristic Stefans move of raising the stakes and then declining to cash the chips.

Hi Folks,

I have a lot of vague thoughts on this matter, being both of mixed ethnic origin and from Rutherford, NJ (as I never tire of telling people, WCW's son was my doctor when I was a lad, and in high school I would occasionally feign illness as a pretext for intelligence missions). I don't remember reading about his collaboration with a Chinese white supremecist, nor have I read the letters that speak of circumcision, which are no doubt pretty ridiculous and stupid, though it is worth remembering that, of all the “major modernists”, Williams was (to me) the most seriously compromised by his lack of “sweetness and light” in Arnold's phrase — i.e. despite his education in Switzerland (I think), at Horace Mann and in Pennsylvania, he was pretty lacking in the “humanities” but often, to his credit, seemed to go out of his way not to be cosmopolitan in the way of Pound. He at least felt bad enough about his suburban disposition to downplay his own role as an unacknowledged legislator — i.e. he classed himself as a “dog among dogs.” In any case, here are a few rambling questions regarding this subject (no answers):

1. if he never created a “positive” image of a civilization or culture that didn't include Jews, in the sense of a new Italy or Europe, could he be classed with the anti-semitism of Eliot or Pound, who wrote extensive tracts on the subject? 2. to say that Williams, like Pound, had “Jewish friends” hence he was not anti-Semitic

is, yes, a bit weak (an older saw than the *ginzu*), but what were the value systems of these Jewish artists that Williams supported, values that he knew and recognized — such as in Ginsberg's *Howl* — and how did they run counter to a classically contoured, Euro-centric, authoritarian — in any case "passeist" — image that Pound and Eliot threw up against the miscegenation that would be the inevitable result of liberal capitalism? I somehow think that Zukofsky's leftism was modified for Pound by his choice, in the famous "Mantis" sestina for example, to utilize very old forms, or the "luminous detail", method in putting forth his image of civilization — indeed, LZ seemed to believe that "civilization" had its glories that were worth preserving, in opposition to say the pessimism of much continental writing. (LZ was also a faultless highbrow.) But what could be similarly modified in the writing of Ginsberg — didn't you more or less have to take the whole range of values or leave them? 3. could Williams, who took pains, I tend to think, to differentiate from a Puritan, self-policing sensibility — hence his attraction to Ginsberg — be put under the same microscope as a Pound or Eliot? That is, even if he had a better side to him that recognized anti-Semitism, especially in 1939, as something one does not want to humor as a political disposition, isn't it possible that he also rejecting this self-negotiation in favor of the "potency" of language — after all, this is the guy that sprinkled exclamation points in poems about flowers. He kind of liked to curse; the Calibanic strain was quite strong with him (to echo Obi Wan). 4. on the note of racial slurs and things, I noted in my Philly Talk much to the chagrin of the audience that there was a way that my Asian friends and myself used to pick on each other in high school that was, for me, therapeutic, involving those very ethnic slurs that we were often only on the receiving end of. Which isn't to say we became racist, since we just used to pick on each other to sort of poke at the wound. A little later in life, this has grown, for me, into an identification with Korea and the Korean people in a sort of direct but failing way, such that I often, to myself, refer to Koreans as "my people" and Korea as "my country" or whatever, and so when I hear of a North Korean submarine washing up on the South Korean coast, I think, "what are my pathetic little people doing now"? I've only been there once, and of course I am not "Korean," but then again I exercise a certain freedom possible to "Americans" to be that other at least if it gives me comfort. Obviously this is just an interior play, something about exchangeable identities, and so forth. I also tend to have words like "gook" and "chink" floating around in my consciousness quite often, not in conversation but in private thought, often on the verge of finding their way into print, and sometimes they do get there — why not? I don't tend to think of this so much as "self-hatred" or hatred for an other, so much as a play on identity, a way of erasure through signature, etc. So in contrast to the interpretation of Williams use of expletives as "ironic," it seems to me a different reading is possible. I.e.

Williams had a pretty strong memory of his Jewish grandfather — isn't pretty inevitable that we would have to read a relationship to this ancestor of his in any terminology that he uses that would seem to class him with the anti-Semites, the oppressive "other"? Whose voice is he using at this moment? 5. what about Williams' relationship to Catholics — those "Catholic bells"? I don't know the history well enough, but Rutherford now is pretty heavy with Catholics (I was raised a Catholic), but I would guess that it was a phenomenon just in the making in Williams' time. I tend to think Williams — who fetishized the word better than any "American" before him — seemed to fetishize everything from, again, flowers to potatoes (to the "e" in potatoes) to too young girls to ethnic minorities (cf. Mackey's well-known essay on his exclamation-point riddled poem on jazz music). This seems to be where the Polish mothers meet the wheelbarrow, in a specific over-riding ontology — what is there is not me, etc.

As a last note, I tend to be wary of the granting of letters a confirmation of the potency of the panoptic gaze, which is to say that a consideration of the contexts of letters demonstrate that they hide as much as they seem to "reveal." I'll have to look those letters up, but considering that Williams map of a "civilization" is one that would have to be more often surmised than can be found elaborated linearly — that he just wasn't a systematic thinker — his idiotic banter on the sidelines with a guy like Pound — whose system of thought was pretty ornate but tremendously corrupted by his hatred and prejudices, considering that the system was centered around ideas of beauty and wisdom, such that we would have to believe this hatred quite intense for it to survive, and hence his depression when he finally realized how intense this hatred was (it suggests to me Carlyle's discovering upon the death of his wife that he was quite a cad — another Puritan sensibility run amock) — could be taken in many ways, perhaps even as the sort of masculinist sparring that we know of that leads to an agreement in terms that are often less than agreeable. Pound overwhelmed him more often than not.

I have no answers to the above questions in general, just thought to toss them out. I would suspect, I suppose, that Williams would behave differently if he were in Rome in 1939, or that his letters would be somewhat different, but since both his humanism and his anti-semitism were not really challenged by much more than what he read in the papers — i.e his imperative to decide was not quite as strong as for a European — then much of this is speculation.

Anyway, I got to get back to work.

Cheers,
Brian

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PS on Williams

15 Jul 1999

The "other comments" Stefans refers to are his own, in the longer post "Williams," from days earlier the same month. See ["Williams"](#).

As a sort of postscript to my other comments on Williams, I would note that the quotes Eliot Weinberger draws from his stories, while being quite powerfully derogatory, could be seen to consistently fall within the realm of "speaking through the other," i.e. echoings of the local tongue and prejudices, and also within my idea of the fetishized ethnicity. My sense is that Williams didn't belong to any local community in Rutherford in any very easy way — he felt quite alienated, as we all know — so a lot of what sounds like "plain speech" in Williams can often be seen as not his own plain speech, until perhaps the Asphodel poem where it seems all him. But that's because we know to whom he is speaking — i.e. Flossy. But when he writes "He was one of those Jews..." sounding like he's addressing someone, but who is this? (If one imagines that he thought his first or only readers for such stories would be his sophisticated New York literati friends, many of whom were Jewish, how do these lines resonate with them?)

In any case, what would be interesting would be if someone could find the kind of invective that one finds in Pound and Cummings and others, or the kind of detached "objective" tone in Eliot's writing on Christian culture, in Williams — i.e. something more discursive and outside the realm of pure imagism, something with a sure sense of audience and purpose — since such a thing would point to a more synthesized world-view in Williams that presently we can't see. I've never quite figured out whom Williams was addressing in *Spring and All*, for example — much of which, as I'd written to a friend earlier, would sound like the most vicious "flame" on the internet — and I think this vagueness about his audience contributes to the choppy, seemingly incomplete nature of his "career," i.e. the ups and downs of his work.

Also, can I suggest Marianne Moore as a modernist not motivated by hate or exhibited anti-semitism? I'll probably find this wasn't the case.

Brian

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What to do with all this Real?

19 Jul 1999

Mark had answered the Williams argument with a childhood anecdote — a resort owner's son, a black German Shepherd with an unrepeatable name — and Stefans, refusing the bait, reroutes it into a thought experiment about modernist quotation and the terror of unmarked speech. The lower block quotes the anecdote back in full, so the reader watches him decline to be moved by it in real time.

I don't think this is a fair reading of what I wrote. Perhaps, if you'd like a new angle on this, you can imagine writing a story with your friend from the Poconos as the protagonist, and when quoting him in the story not use quotation marks. You, as most of us, would be very frightened to do this because you would wonder if a reader would think these were words reflecting your own opinions or personality. But nonetheless this is what a lot of modernists did, I guess because it was supposed to be an unmediated representation of objective reality, which in the scientific spirit of the day was a primary goal. Of course, if you don't think your friend from the Poconos is worth literary immortality you wouldn't write the story at all, but then again you wrote this post, so your friend, racist or not, was somehow useful.

When I was a little kid we used to vacation at a cheap resort in the Poconos, which were a lot more remote before the construction of I-80 than it is now. I became close friends with the owner's son who had a black German Shepherd names Nigger. I don't think he'd ever met a Black person, but I don't doubt for a minute that he and his family were racists. But maybe when he called his dog he was feigning a persona.

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[To Mark, on the dog analogy]

21 Jul 1999

"Not to drag this on" is how Stefans drags it on, retiring from the dog-name quarrel over the course of a paragraph that first corrects Mark's grammar — one does not "feign a persona" — and then signs off gracious. He wants it understood that he is no apologist for Williams, who is "much better messy and flawed," and that the exit is his idea.

Hi Mark,

Not to drag this on, but it seems to me this story is unrelated to what the context of my ideas were earlier. I'm don't see how the naming of a dog, and the eventual calling by its name and what light this sheds on the moral make-up of a family, has anything to do with sitting down and writing a short story, a modernist one no less, which involves a plethora of aesthetic and strategic issues that are simply overshadowed by this connection — why reduce? I think just dumping a discussion of Williams into this anecdote is too easy, besides being poorly thought through (more important than the names of philosophers would be a clear goal and consistency in thought, especially in such a thorny realm — and what makes you think I would have been better treated than that family, which you hold

before me as an example of my ignorance?). I am certainly not an apologist for Williams — he's much better messy and flawed, but you seem to imply this by your last sentence, which has a certain acidic tenor which I deemed "unfair," and still do because you used sentiment to guide an opinion regardless of the content of my post and those it was responding to. Consequently, I don't know what your jibe on "feigning a persona" has to do with what I wrote since I didn't write about personae, nor about "feigning" one (which is kind of impossible, people usually "adopt" a persona, or "feign" a personality — "feigning a persona" would put you two steps behind the surface). I was talking about words and sentences, the "many origins" to misquote Olson, and not "irony" (there's a bit of negative capability thrown in there also, I guess).

Anyway, I'll happily retire from this one. Just wanted to clear that up —it's implicit in the previous post, I think.

Yours,
Brian

I'm not sure I understand what you're saying. Williams is more than any modern poet the source of my own development as a poet, so I guess I think he's useful. And the boy in the story was my best friend. I don't think either of them were being ironic in expressing their less savory attitudes.

I don't think this is a fair reading of what I wrote. Perhaps, if you'd like a new angle on this, you can imagine writing a story with your friend from the Poconos as the protagonist, and when quoting him in the story not use quotation marks. You, as most of us, would be very frightened to do this because you would wonder if a reader would think these were words reflecting your own opinions or personality. But nonetheless this is what a lot of modernists did, I guess because it was supposed to be an unmediated representation of objective reality, which in the scientific spirit of the day was a primary goal. Of course, if you don't think your friend from the Poconos is worth literary immortality you wouldn't write the story at all, but then again you wrote this post, so your friend, racist or not, was somehow useful. Date: Thu, 15 Jul 1999 18:16:46 -0700 From: Mark Weiss <junction@EARTHLINK.NET> Subject: Re: PS on Williams When I was a little kid we used to vacation at a cheap resort in the Poconos, which were a lot more remote before the construction of I-80 than it is now. I became close friends with the owner's son who had a black German Shepherd names Nigger. I don't think he'd ever met a Black person, but I don't doubt for a minute that he and his family were racists. But maybe when he called his dog he was feigning a persona.

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Re: Pound and the Bollingen Prize

28 Jul 1999

The Bollingen question — whether a prize could be given to the Pisan Cantos and withheld from the man who wrote them — arrives on schedule, as it does in every generation of this list. Stefans takes the bait with relish.

I tend to think we're revolving around the old issue of the "Politics of Poetic Form" here since, in someone like Bernstein's reading of the Pisan Cantos, the form of the poem actually undermines what would be the non- or supra-poetical work of the "man." That is, it seems the essays by the man, which we take to be a literary product of Pound as the "man of action" don't find their fulfillment or their natural corollary in his poems, which one would consider the works of the "man of thinking." So talk of the "man" is split here since we know this person two ways, via an activity which we normally associate with biography — what the guy did when he wasn't writing poetry — and the activity we normally associate with the "work," that seemingly isolated ("art-for-art's sake"), timeless artifact. If we are to take Bernstein's reading of Pound in "Pounding Fascism" seriously, we wouldn't have any "man" left over to hold against the prize or the literature — the split would be too profound.

If you want to imagine a gross exaggeration of what this paradigm suggests (though who's more exaggerated than Pound), imagine Robert Mapplethorpe leading a double life as a Washington lobbyist, or some Xtian rightist, pushing for something like strict policing of the internet, mandatory short haircuts for men under the age of twenty, prayer before every meal, or well just imagine him being some sort of obsessed (sexually repressed) outsider politico pushing for centralized, conservative values (and symbols) that run up against his art work. Then, when it is time to offer him a prize, you would be in the position of asking whether the "work" is the same thing as the "man". It's not unimaginable that even a Mapplethorpe could be split this way, since there are all sorts of breaks like this in twentieth century art, it seems, such as:

Why wasn't Robert Smithson an environmentalist? (I know because I read his writings, but it's surprising.)

Why does Clarence Major prefer the poetry of John Berryman over the "New American" poets? (cf. Mackey on Major in *Discrepant Engagement*).

What are Ian Hamilton Finlay's political views? (I.e. why is he, who in many ways seems so much milder in temperament than a Bruce Andrews, more clearly agrarian-rightist-revolutionary and someone like BA a leftist?) Who, then, becomes the more "elitist" artist, the rural aristocratic Finlay or the urban cosmopolitan Andrews? And why do the poetics of a Marxist like Hugh MacDiarmid seem invariably more conservative than Finlay's?

A recent one I came across: apparently the German painter Gerhard Richter was the prophet of pop art back in the day, introducing or at least championing Warhol and those folk, but now he seems to clearly on the monumental side — large-scale abstract paintings, with a near classical sense of balance, or perhaps romantic sense of sturm and drang — with someone like Kiefer in opposition to the "democratic" vision of someone like Polke. How does that happen?

Why are poets like Drew Milne and Jeremy Prynne, the former of whom is a recognized Marxist scholar, more or less perceived, by the Americans aware of their work, as somewhat reclusive, decidedly "highbrow" poets (I think in the tradition of Thomas Gray)? (My question is also whether Milne recognizes any sort of camaraderie among the American language poets since his introduction to the anthology of Marxist literary criticism he edited with Terry Eagleton seemed to suggest a parallel series of ideas, despite the very different temperament.)

(Sorry to present an exclusively male list here, but nobody comes to mind right now as presenting this sort of dilemma, though I guess Moriko Mori, who's a bit young to be well known, walks a pretty interesting line between conservative "Buddhism" and her techno-narcissistic-adoration.)

Actually, more women do come to mind: why is Barbara Kruger using techniques explored by proto-fascist artists, including some of their color schemes, to present purportedly progressive feminist propaganda? Is this art or social work?

Well, not exactly. I agree that:

The work is not the man. The prize is not the man. Therefore, the man is neither the prize nor the work.

However: The prize is the both work and the man. There has to be work to be a prize; and, by implication, there has to be a man (or woman) to be work. The ratio of man to prize increases in relation to how "political" the selection criteria are.

In general, I feel that ethical considerations of the writer's life should be entirely separate from considerations of the work—not that ethical concerns shouldn't be considered, discussed, dissected, etc., just that they shouldn't be seen as germane to the work. At all. A close-up of anyone's life reveals multiple layers, "selves" and contradictions—the study of personality is an interesting one. However, in the case of a writer, their biography is merely another footnote, and maybe a totally misleading footnote at that. A critique of the work, on the other hand, is much closer to the writer's "self."

The work is not the man, neither is the prize the work. The prize, as i think you are saying, is a political gesture apart from the work.
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Re: persona

28 Jul 1999

Addressed to Dodie Bellamy, and gallant about it: Stefans concedes he was "just being picky with words," then keeps picking, because the rainbow coalition of impersonations was too good to drop.

Hi Dodie,

You're probably right about this, I was just being picky with words in a way. There are many levels of impersonation that you can point to, a virtual rainbow coalition. For instance glammy-camp personas are hardly personae on the level of, say, Al Gore being coached into the presidential persona. The persona you write about, the cocktail party one, reminds me of the movie "Safe." There are varieties of transvetitism which I think would be interesting terms of poetry; my own explorations into this involve a brief stint as Arthur Rimbaud in a "love" poem called "Verl" (a prose piece inspired by the letters, which I guess kind of ties into Acker's personas), poems as a fake English poet (partly inspired by a certain fake Japanese poet), and the various times I've done my own pip-squeaky imitations of Pound, etc. I'd like it if more poets were transvestites; most of us are rather boring in normal life so why not, and if fiction's becoming so passe next to film and "new sentence" poetry then there aren't many venues for identity performance left for a writer. And since personae become, in their ways, symbols, they surface above the semiotic as social constructs that people can understand without having to become subject to them, since the falseness is so foregrounded; i.e. there would be more meat on the bones of a deconstructive poetics than say language-style all-over razzling and hyper-collage aesthetics would seem to permit. Entire senates of puppet plastic personalities, but always tinged with the "pathos" of discipline and responsibility, of a sort that poetry only seems capable of.

But what about when writers adopt certain tones and methods in their writing — I think of Jennifer Moxley here, she's probably the only one right now — which, in their stateliness of pace and foregrounded anachronism (i.e writing as if certain 18th century value systems, such as the emphasis on "sensibility", were still the ascendant, and countering other values such as those centered around the "cult of speed" and information, from Marinetti to O'Hara, for one), go up against any easy romantic notion of "sincerity" and yet are actually using these styles as a way to break back into the "lyric," i.e. the pure soul as speaking, "suffering" thing. Is this a sort of transvetitism (without the overtones of freakishness, but with the cross-gendered aspect)?

| Brian,

I'm intrigued by this idea of feigning a persona as opposed to adopting one. Adopting one sounds like putting it on proudly, even buying into it. Feigning one reminds me of those endless social occasions when I've known what kind of persona was required but I couldn't buy into it, didn't have the heart to fully embrace it, or was lacking in the social skills to pull it off. In those instances, I'd say that feigning a persona would be much more appropriate a category. An awkward ineffectiveness. Cocktail parties come to mind as a dangerous site. Also much of the humor on TV sitcoms, not that I watch them enough to be an authority.

In writing, too, I think this comes up. Kathy Acker's personas, for instance, their delightfulness is in the sense of feigning rather than adopting. Pathos unbalancing power.

When I hit reply to all in Eudora, the speech function kicked in for some reason and my computer started reading your message outloud to me in this mechanical reverb voice. Creepy, but appropriate somehow.

Dodie

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Modernists in the basement

30 Jul 1999

Mid-thread on Pound, Stefans reports going back to the Selected Essays with Roger Griffin's anthology Fascism open beside it — a reader checking the poet's prose against the ideology rather than politely around it.

Re:

*Another pretty instructive exercise is to compare, say, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* with *In the American*.*

I just recently read the anthology Fascism, edited by Roger Griffin for Oxford University Press, and then went back to looking at Pound's writing from Selected Essays and was struck by how the tone of EP's writings there, not to mention the content, is not so far off from the Italian section of this anthology, which isn't surprising but might be to those who abide by the "Pound wasn't a fascist, he was a clown" mentality which is occasionally put forth. EP was in fact much more anti-Semitic than the Italian fascists were at that time (at least officially), it seems to me at least.

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Re: POETICS Digest - 29 Jul 1999 to 30 Jul 1999 (#1999-145)

02 Aug 1999

Answering Jordan on Jennifer Moxley versus Lisa Robertson, Stefans draws the finer distinction the thread had blurred: Robertson foregrounds her artifice while Moxley smuggles hers in as sincerity, so that her real strangeness turns out to be "the free use of convention." He predicts, not unkindly, that she is "destined to be" poorly imitated — the compliment and the epitaph in one clause.

Hi Jordan,

Yes, of course Debbie does that very much. What interests me about Moxley is that she's trying to sneak in much of this artifice and sensibility that is "anachronistic" as being very much a mark of "sincerity," or that she's not quite foregrounding her artifice the way Robertson does, nor does she engage in that hyperbolic rhetoric that just drenches Debbie in soap-box irony (meaning that irony whose "message" outweighs its levity). (She did more in her first book, but not in the new chappy.) Debbie could be said to be a safer work, I think, due to its density and ideological surety — I mean the means of reception are in place for a book like that, and the influences leading up to it are more or less respected when they're not totally obscure — whereas I think the Moxley chapbook — what's it called now, something Life — attempts a sort of monumentality unhindered by this (debilitating?) irony, for better or worse (worse when it is poorly imitated, as she is destined to be), and freely accesses certain traditions and modes that are not quite in the ascendant, and these sorts of gesture could sink it for many, though on the other hand haven't and probably won't. This isn't to put Debbie on the lower end of some sort of critical totem pole — it's incredibly smart and wicked like most of Robertson's work — just in this particular light Moxley's poetry comes out as the more unusual even if in the end it's strangeness is the free use of convention.

Another way to look at it: you can't get excited about Moxley's work the way you would about a traditionally "new" sort of avant-garde poetry, since she's not avant-garde or new. And yet there's something there turning many of these value systems on their heads, and she fits in no obvious way into the underground traditions that we are familiar with. But then one asks how she fits in with say a Bishop or say the "mainstream" of today? I think she's at a distance from them precisely because of this use of "anachronistic" technique. Yes, my dear Watson.

Make sense? Well, must run.... Brian

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Boston Poetry

04 Aug 1999

Deputized to gloss Jacques Debrot's provocation, Stefans grants that the "inny and outy" charge against Boston's younger poets was drawn too boldly and then extends it anyway, floating class and a missing European influence as reasons the counter-humanist "edge" never took there. A defense that improves the indictment while claiming to soften it.

It seems to me Jacques was suggesting not that Wieners isn't in the hearts and minds of many poets in Boston, or that Lansing wasn't able to put across some compelling poetry, but that there doesn't seem to be a sense of mission or "progress" in the group of younger poets, and that this can be attributable to the indifference of these poets to thinking about or through these issues along with creating their work. "Exerting influence" is more than just being alive and being read, but at least in Jacques' sense also means circulating ideas, either in prose or in person. Also, Poetry as balm for the soul or as freeway to transcendence are constructs that has been quite tortuously deconstructed or at least debated elsewhere in the States (often enough in the context of the "local") but which, he suggests, hasn't been dealt with at all for or in Boston. I'm interested in knowing if this anti- or counter-humanist discourse never took root in Boston partly as a result of class issues — the "other" big 20th century poets we think of as Bostonians, such as Amy Lowell, John Wheelright, and Robert Lowell, are all from the upper classes, which I tend to think have a liberal bent there? — but also because of perhaps a neglect of European influence (or a lack of Europeans), or a too strong identity as the source of American philosophy, or what? I agree with Dan that the inny and outy aspect of Jacques post was a bit too boldly (as in exaggeratedly, but also daringly) drawn, but if you want to think of Boston as an entity in American poetics it seems a place to start.

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Boston 99

05 Aug 1999

On the word "Alternative" in the title of a Boston poetry conference, which Stefans finds redundant to the edge of comedy — the essay as a slow demolition of a single adjective.

One interesting thing about the word "Alternative" in a title for a poetry conference in Boston is that, for some of us who are attentive to scenes and locations, it's redundant — if the poetry really has something to do with Boston, then it's probably alternative to the rest of us. I tend to think that beyond aesthetic and political lines, the idea of poetries from "alternative" places is beginning to get pretty interesting, since the poetry takes on anthropological value for what it's worth, and in our times with nationalism and plurality are such violently heated issues we can use our analysis as a sort of petrii dish mirroring the world at large.

Anyway, wanted to share this snippet from an unnamed poet from England whom I hardly know, who sent on this bit about the British scene:

"No, I wouldn't disagree that the scene in the UK lacks new younger writers to carry the baton, mostly. It's sort of strange, in that when I visited Cambridge in the mid-1990s there seemed to be quite a vibrant crowd of bright young(ish) things (Helen MacDonald, DS Marriott, Rob MacKenzie, Karlien van den Beukel, etc.) but then there was a long gap where no young writers seemed to be coming up (this is now remedied by the activities of Keston Sutherland & co. I gather). Drew Milne when I asked thought that the mid-90s "bulge" was largely the work of Stephen Rodefer's getting the kids excited, & that things went flat when he left."

I think this is interesting in relation to this idea of poets "passing through," since as the lore has it Jack Spicer passing through Vancouver and giving his lectures seemed to create part of the ambiance that led to Tisch, which then led to Kootenay, etc. And of course Rodefer, to those who know him, carries out something of the Spicerian function in the communities he has touched over the years — I described him to this British poet as "divisive" (in a quasi-pejorative sense) in some contexts such as New York's which has a pretty strong if inchoate "community," and I guess conducive to "poetry" in the context of Cambridge in the mid-90s. Cambridge, by the way, has many strong poets in its immediate area, such as Jeremy Prynne, and of course its Cambridge, so it's not the boondocks. So why did it need Rodefer?

(Footnote: Rodefer, by the way, seemed important enough to Iain Sinclair to be included in the major British Poetry anthology *Conductors of Chaos* in 1997 or so, though he had been in Brooklyn for a number of months by the time it came out. Also, this isn't to say he doesn't have a good effect in New York as well, otherwise I wouldn't be writing about him. It's also worth noting that folks like Jennifer Moxley, Bill Luoma, Doug Rothschild, etc. studied with him in California, hence he's helped shape a generation there.)

I introduce this since Stephen is a very peculiar type of person in poetry society, which is that, besides his immortal escapades, he seems very attentive to younger writers — to the point of oversensitivity sometimes — and badgers them about their work, he likes to make high-minded pronouncements which half the time are nonsense and the other half very provocative (don't ask for more exact percentages), and he has, to boot, stories to tell about his time with poets like Olson, while at the same time having produced a book like *"Four Lectures"* which is seen to be a classic of sorts for language poetics. So he's kind of still a beatnik, kind of a post-structuralist, etc., has some sort of natural lineage, but also likes to hang out. I don't know if he's written any criticism at all, but I would have to

guess he has — in any case, it's not his Selected Essays doing the work. As a side note, nobody questions Stephen's ties to institutions — he has none, never has, I think, besides brief teaching stints.

Anyway, I guess the point is that a person like Rodefer provides something like the social glue that seems to keep communities together. The "glue" is partly the result of talent, interest, intention, but also irrational and, in the standard sense, "social". I remember a friend of mine the U.K. complaining that a certain young lady would only go to the poetry readings to flirt and meet guys — he found this offensive, but I countered that, heck, if you want this scene to start up, if you want all these poets who are really pretty hard-headed, stuck up, intense etc. to spend the inordinate amount of time with each other that it takes to form a scene, then some of these minor details will have to be overlooked. I also said that you should be sure that everybody has a house or apt. to go to after the readings to get drunk, otherwise nobody will ever talk about the reading again. The scene, in other words, would have to handle certain other needs that poets have in abundance, such as that of getting attention, letting loose, meeting people, etc. (To be snide, I would add that half if not more of the poetry you hear at a reading is pretty bad, so if you make a reading hang solely on the entertainment value of the poet, string a few bad ones like that in a row and The End.) (I heard the readings in Boston got a bit flat after a while, for what it's worth.)

This may all sound silly but I just wanted to counter the impression that good intentions ("pluralisms", tolerance) in the form social programs, revamped institutions, or any other injection of capital into an community, urban or not, are necessarily going to bring about a poetry revival, or that any are even necessary. If a "scene" is to develop in a "place", it seems a first step would be to have those poets be interested in that place, and (for it to be "collective") in each other's work and lives. Showing off is also fair motivation in this game, if you want it (though it gets annoying), which seems only possible when people are looking.

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And Try Again

24 Aug 1999

Playing anthologist for an afternoon, Stefans forwards a poem the young Briton Keston Sutherland emailed him — confessing he “can't keep his mitts off O'Hara” — and vouches for it as “funny, bold, provocative, right and wrong.” The verdict hedges every direction at once, which is how he likes to introduce a thing he means to argue with next.

Keston Sutherland, a young British poet, e-mailed me this poem on Tuesday, claiming that he "just can't keep [his] mitts off O'Hara" these days. I've known the problem myself, but O'Hara's only blushed, not bruised — he's done a greater

disservice by his (hardcover) defenders, I feel. In any case, I thought it quite funny, bold, provocative, right and wrong, but well-written:

AND TRY AGAIN

Dainty failure of the lyric,
rising with a tick of mellow
fury to an end that cloys,
fast as the food whose time it crowns.

Three key errors of Frelimo:
pushed too rapidly for heavy
industry and gave too little
support to the peasant sector.

Retained one-party state and govt.
structures of the colonial
era, centralized like those of
socialists in E. Europe.

Failed to predict how the climate
internationally would change:
second oil price rise, sharp rise in
interest rates, Frank O'Hara,
pathos, private recollection,
innovative cracks in grammar,
fetishistic ploy of leaving
meaning for the dogs to sigh on.

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AND TRY AGAIN

24 Aug 1999

Stefans presents a poem the young British poet Keston Sutherland had e-mailed him — the impresario's reflex, handing a discovery to the room before the critic can get a word in.

No, I think you're right that Keston's not got the last word on FOH here, and we've been bunging each other pretty good e-mails over it. But regarding the poem, I didn't read the last quatrain as being an elaboration on "Frank O'Hara" in the prior stanza, mostly because there's a comma and not a colon separating them — had there been a colon, the next items would have been a dependent list. (The title of the poem argues otherwise, of course.) To me, FOH appears in a list of general economic statements that are, in scale, much larger than he himself — part of the humor of it, I guess — and the list continues on with other generalities, though with a shift toward issues of poetics, so FOH, ironically, acts as the channeling of these social issues into the aesthetic, though Keston is arguing that

his poetry diffused them. But if you think of the final stanza as somehow descriptive of the heirs of O'Hara, perhaps in Keston's idea even including the Language poets, though maybe more surely latter New York school poets, then O'Hara becomes — due to other aspects of his writing as well, including his synthesized and not-so-synthesized use of many continental modernist methods that had their relevant links to politics of the left and right — a poet one can read politically (or let's say responsibly, as his heroes were more responsible than political) without a reduction in "pleasure" as folks like David Lehman would have it. O'Hara, for some, comes pretty close to pop art, in that he is seen as blindly assembling a catalogue of how he spends his money and time, how much pleasure he finds in living in the power capital of the world, how thoughtless and hapless and light, etc., but also as an argument against pop art due to his sentimentality, warmth, candour, pathos, etc. — but he's really much more than that if placed here, where Keston places him, I think (though it's sort of where Pound placed Wordsworth, no — a diluter?), in a sort of economic nexus. There are many arguments for why all those things appear in his poems, but the most obvious one is the most vulnerable — that he spent his day doing things (nice things, fun things), and liked to write them down. It doesn't explain how the method works, though, relations to liberated words and Mayakovskian apostrophe, etc. Which means, in the end, that some much better writing has to be done on this guy to wipe away that terrible book which hopefully everyone's forgotten, *The Last of the Avant Garde*.

Oh well, a ramble... but thanks for writing.

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Carla Harryman, *The Words*

15 Sep 1999

"I'm probably going to be taken to task for this," he begins — and, in the thread that followed, was: an unpublished review of Harryman's Sartre-and-Sandburg novel that finds its Modernist models a century past their use. Knee-jerky, he grants in advance, but offered for the argument.

Ok, I'm probably going to be taken to task for this, but here's a little review I wrote a while ago which isn't going to be published (tho here it is!). It may seem knee-jerky to some, sloppily termed or patronizing to others, but perhaps there's some matter here worth discussing? Or if not, not.

* * *

Carla Harryman *The Words*, After Carl Sandburg's *The Rutabaga Stories* and Jean-Paul Sartre *O Books*

The Words is a radical, perhaps even “bold” deconstruction of the novel or memoir forms, but as opposed to the *nouveau roman* of Wittig and Robbe-Grillet, it is scattershot in its targets, and doesn’t appear to point to any secure set of objects or themes. Moments of lucidity are interspersed with wrench-in-the-machinery doggerel that makes reading the book a task -- an intellectually challenging one perhaps, but occasionally disheartening as the form is so clearly indebted to Modernist models that, more than a century old, seem to have outlived their usefulness (as models, that is). Somewhere between a Rimbaud declaiming against the snoring Verlaine and Lautreamont swimming with the sharks, Harryman screams the birth of a new feminine consciousness, one that, indeed, goes a long way in subverting the previous century's conception of female passivity: “After childhood, for many days running I studied people's asses with the slowness of one who has discovered the crucial element in a universal tragedy. I slept too long. I could reach over in bed and feel European history, its density, course through the bloodstream of my adolescent mate. While he slept and breathed equations of collective effort and heroic self-sacrifice, I spread myself across the bed and concentrated on this recurring fantasy: a particle of fog burnt off at midday by the north coast sun.” [12] Though Harryman is considered part of the Language generation of writing, it appears that she develops a line quite directly from English Futurist-inflected writers like Mina Loy and Wyndham Lewis -- both staunch critics of any sort of democratic humanism -- and like them shares a penchant for larger-than-life mythological, or Zarathustrean, figures -- though, post-structuralist as she is, her “mail order allegories” [p. 72] are provisional at best. The protagonist -- more a motif -- in *The Words* is a figure named “Woemess,” which seems a pun on the word “woman” and menstrual imagery (or perhaps the aborted fetus, tying her sense of subjectivity in with that of Baudelaire’s in “Benediction,” in which his mother asked to give birth to a brood of vapors rather than to a poet). She fades in and out of the narrative like a figure in a house of mirrors -- “Woemess baked in the sad plains. She was as unreal as a discovery made elsewhere” starts one chapter -- but occasionally is given to excitable, oracular outbursts: “Woemess put the hat on her head and continued her speech as if she had played all the parts, ‘In the recess of the cryptic world, where my arm sings to transcendental wampum, there are emergency vocabularies waiting in the wings to take over when we are failed by categories. If I wanted to, right now, I could paint the picture of the picture, show you the cryptic world, the song, and the wampum. Or a dreary series of irregular rectangles, a repetitious dirge, and money. But if I take you there, we will be gone.” [57] There is much philosophical terminology in here, as well as many plays towards fable-like forms and Steinian word-centered writing, but the most salient feature seems to be that of the a new voice of feminine power, albeit one

centered around opacity, or moments of overwhelming presence, than master narrative: "Femininity can't be narrated. A theory develops that only what can be ignored can be narrated. Cactus, can it be ignored?" [52] However, though the general texture of the writing is brisk, at times it is repetitive and uncontrolled, and the content, ironically, fails because it is not self-centered enough -- it's the recreation of the struggles of the ego confined more than the hapless, charismatic traces of its enactment. In this way it comes off as a bit academic, artsy, and not philosophical in that unmediated Nietzschean sense that it aspires to -- it doesn't seem to relate to the world. Nonetheless, *The Words* is a pretty good read, and possibly an interesting anthem for feminism.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Bob Perelman, *Ten to One*

15 Sep 1999

"Another one from the U: drive, for no particular reason." A review of Perelman's Wesleyan selected — the most accessible of the Language poets, Stefans argues, because the most rational — pulled off the hard drive and posted where the trade journal wouldn't run it.

Here's another one from the U: drive, for no particular reason.

* * *

Bob Perelman
Ten to One, Selected Poems
 Wesleyan University Press

Perelman has distinguished himself from his Language peers by moving recently into academic respectability, publishing two books of criticism, the second of which, *The Marginalization of Poetry*, was about the Language movement itself. Temperamentally more congenial than poets such as Bruce Andrews, Lyn Hejinian and Barrett Watten, who have often opted for theoretic density or outright opacity in both poetry and prose, Perelman is considered by many the most accessible or even "lyrical" Language poet, but one can also say he is the most rational, as his poetry sacrifices common aspects of aesthetic affect -- such as the angst-ridden dialectic between personal expression and the integrity of form -- for a sort of plain-spoken irony in a tradition that can be traced back to the Enlightenment, or which can be linked to more recent concerns with "entropy" (form dissolved into linked gestures). An early poem such as "An Autobiography" is a play on the type of minimal French novelette, and Perelman is quite apt at satirizing the more indulgent, but perhaps also un-American, aspects of this genre, such as the disclosure of repressed sensibility amidst the drama of religious confession: "I wanted to cover my mother with kisses, and for her to have no clothes on. It was quite usual to feel one side of the face getting

sunburned, while the other was being frozen. A journey of this kind is no joke. [...] I always wanted to give them to her on her bosom. Be so good as to remember that I lost her, in childbed, when I was barely seven." Of his "father," he writes, with metaphysical, Catholic overtones (murder striking at the heart): "I abhorred my father. He brought with him memories of how it feels to be intensely, fiercely hungry. He came and interrupted our kisses." [p. 2] Oddly, Perelman's poetry is atypical of Language writing in that its distrust in the referent is disclosed discursively rather than by example; that is, more like a Barthes than a Bernstein, he appears less concerned with "liberating" language such as to foreground its "presence" than with explaining, casually, perhaps reductively, the links between syntax and ontology: "No place exists even once. Even before / Birth, earlier made up syntax / Could tell you apart / From a thing or two, nothing waiting / In the wind, spiritual placebo plus / The actual problem of dying." ["Statement," p. 53] However, like Bernstein, he can be deathly funny, and uses bathos quite well, as in the poem "Oedipus Rex," which could have been out of Mel Brooke's *History of the World Part I*: "What news, ancient uncle, from the transcendental desktop? / KREON: The people, hemmed in by liberal playgrounds / and rightwing communications systems, are dead / or dying. No one's complaining, mind you, but with the inauguration just hours away the sky seems to be crumbling, and the decibel level in some stadiums is below that of Mallarme's tomb. / God thought you should know." [p. 70] Included in the volume is the poem made famous by Frederic Jameson, "China" -- a series of fake captions to news photographs from China, presented alone as a "schizophrenic" but evocative poem -- which in hindsight is witty still, but nonetheless a toned down, less masterful version of a poem from Ashbery's *The Tennis Court Oath*. Indeed, Perelman can be faulted for not always achieving aesthetic effects in his poems, as many of them -- including the 6-word-to-a-line poems which intend, conceptually, to flirt with the aleatory, and to counter any "false" notions of the idealism of form -- are rhythmically unvaried or unexciting, or at least lack the sort of decisions that, when made well, inspires the reader's interest in the meter, sound patterning and images, and by extension the content. The poems work well as "assays" into topical issues -- Chomsky would be happy with such poetry, as it offers no delusions yet shows the connections, like a domesticated Ginsberg -- and welcome open dialogue with its contents (its authority is pedagogically inclined), but one asks: "Is it art?" Perelman, with a nod to Duchamp's subversions of the retina, would delight in the question.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

John Wilkinson, Anne Tardos

17 Sep 1999

A double notice — Wilkinson's Oort's Cloud and Tardos — too long to be a Little Review and too decided to be anything but criticism. The reviewer's instinct, filed without the label.

John Wilkinson
Oort's Cloud
Barque/subpress

Collecting all of Wilkinson's early books (everything prior to 1988's *Flung Clear*), *Oort's Cloud* is this English poet's first full-length collection easily available in the United States. While Wilkinson is clearly indebted to his former teacher at Cambridge University, the poet J.H. Prynne — both poets share a polymath range of reference and use of complex rhythms, creating a near-forbidding surface density that spirals chaotically around a generally stable underlying formal structure — the younger poet departs in his occasional use of pop cultural references, a directly emotive (nearly satiric but decentered) form of political commentary, and emphatic, almost apocalyptic tone. Indeed, some of these poems — which seem laden with images, yet strangely lacking in color — can be understood as "sculptural" in the most brutal of British traditions. It's not surprising that one of the poems, "Pneumatic Drill," seems to make reference, via the phrase "rock drill," to Jacob Epstein's science fiction-like sculpture of that name. ("Rock Drill" was a piece that utilized an actual drill in it, and became the name of one of Ezra Pound's series of *Cantos*.) The material and rational world become a matter of hard physics, and hard post-Newtonian lessons, in Wilkinson's harsh narrative gaze: "And it's mainly a business of nerve / Finding out the outline of the body / By an accident By the fate of light / And skirting your frozen chamber / They are giants of indifference Ack! Ack! / Like an aching tooth." ("Pneumatic Drill, 51") The influence of George Oppen is apparent, especially in some of the shorter poems in which the weight of a social and moral conscience bear down heavily upon the everyday: "At three-second intervals / air / disturbed his coiffure / too dense & / closely trimmed / to model the much-admired / ruffle effect // To sell his labor power / Find a willing employer // & the competent fan / empire made" (*Mile End Road*, 40) However, the use of highly telescoped physical imagery (often used in the context of a view of the interchangeability of matter) suggests a more harrowed consciousness, such as in the painting of Francis Bacon or the early poems of Gottfried Benn, especially when in poems that suggest the impossibility of reaching *_nearness_* in human relations: "Where have I take you or you guided me / Where I go is dis / ease / warts and thick / vaginal discharge / We are right to be suspicious / of contact / quoth the counter girl". ("Driving Each Other #4"). At times, as at the end of "Pneumatic Drill," Wilkinson seems to mourn the loss of the visionary capacity, or

at least to ironize it; at others, he gives over to a sort of prophetic rhythm that he could be said to share with London contemporary Allen Fisher (and further back with Shelley and Blake). "Air Fleet Base" seems most key in this case, a very long poem that is rather repetitive in meter (Wilkinson's meters are purposely unalluring, but occasionally are flattened out to a overly-recognizable, or perhaps entropically dulled, pattern), but which, in its waves of accruing matter and fugue-like repeats of themes, suggests Walter Benjamin's take on Rimbaud's "Le Bateau Ivre," in which he suggests that rapid exchanges within the poem — a sort of hypertrophied capitalism — lead the writer to escape, or rise above, class. "I'm no stranger, I'm that arch arcadian trading sheep-eyes / off the kiosk behind the Shakespear cenotaph; how my flanks / pale in alabaster, worn with a finicky social observance / with expatriate lust," he writes in "Air Fleet Base." Wilkinson seems at pains to stay one step ahead of poetic domesticity, whether in interpretation, assimilation, but also the blindness of understanding or the deception of physical wholeness. The following lines, coming in at angles one after the other, seem to push the envelope toward the overwhelming question: "Beyond the heated policy / Which scorches the earth / Wet wool stinks on a hearth // Excess in that package / Smokes out the affirmative mate / In a blonde rage // Striation of exacted space / Enflames the offered meteors / Like burs on the carapace // His feet slip on the landing pad / Burst the sandals / Whose awaited message was banal." (notes to "About the Level I Start From," 80). Poems like "Bullyboy Tears" employ nursery-rhyme rhythms, while others bury deep within them the traces of poetic genres — ballads, epics, pastorals — that one wouldn't expect in late-modernist writing. This book is not for everyone, and might be a tougher sell stateside, where vocabulary and syntax has tended toward the "everyday," even when employing semantic breakage; for Wilkinson the breakages can suggest a "deep" reading of English (going back to the Anglo-Saxon), a cubist simultaneity, and finally plain old avant-gardist liberated words — anything that shatters the picture of the unity of the contemporary social body, while placing within it the arguably still traditionally-employed poetic artifact (moralizing, eternal). Though Wilkinson sacrifices any easy notion of an "authorial voice," or a protagonist even in apparently narrative poems, he is not interested in "play" in the form of either Language poetics or the poems of Ashbery or the Oulipo group, so one looking for "postmodernism" can be at a loss as to how the images collect to form larger meaning structures, or how the music is to operate — the "voice" itself seems obviously unattractive, and the outlook in the poems unsunny. However, close attention pays off, as traces of the peculiar brand of British social realism (and black humor) break through, and the vulnerability of the poet and the poem — the inability to maintain a "perspective," or to trust either the rational, autobiographical or the visionary, along with a very real marginalization that can

rely on few or no secondary structures to buttress its acceptance — becomes a matter for deep thought.

(To order: \$15 to 'A'A Arts, 2955 Dole Street, Honolulu, HI 96816)

Anne Tardos

Uxudo

O Books / Tuumba Press

The foreword by poet Caroline Bergvall states that Uxudo - written in spliced together bits of Hungarian, German, French, English and made-up languages, as well as pronunciation keys and other linguistic graphs - is a "multilingual text," a form of first language itself which "throws up the xenophobic asymmetries of difference." (8). Indeed, the writing begins to take on a life of its own, inviting the reader into a world of semantic and phonologic echoes, an effect furthered by the inclusion of several of Tardos's video images, many of which themselves repeat with different digital effects. As an art piece, one thinks of a much-less elegant Christian Boltanski and his out-of-focus black and white portrait photos arranged as alters, shadows in silent deference to, and communication with, the lives lost in the Holocaust. As many of the texts of Uxudo are either Fluxus-inspired doggerel, sing-songy chants, or simply candid bits from everyday life, the wafts of Europe's lost innocence are hard to ignore. As visual poems, they resemble the French Lettrism, which to American eyes tend to look ugly — most of the technology employed here is low end, and not very slick, the fonts clashing and the margins loose — but whose chaos becomes endearing once divined. The first line, "Aller Sunden Katzen zusammengefasst," finds its echo on the facing page: "All sins of cats rolled into one / Where do we come from and where do we go? / Images, mon ami, ich smoke nicht mehr. / Gern would I do." (19) The contrast of the fairytale line with the most basic question of the cultural exile, followed by two mixed-language sentences that make sense despite their word replacement, leads one immediately into this interstitial area that could very well be the road from any European nation state — a margin at the heart of the center. Later, a flurry of equal signs leads the reader on a heady joy-ride of mistranslation: "quake = tremblement = Beben = renges" (22), for example, or "uxudo = uxudo = uxudo = uxudo = uxudo = uxudo" (42) as if parodying the mind's inability to make sense out of the solipsistic word. After looking at this book for a fair amount of time, one is not sure if the Zaum-like neologisms are not, in fact, Hungarian, as Tardos's unreliable witness has already acquired a reputation for slipping away when apparently most needed. In contrast to the multimedia book Dictée by the Korean American artist Theresa Cha - a text which relates, however obliquely, the story of Korea's annexation by Japan and the subsequent liberation movement - Uxudo

(the title itself comes from a word that appeared in the text after a computer malfunction) exists no where more than in the mind, where words, in the act of improvisation, have to be created out of air as the linguistic environment: "multiplicatering = multiplikatern." Page thirty playfully contains the pronunciation guide and definition of the foreign words on page thirty-one, but even after that, meaning is quite elusive: "Hochgeduld after nine from a fountain / Gekreuzung vielmehr, which is how it's done / Neighboryly jolie bete / Give it time, haromvaros." (31) The words following this bit, "Afterimage = Nachbild," sums up the project of Uxudo: it is a collection of resonances, shadows, scraps and funky constructs, mixed with the fading light of the nihilistic, playful response to this disillusionment that characterized avant-garde art of the early century. It's modernism and the nostalgia for modernism.

(There are a lot of missing diacritical marks in this review.)

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Things

22 Sep 1999

A rare public retraction — "I confess the Perelman view was very off" — Stefans conceding a point in the middle of an argument, which he did more readily than his reputation as a combatant allows.

Yes, I confess the Perelman view was very off, and the Harryman shrill and imprecise. I may be able to argue that I don't seem to have the leisure time to think things through as thoroughly as I'd like, but then again I'm impatient, and sometimes precision seems dull to me, even if the promise at the end is some degree of "profoundity." But I don't see anyone else, except perhaps Lowther at this point, writing about books on this list, unless it's to demonstrate some bibliographic skill that, in the end, is rather uninspiring, or if it's to pounce on some third party for a salty phrase which, in the end, turns out to be a partisan dispute regarding reputations rather than text (the author of the review not being available to offer counter-arguments — whereas I am). Not to be so glum and down —or reductive — but I don't quite know what this list is for. It seems even a bad review could garner some degree of thoughtful consideration from those who at least feel the urge to make jibes — is that worth the effort? Who's impressed? I realize that we're dealing with several geographic areas that have their own mores which can be considered essential to them — i.e. one person's salty phrase is another's version of downright condemnation — but is there any way to break through that, not with an ax but with subtlety?

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Prynne

14 Dec 1999

Addressed to Rebecca Wolff, who edits Fence, and scrupulous to say the disagreement is "not about you, just this idea" — the standard Stefans disarming maneuver, deployed just before disagreeing at length.

Hi Rebecca,

It seems to me that this same argument could be used to suggest that affirmative action laws should be abolished.

With all due respect (and this email isn't about you, just this idea), this doesn't strike me as a very good analogy, and indeed symptomatic of some thinking on how poetry is intended to effect culture (when such intensions are hinted at or stated). The New Yorker is hardly Congress, nor is it something one would think could be fetishized as "society" — it's really a very specific magazine for a specific group of people, even if it's a very large group. If you start imagining it as some avuncular entity, some sort of big daddy (or mommy, either way) authority whose mind you hope to change, then you get into trouble (not to mention the fact that the New Yorker can go away, go bankrupt, if we want it to but society cannot). As it is, the New Yorker can change in a split second, as it did when Tina Brown took over (she's gone, of course): in their first (or one of their first) issues after she landed, there was a gorgeous full page picture of W.H. Auden in a long overcoat in the snow staring, melancholic as it's possible to perceive behind his drapes of wrinkles (here I'm getting belle-lettristic) with a very long poem on the facing page, something like the In Praise of Limestone but I can't remember exactly. Now, anyone could have looked at that gesture of hers as a "sign of something new" or a "change for the better" as if it were on her hit list of cosmetic changes along with Art Spiegelman covers and (was she responsible for this?) Peter Scheldahl. I have, really, no idea how she followed up that gesture though I don't remember too many more photos of poets, nor better poetry, coming in its wake. What's striking is that Auden, for whatever the readers of the New Yorker knew, could have just as easily been described as a "Cambridge don" (of course he wasn't) — in other words, he's English, an amenable exotic, and despite his leftism and flirtation with experimental poetics and, one might say, his homosexuality, he wasn't threatening to the New Yorker readers sense of culture (he wrote opera librettos, too) and their mastery over it. Anyway, all I'm saying is that, in my opinion, there's no reason to even want to change the New Yorker, nor to equate it with any sort of cultural legitimacy in terms of what this loosely defined "we" are trying to do. The New Yorker will never spread a greater understanding of experimental poetics unless they know how to sell it or assimilate it into whatever else it is they sell (culture, events, opinion), which of course they won't (because of idiots like us). In that way, it's hardly a "ray of

light" but a rather wide swath of darkness — not neutral even, but kind of negative (though on any other day I'd say it's pretty neutral). I think Prynne should win that award, whatever the hell it is, because I can't get over how great some of those poems are and that, in general over here, we don't know much about him — it's like Hopkins or Dickinson coming to light. But it would be sad to see that the first widely disseminated writing on Prynne would be a fluff article in the New Yorker, but then again, if they print one of his poems, Prynne seems prepared: his writing is almost armored against any easy discursive assimilation, while being so formally crystalline as to not "go gently" into the anonymity that the magazine seems to want to cloak its authors in, not to mention the chummy garbage they'd probably want to spread about him. Ok, this all sounds terrible cynical. Here's another example (my facts will be all wrong here), an English one, which had to do with Iain Sinclair's editing of the Palladin poetry series, which got books by folks like Allen Fisher and Bill Griffiths into the "mainstream." The books didn't sell all that well, the publisher decided to stop the series and pulped the entire print run — not drop them in used book stores like, say, I do, or keep them in their attics for posterity or whomever might be interested, just destroyed them. "Their" laws are just too different from "ours" in this way. Another example: David Lehman has to write a book on poetry, and decides in the last chapter, while he had his moment behind the "bully pulpit", to get out all his grumpiness on the charlatans he feels have filled the shoes of immortals unjustly (one of his sestinas was rejected from L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E, I hear). He does this while answering a few calls, changing the ribbon in his typewriter and listening to Rachmaninov (like his heroes, right) — in other words, here he is engaged in serious intellectual activity that affects, in direct and indirect ways, great numbers of people, and he doesn't care enough to think through his ideas, read any of the literature, etc, or to even quote from it adequately (only in censure), but has no scruples about weighing in with a moral judgment that, to those who don't know better, can be taken for the general opinion on things (like, "disco is out"). Ethics, ethics, ethics. So I go to Montreal a few months back and, trying to dig up some Earle Birney books (they didn't have them) discover that the only book I can find of "New York school" poetry in the stores in Lehman's! The essential continuity, throughout these examples, is that none of these central, big publishing outfits ever took the time to care about the work they were presenting in an effort to be hip; it's all very cynical and manipulative. Which is why Prynne is great: he's only had one or two "trade" books and the rest, I think, were small chapbooks; he doesn't write reviews far as I know, and I think there is a kind of built in auto-critical aspect to his poems, whereby they have very attractive, almost conservative (or "formal"), surfaces (they even look good hanging on a wall from across the room) but you can't simply breeze through them, follow the

stately rhythms (they change constantly) nor do you just wait for the good jokes or accept them as some sort of "experience in language" — his own little controversy with McCaffery over language poetics seemed to center around this aspect of the "play" of language, the semantic slippage, as providing a sort of ease for the reader rather than the difficulty he wanted. I think there's an ethical dimension to his "difficulty" and that part of it has to do with this relationship to other forms of literature — mainstream, the media, whatever — that don't trouble you into thought. It has a relationship to a variety of things, actually, and I don't claim to understand them all. But part of the problem with these ideas of aesthetic merging — i.e. lets break down the walls of these aesthetic camps and just meet halfway — is precisely when it extends to places like the New Yorker, which has always been a non-entity and should remain that way, and when it is not truly in the service of a complexity of thought on these matters which, we agree, are so important (and if "they" don't seem prepared or willing to keep up with "us," that's not our concern). The difference between two poor and ignored "experimental" writers in New York who don't write like each other is nothing compared to the difference between them and the writers that the New Yorker habitually tends to; then again, if the difference between those two (poor and ignored, etc.) writers is in their attitude to the New Yorker (standing in for other cultural institutions) it may in fact be a big difference and worth investigating. A kind of thoughtless merging of poetics tends to gloss over the fact that there are very particular attitudes that some of these "radical" poets possess toward assimilation into the dominant culture, that it isn't just a game to want to reject certain types of identities and aesthetic closures, and that many of us feel that we could write great poems for the New Yorker on any given day but don't. Artaud wrote that "all writing is pigshit," or something like that, and at about the same time (the first half of the century) Brecht was giving an important literary award to a poem about a local bicycling star (it was called something like "Hey! hey! the Iron Man!" — that's not even close but something like that). Why do people do things like this? I don't know, but a lot of us are still doing this very thing in more subtle ways today — being "moral exhibitionists" in some quasi-nihilistic manner, and our art and maybe in our lives — and to think that it's because we are really scratching at the doors of Culture wanting to get in is missing something very important. I couldn't see Prynne as a "ray of light" for the New Yorker because, after all, he would refuse to go to their parties — it's part of him not to be this light. "Good" gestures by the New Yorker confuse the point, especially when they transcend the words and actions of those they affect (in this case poets who aren't considered to possibly have social power of their own), though then again probably brings it to a head. Ah, the patronage issue again... 1930's anyone? I feel like I missed an earlier point, which had to do with the initial linking of social

activism with changing the New Yorker, but if you graph out what exactly the entities are in these respective exchanges perhaps that's better — use colored markers. Well, but anyway, my apologies for using your very short email for this William Blake moment, but I had some free time today. Cheers, Brian

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Lucious Jackson

December 1999

Addressed to Rebecca Wolff, and conceding her general point before dismantling the particulars: yes, most people will get their poetry from the New Yorker, but Stefans's quarrel is with what that magazine cannot register — Prynne's "successful resistance to assimilation," Adorno recommended as the cure for his own inability to talk about it. He scare-quotes "bourgeois" even as he leans on it, and files Ashbery, with affection, as someone the New Yorker was right to keep.

Hi Rebecca,

Thanks for your comments. You are right in what you say, in general: that our parents, uncles, priests, rabbis, books store clerks, computer literate younger sisters, golfer grandfathers, etc. (though perhaps not our taxi drivers, Armenian uncles, arctic explorer friends, Falun Gong enthusiasts, Romanian gymnists, hard-boiled prog rockers, jocks, suburbanite high school coke-addicts, Bush supporters, etc.) are going to get their poetry from the New Yorker. And if you want to talk to those folks about poetry, the New Yorker poems are probably a good place to start — at least in terms of cultural values (which are consistently expressed there), recent literary tradition, even general aesthetic qualities (and the weather in the Hamptons). Why not? My issues are really much simpler:

1. that Prynne is a terribly complex poet, and much of this complexity is centered around his successful (i.e. not nihilistic or reactionary) resistance to assimilation into "bourgeois" (I scare quote it since it's an antique term, in my view) culture. (A good introduction to Prynne, I've recently discovered, is the first volume of Adorno's Notes to Poetry, especially the essay on "Valery's Deviations" and "Lyric Poetry and Society" — not to be didactic, here, but I've never been able to write or talk about him very well, and that helped.) The New Yorker, I feel, would fail to pay any attention to these qualities. (I have mixed feelings about the Ashbery/Prynne connection — I think Ashbery fits in quite well with the New Yorker, through his natural charm and calmness, though he is more mischievous than he lets on when in there.)

2. that unlike popular music culture, which is driven by money and, in a sense, the enthusiasm of "youth", but also by the generally asocial, anarchic, quasi-romantic fuck-it-all sub-life that many people, from nine-to-five stock brokers or Romanian gymnists, have, the New Yorker is not going to roll over, switch gears (and class

loyalties) because of some sudden grass-roots interest in Prynne (or radical leftist poetry in general). As Bernstein quite accurately wrote, mainstream poetry lacks the "edge" that popular culture has — it's a phenomenon that's worth observing closely — but paying lip-service to the "edge" that non-mainstream poetry really only destroys that edge, since unlike in music, you have to work a little bit to find it. Perhaps it's unfortunate that there aren't as many "charismatic" figures in the poetry world as, purportedly, there once was — thinking here perhaps of Eliot, Stein and Ginsberg — but this creation of artificial interactions is unlikely to create it. Did MTV's attention to the Nuyorican poets create any real interest in the "underground" scene? I don't think so (can't really say) — most of what I've read or heard about this, i.e. the opinions expressed on the subject (even Brian Eno writes about it in his 1995 Diaries) seems to suggest that the blurring of commercial and "counter-cultural" (another antique term) interests, only destroyed whatever efficacy the poetry had aesthetically and as cultural critique (or even as expressions of nihilism, romantic longing, etc. whatever rock music is supposed to do). (Eno, consequently, would probably be interested in Language poetry, but I don't think the MTV thing made him think poetry in American was worth thinking about.)

My sense, based on what you write below, is that you are very interested in a wide variety of poetries, but are also interested in "spreading the word," so to speak, about it — that's a fine idea. I have a few questions:

On the other hand-and this is the not-so-big idea behind Fence, which I edit, and which does attempt the kind of "aesthetic merging" that is by necessity and intention superficial, in that it only entails juxtaposing poems on paper inside a product-I also want poems that I like to have a wide audience.

Is there no way to not make this "superficial"? While there is a lot of stuff going on in the States (and your magazine, I think, focuses primarily on English-language "literary" [i.e. page-based] stateside poetry), it doesn't seem to me that there's SO much that one need only deal with different types of poetry superficially. For instance, you had a piece of prose and some poems by Molly Peacock, who is a "new formalist" (she's pretty good, as far as that kind of poetry goes — as are Amy Clampitt and Anthony Hecht, in that category [though not part of the group, of course], though in general I think this movement pretty awful, especially the criticism) — why not get something from her that's completely, radically "new formalist", i.e. as extreme in that direction as possible? And, likewise, go extreme "language," extreme frenchy lyric, extreme gay narrative poetics, pidgin poetics, documentary poetics, projective this and concrete that? If you are going into it thinking it's going to be superficial, then you really only circumscribe the idea of a lukewarm center — any "edge" that you may have courted will be lost there, and by extension any interest (I feel). It's like all those

novels written by mildly talented authors who were trying to bank on the Pynchon craze many years ago — you will never turn anyone on to literature by showing them "Come Sunday." But of course you are the editor, so you know more about how people have read your magazine than me, and I don't doubt that Fence has introduced a number of new people to non-mainstream poetry.

I don't have figures, but I do have the backlogged memory of dozens of frustrating exchanges with general readers trying to engage by bringing up the New Yorker in conversation when they hear that I write poetry.

Do these people like the poetry in the New Yorker? If they did, then why didn't they take their interest a little further by investigating the books, and maybe other outlets, or somehow connect it to their interest in words that they acquired (I'm guessing) in listening to songs and watching movies? Everybody has uttered, at least once in their life: "terrible screenplay." I know what you mean here, of course. My dad — who is a big Bob Dylan fan, especially back in the day, and is a writer — doesn't seem to connect with the words in any of the poems he reads there, or in the Nation or wherever else he comes across poetry (I know he spots them, because he always brought up some new Ashbery thing back when I was at Bard). So basically what I mean is: isn't it clear that the New Yorker, along with its context, is a deadening force on poetry — that it just doesn't get anyone very excited about anything? Maybe that's why those conversations are so frustrating — because of the false sense of knowledge that poetry in the New Yorker creates.

I am interested in the general reader.

Aren't there other kinds of "general readers"? New audiences? If you are interested in the poetry and the value-systems inherent them, isn't it better to try to get this poetry read by people who may share some of the values (but who don't read poetry) then try to convert those, "hampered, handcuffed" as you are, who are knee-deep in their own rather satisfied (and why not?) existences?

I find the other model to be gratuitously alienating, when I have already gone through the alienation thing.

Well!

(Sorry I'm writing so much... day off, Christmas vacation). Last notes:

Alice Quinn (poetry ed. of New Yorker) has a subscription to Fence.

Has she written anything to you about it?

I'm really undecided and occasionally bemused over the question of whether anything that is performed through the medium of poetry can have the effect of picking someone up and setting them down outside the dominant culture.

I didn't write that that would be the case, myself — you must be thinking of someone else. The greater question, "ontological" if you will, is whether poetry

can ever enlighten one about her own spiritual, social and material conditions — i.e. can it open one's eyes, get past the illusions, make one want to live a little differently or live in general, etc. One can be set quite easily "outside the dominant culture" — every time you refuse to eat processed cheese you are outside the dominant culture (though if you just choose one processed cheese over another you are probably still in it — sadly), which is to say that it's not a black and white thing, it's just that a series of decisions, ethically or out of a matter of survival, will probably put you head up against the "dominant culture", and once in that position, it might be nice to find that there are people making art especially for you (and not for "them") — i.e. that you have been recognized in your doubts and frustrations by a "pure" entity, whether it be poem or poet. The "dominant culture" as an abstraction is not very useful, of course, but we all feel it somehow, and art seems to me a good way to organize these feelings (not to mention a way to break through the prevalent self-concern that seems to be *modus operandi* that capitalism strives on.) This is all very vague; I'm just trying to stress that this poetry which you feel is only read by those who "live, work, etc." in the experimental poetry community does actually have value for others outside of it, even if — and I mean this — it's in serious trouble right now in how to convey these values, or to make them enjoyable, aesthetically pleasing, necessary, etc. (Luscious Jackson notwithstanding.)

Anyway, I hope you think I'm not just being "schmegeggy" or whatever you wrote about this whole thing — I just think it's a problem that's of some interest to a lot of people. Many writers do make life decisions based on how they are to crystallize their own thoughts on their poetry, on how they can live to write the poetry they want to write, etc., and yes these can lead one into holes, low readership, feelings of alienation and asocialability, etc. which feeds back into the poetry, though hopefully in a way that reveals something about one's own, and the general, situation. Everybody wants to be paid for their work, and to be read by an appreciative audience. But it's probably not a good feeling to be respected for something you didn't actually do, alas, and when what you did do becomes lost in the shuffle (your heresies against Guiliani, for instance, reappearing in some terrible Jay Leno monologue — even Eno, who shares three of the same letters of his last name [and five of the first five of my first], hates Leno). So it becomes rather frightening when you see "experimental" being coopted as some sort of cultural mass that can be affixed, superficially, to some larger cultural mass that, in the end, will not recognize it's values, or fail in any way to be illuminated by it — then all the work seems lost. Whether it's true that the work is, in fact, lost, who knows — poetry sometimes takes a long time to make sense.

Well, getting late. Cheers,

Brian

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2000

Atlanta Poets Revisited

06 Jan 2000

An apology to Mark and the Atlanta poets for having called them a "ghost double of language poetry" — Stefans walking back a phrase he plainly still half-admired.

Dear Mark and others, I apologize if my comment made it sound like I was essentializing the poets in Atlanta with a suggestion that they are, by nature, a "ghost double of language poetry." This was a rhetorical mistake — I was sort of writing this statement to Jacques, and accepting for the moment that his comment had value you to it (rather than arguing that value, just accepting it to make my point). I'm not sure that Jacques was essentializing in this way either, but I won't take that up. My sentence, in this public context, should have been more like "that we [who is this "we"?] see the Atlanta poets involved in the APG as a sort of ghost double to language poetry," or something along those lines, in other word admitting this outside view (I'm not in Atlanta), the fact that it has holes, exceptions, or could be just a big mistake, etc. (I'm very close to many of the poets once involved in the Kootenay School in Canada, who have often been, in reductive statements, called a sort of tail-end to Language poetry, despite their very different practices; consequently, as an "Asian American," I have tried to avoid anything suggesting essential qualities in writing about writers purportedly of that group — I hate to use scare quotes [Adorno said it was cheap], I am Korean American if anyone is, but I don't see how that could determine anyone's writing, nor do I see how being in Atlanta could.) Anyway, I thought the "sort of" and the "some" in the line would have suggested the provisionality of the statement — I don't think there's anything essential about, well, poetry, and my statements on Miles Champion would suggest this (i.e. that the same poem could have differences of meaning in relation to the time and place in which it was composed, as well as its relations to predecessor poems — contingency). Thanks for your ideas, though; this kind of descriptive writing seems to me useful. Brian

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"Cyberpoetry"

12 Jan 2000

One front of the long cyberpoetry campaign Stefans fought across two lists at once; he opens by gently informing his correspondent that the post seems to have been meant for a different list. The argument would run, in various venues, for years.

Hi Kominos,

I read your post today on the EPC — it seems to me that you intended this post for another list? At least that's what the last line suggests.

I'm planning on checking out your sites, along with the work of Reiner Strausser whom you mention. I'd like it if you could recommend some sites that you think are successful in presenting something like "web poetry" —this is my own preferred term, since as you demonstrate neologisms can be as confusing or limiting as this rather mundane term. The drawback with my term is that most people don't ask me what I mean by that when, in fact, they should — they assume I mean posting poems on the web, in which case I would just call it poetry. The drawback with "cyberpoetry," it seems to me, is that a cluster of images come along with it (like mirror shades, virtual reality gloves and Keanu Reeves) that I try to discourage in my own use of images in my "web poems."

Anyway, I'm presently working on a short paper and statement on my own work and others, so would appreciate it if you had any sites that really blew you away. At this point, my favorite stuff seems to be European experiments in Flash and Director, or the more anarchic style of jodi.org, etc. — i.e. work not called "poetry" usually. I have a hard time getting excited by those too tied to ideas of "dirty concrete" (i.e. exposed technology), but think it's more useful, at this point, to just go ahead and make beautiful things.

My own work can be found at www.ubu.com, under Brian Kim Stefans. The one to really look at, if you're interested, is "The Naif and the Bluebells," which is in fifty parts, some 4 or so words long, some with intricate javascript interfaces, and a few java kinetic poems.

As for why people don't discuss web poetry on the poetics list, it would be tough to say, but in New York, which is supposed to represent the "forefront" of poetic English-language activity (at least in that dim old 20th century), is pretty devoid of people doing work in Java, javascript, C++ etc and tying it to poetry. I don't have any friends here who do this work (in the poetry community), the only exception being Kenny Goldsmith, who's more of a visual artist. I actually think that, as with the Brazilians and concrete poetry, it will be artists from outside the traditionally main areas of literary commerce (i.e. not Paris or London or here) who will make the most invested, impassioned dive into this art. There are tons of web designers in New York, obviously, and they make my stuff pretty crude

looking, but I don't sense that there's a general interest in the "community" for grabbing this toledo by the torontos, and taking it as far as it can go. But as far as I'm concerned that's fine — there are few enough general authors in common for a general discussion, so a very specific thing like this might be alienating — I don't expect anyone else to program in C++, and I wouldn't myself if I didn't learn BASIC before puberty (I should have learned basic puberty, I would have been better off).

(I've decided to just post this to the list since it would be great if you put up some links for us out here on the borders. I'd also like, for my own conscience, to know what people DON'T like about web poetry — a lot is stinky. Perhaps you could periodically post things that seem of interest of you — that would be a great resource. I'll try to do the same.)

Brian Eno, by the way, has what I think is a much better term for "interactive" art, which is "unfinished" art. "Interactive" art is usually just something in which you click along a more or less preordained set of channels until you reach the punchline, etc., whereas "unfinished" is kind of like a finger-painting set — you are given a set of tools, a set of options (in the case of painting, the white page, for the computer any variety of interfaces — that's the art for me, the interface), and more or less whatever you do leads to something called "art" and you can actually improve at it as you go along. Imagine a piece of art you could improve at "interacting" with — wow, that was the best session with "In Memoriam" I've ever had! The trick is not to make it stricly "eye candy," or a "schizophrenic" hodge podge of more or less useless, superfluous, spiritually ungratifying options (I can go to Pizza Hut for that).

I suppose you know the Rhizome list and website. I've only just joined but, though often very pretentious (but what is "pretentious"?), there seems to be a different vibe there which hasn't made it into poetry in any way that I know of yet.

Anyway, liked your post.

Best,
Brian

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Questions on the APG

14 Jan 2000

"Pardon the overly-careful tone of the following, but I don't want any bombs going off." Stefans wades into the APG discussion he admits to having only eavesdropped on; the companion post, "Re: Questions on the APG," is him trying to defuse the wearying thing he had started.

[Pardon the overly-careful tone of the following, but I don't want any bombs going off...]

I've been more or less eavesdropping on the APG discussion here, mostly because I don't much care what poets think that they themselves are doing since, while not a "private" matter — we wouldn't be doing this list if we thought poetry, its meanings and dissemination were a "private" matter — it is a matter that can only be, or is best, described with "private" terms. That is, however the APG talks among itself, one must assume its a language that is not general enough to be widely understood — even if the terminology is the same, the skids that they talk off of "general" understanding of them will be, perhaps, their most defining, confusing and original aspects — since it operates based on factors that are peculiar to Atlanta, or the feelings those poets have about their relationship to other urban poetic entities, historically and geographically (i.e. entities that either critics have created, such as the "New York School," or that the poets have created for themselves to foreground questions of locality, such as "the San Francisco 'front' of the Language School"), their sense of the history of forms, etc.

However, nonetheless a lot of text is produced by writers associated with the APG, much of it quite syntactically elegant and carefully composed, but rarely to I get a sense, in reading it, of what this private language is. Another way of looking at private is to use this useful term which I found in the writings of the only philosopher I've talked about on this list (so I'll skip his name, because I want you to think I'm an interesting guy), which is "redescriptive." How is what the APG is doing in terms of poetry and theory redescriptive? And if it's not redescriptive, or if there is no concern with this, then why all the text? I hope you don't think I mean that you shouldn't write, or try to work these issues out publicly — this would be a first, anyway, a group of poets working out their self-identity publicly, in a quasi-hostile or critical field, and I'm always in for some good history — and quite often what you write is interesting. But much of what I read from that corner concerning this issue tends to have a few qualities which raise an tiny alarm in me, such as 1) high volume, 2) somewhat undialogic aspect, and 3) self-reflexive, or defensive, in a "personal" way. With this last point, I mean only that the undercurrent of the writing seems to be a justification for the APG calling themselves poets at all, as opposed to stating claims for particular aesthetic properties. The cumulative effect, in some but not all cases, is that these posts are

more exhibitionastic rather than dialogic (if I am using this last word correctly) or "promoting dialogue." There's nothing wrong with that, of course — you can't respond to Alan Sondheim's posts either, there's tons of them, and they don't make any great claims to originality outside of their abundance (I do think they're original myself, more along the lines of how "I Love Lucy" is original as compared to Moliere's originality — the effect of the serial, etc.). But what are the ideas to latch on to in terms of the question of the APG? Is there a sort of research being done by this group that could be of interest to others (such as that of the "Toronto Research Group" of McCaffery and nichols, which involved a whole new pantheon of critical figures and terms, and uncovered loads of work that had been neglected for ages, sort of what Steve McCaffery is continuing to do now; or the claims Zukofsky made for the objectivists). Are there political or philosophical ideas in the APG? Is there any connection of this writing to the arts or music scene in Atlanta (outside of the obvious "I like this stuff")? Is there any substance to the claim that John Lowther makes occasionally that there is a larger field of activity called "the language arts" that poetry (or poetry as it is discussed on this list) is only a small component of? One thing that I ask, concerning the work that I have seen: is there anything in the form that resists the completion or continuation of the work, or is it possible to just continue writing consistently and endlessly? I.e. where is the sense of doubt that so many poets, such as Valery and Hopkins and Williams, seemed to have about form that inhibited writing rather than produced it? Or is this doubt necessary (Cage might say no), and is that a concept of the APG?

I remember trying to introduce a friend of mine to the writing of Frank O'Hara at college. She was all Nietzschean self-creation, Sartrean abysses of meaning, and more than a touch of the revolutionary (she's now in Cuba, I think). She was also a writer, and has had plays performed in New York, and had worked editorially for *Conjunctions*. Anyway, she thought it was the most facile, idiotic junk she'd ever seen, and couldn't see any sort of value system in it at all (which is to say no aesthetic quality either, not that they're synonymous or symbiotically linked in any easy way). I only mention this since it seems that "we", being the outside (in this case she was the outside) mostly spot the negatives before we spot the positives, and in the cases where there is really no opportunity for positives to make themselves felt (i.e. rendered invisible by the paradigm), the combined effect of the negatives is that what you are looking at is facile. Another way to phrase it, using the above terms, is that you would like to spot the resistances in the work since it is that which gives you the first note of understanding of why a work is "art" and not something like a letter, or a call in the wild. I guess I'm trying to justify Jacques assertions about the APG's relationship to the language school — which I think were a bit crude but not entirely, since forceful rhetoric

can be absorbed in ways that are helpful, I feel, and he's generally a very responsible commentator so I give him the benefit of the doubt.

I think there are posts that respond to these issues already, I feel, and my reading of this issue is completely off-the-cuff — I haven't gone back and collected pros and cons, backs and forths, etc. Actually, I just have, and noticed that Randy Prunty, for example, has posed some meaningful, well-stated questions to Jacques — but why all this reliance on Jacques point of view, and why addresses only to him? Is it because he's the only one who seems to particularly care enough to even rag on the APG? It would be like me directing all of my comments on "new younger poets" to Ron Silliman because he made those statements in the Philly Talks — it would be a mighty small range of focus to just narrow on his opinions (by this I mean that Ron's just one person, a considerable one at that, and to his credit has always, I feel, spoken as "one person" and not faceless authority), and to always be adopting his descriptive terms to do so. Another example would be me to confine my statements on Asian American poetry to the terms provided by 1) the Asian American critics, and 2) non-readers of this work, such as all those Yasusada defenders who think Asian Americans are just uptight and narrow about poetry (I've had many interesting conversations on this event with "white" poets in which I've felt rather "narrowed.") I know, myself, that the terms provided in both cases are often incomplete and narrow themselves, and hence have taken (or tried to take, I'm a pretty terrible essayists) up new ones. If the scale of the discussion is not there in fact — i.e. 50 people writing on the APG [including, say, Harold Bloom, grandma and Benchmark the gardener] — then maybe it would be worthwhile imagining it, if only for peace of mind, rather than fixating on someone else's terms.

Anyway, just some thoughts. (I've been meaning to respond to some other posts, by the way, such as the one on Australian poetry, but haven't had time).

By the way, Patrick, I've forwarded those Irish jokes to the director of my department, who's from Dublin, and now she's not speaking to me! (Just kidding.)

Brian

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Lucious Jacqueson

January 2000

The Debrot exchange opens: a friendly hello to Jacques, praise for his post on mainstream poetry's 'crisis-in-complacency,' and then Stefans's own gloss — the old mainstream (Lowell, Berryman, Bishop) still drew its thrill from modernism's looming figures, while the current one must practice a 'willed blindness' toward its experimental peers. The correspondence begins as it will continue: agreement used as a runway for a longer thought.

Hi Jacques,

Just wanted to say hi and to note your comment on the list, which I thought very insightful.

*mainstream poetry is fascinating to me in that it is, in several ways, in a profound state of crisis, while simultaneously seeming to be incredibly complacent (or "lukewarm" as brian puts it)—a crisis, in other words, as much *of* as *in* complacency. for the readers of mainstream poetry—& such readers have, by definition, a casual relationship to poetry—poems are almost entirely about "soul making" (thus, bill moyers)—& register the (fairly circumscribed) dissatisfactions, aspirations, & values of the most completely socialized segment of the american population (left-of-center, suburban college-educated professionals).*

I think people got confused by "soul-making" — or at least your one respondent. But this idea of the state of crisis in "mainstream" poetry could have many factors, one of which is that the glory days of this "mainstream" — Lowell, Berryman, Bishop, etc. — still maintained some very close ties to modernism and its myths, not to mention the figures of modernism in their presence (Thomas, Auden, Stein a little bit even, the ever-looming Pound, Eliot, and even Williams for those like Jarrell who accepted him). They could derive some excitement from that, and feel a part of the "age of anxiety" even if in socially unchallenging teaching jobs. Now, that thrill is to be found in their own peers whom they, by nature, have to ignore — i.e. "us," the so-called experimental wing (whose predecessors took them to task, though not as "citizens" but as artists, which isn't nearly as effective [this could be reversed — artists rather than citizens?]). And we have to ignore them — ignore people like Ammons who, though "boring" often, is as much an inheritor of Williams and, say, the poetics of Thoreau as Howe would want to be, only different. Anyway, this is a willed blindness that, until now, has been generally bought into. Does this make sense? Though it seems a minor blindness, in that it only concerns the realm of the literati, it's really, I think, not — how can we choose to ignore those who loom so large in our world and yet pretend to have anything amounting the "vision"? Even Blake, the most outside, challenged Reynolds on very intellectual grounds, as did Williams/Eliot —these are dialectics, in a way, that create the sensation of movement. There are other factors, of course.

2. *alternative poetries are not diametrically dissimilar to mainstream poetry, but actually share/reproduce many of the symptoms of this crisis-in-complacency. this is not, however, necessarily a *bad* thing inasmuch as it might be more useful & interesting for poetry to make the symptoms of capitalism, etc. *exemplary* rather than to propose "alternatives" or "solutions".*

Not quite sure what you mean here. Sort of: that we should take the fact, the symptoms, of this complacency as a sort of content, especially since it's a key into larger social scales.

3. *for example, silliman's "solution" of a more locally-oriented poetic strikes me actually as extremely, if unintentionally, conservative. for one thing, it would tend, of course, to leave in place the status quo ideological & aesthetic assumptions of more ambitiously positioned poetries like language (not coincidentally). this is particularly evident for instance w/ the more noticeably regional poetic groupings like apg—which, although it produces interesting work, is in an extremely unoriginal position vis langpo—or boston, on the other hand, which is largely frozen in an olsonian aesthetic. what exp poetry needs is in fact an "outside" — an alternative, just for a start, to all the *puffing* that constitutes the critical discourse (for what it's worth) that surrounds it. indeed, rather than the chaos of proliferating books & presses, the reception of alt poetry & its relationship to its audience seems more & more regulated by networks of affiliation structured by a.) apprenticeships by emerging poets to more established writers & b.) accreditation/initiation in/by graduate writing &/or english depts at buffalo, brown, naropa, san diego, etc.*

A little lost here when it comes to the conceptual stuff (the analysis seems pretty accurate): I guess the idea is of the "outside" — which of course you put in scare quotes. I tend to think that the idea of an "outside" still suggests a sort of purity of vision that, at base, has a metaphysical foundation, and once having that, would have to be examined deeply and conclusively — which any of us are free to do. I rather like the idea of there being a constant soiling or corrupting of this purity, that there is no outside but running among the corridors of the "inside," either as criminal or mystified adolescent or what-not, is quite interesting, a possibly anarchic, possibly very invisible activity. That is, if you choose to remain "inside" but never create a vocabulary for how you are operating there — selectively silent, selectively lying or stealing, selectively dead-on, etc. — this may be the closest you come to creating a system that can't be subsumed. If you are talking more realistically (i.e. "realism"), about where a poet does her work, I find I hardly think about that now that I am out of school, working unhappily, making no money from poetry. Unfortunately the outside is the inside in this case. Anyway, where would you find this "outside"? Is it something that can be rationalized?

As for the local, I feel like the term is too loaded right now to know what it means — I could venture based on how/what Silliman writes, but is what O'Hara was doing writing the "local"? Isn't A.R. Ammons writing the "local"? Isn't the local in

terms of New York something of a tradition now that becomes commodified (or taken as a sign of "purity"), and couldn't one say the "local" in Atlanta becomes manifest in the very fact of it's becoming a sort of ghost double of some of the gestures of language poetry (in this way, I read Miles Champions' investigations of language poetics a sign of his confronting the "local" of London — by creating the non-local — a sort of gesture to the ephemeral nature of much language writing by granting some poems the air of permanent form, hence, satisfying a peculiarly English need for form that responds to class and other social issues, the need for "art," while at the same time accessing peculiarly alien meanings, etc. etc.)

*4. poetry, both mainstream & avant-garde, has become a minor genre in almost every respect. it is, for instance, telling that so few of the poets writing in the contributors's notes of fence magazine, when prompted to name their favorite books, mention poetry books. even the way the word is pronounced —po *em* —with the stress on the second syllable— seems to attest to its anachronism. perhaps one could/should begin again by writing *pomes.**

This is a depressing thought, of course. But I don't know how minor it is, actually — if we consider it more glorified several decades ago, then why do Kenneth Rexroth's essays on "Poetry in 1965" and "Poetry in 1970" sound like they could have been written today? I think we don't have a heck of lot of ideas these days, if that means anything. But I wonder what the proliferation of good ideas would do to poetry — would it really help. Is the idea of the "liberal ironist" (in Rorty's phrase) just not as interesting as the "ubermensch" — is there something inherently unexciting about liberal democracy as we know it? This sounds like a stupid question, but I wonder what people are offering as alternatives when they imagine the world of poetry today as being a bunch of over-tolerant, intellectual, self-serving, rather unreflective automatons (I'm exaggerating for effect) — i.e. liberals — is this a call for more violent, egotistic, spontaneous, and intolerant poets? In Rortian terms again: how to we achieve scale, the effects of the sublime, without inflicting cruelty?

Cheers,
Brian

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Re: Questions about Gould Interview

January 2000

On Henry Gould, of whom Stefans admits knowing little beyond a stray essay in Witz — which does not stop him, and never did, from a considered two-thousand-word reply.

I read the interview with Henry Gould yesterday, out of curiosity since I don't know much about him except for a brief essay in Witz (on stanzas, I think that was

him), and because, alas, he has been "banned" from the list. I wasn't on the list back then, haven't read @poetics nor the archives (don't particularly care to, actually, since it's only been described as an unfortunate event, and no doubt cannot be of "objective" interest to anyone for a number of years), so I could hardly comment on that. My general question about the interview, though (and this may be directed toward people who know Gould very well, care for his work, etc.), is: what does the interview actually say, i.e. what positive statements does it put forth? I think there are a lot of interesting gestures within it: for example (these are based on one reading and having the print-out next to me right now), the framing of the questions, with requirements to include names of people or concepts, gave the proceedings something of a tug-and-pull quality, which was pretty weird but fun, but I suppose a lot of fun to do (was this done over the phone, in person? that might help). This sort of activity conveys a tone and mood which has its content — like a Oulipian game of sorts, along with the puns. I also felt that Kent Johnson was sort of trying to lead HG into some sort of more direct (say, polemical) statements about the list, about Language poetry, and about being "banned" — this seems to me quite obvious — and yet HG seemed to want to deflect this, even at the risk of not fulfilling all of the requirements of the question. This isn't to say that HG doesn't in fact indulge in a bit of, say, polemic, but that it didn't (when it did appear) seem to be in response to what KJ was asking. For example, there was a question about "depth" early on, which lead HG, after mentioning Beth Anderson's essay "Imperturbable Things," to conclude that if "you piggyback poetry on the hump of rationalized materialism, you've provided it with a critical pseudo-answer rather than an answer drawn from its own (poetic) depths." I think even this brief quote from HG's reply raises for me a number of problems — for instance, in the phrase "rational materialism," what is the meaning of the word "rationalism"? Is there another type of materialism, say a "mystical" or "spiritual" materialism"? The word materialism, of course, seems to suggest something along the line of "dialectical materialism," e.g. Marxism, and from Marxism you go to Hegel, for whom the word "spirit" had a very special meaning (which survives into Adorno) — I won't venture a definition my self, but it has something to do with the thesis/antithesis dialectic by which historical periods are able to feel their own movement, their contingency but their approach to the eternal as well, the eschatological. Anyway, I am wondering if, here, there is any particular reason to use the term "rational" with "materialism," especially if the term is being used in opposition to the statement: "... Barbara Guest has used no hooks, and this has allowed her to create a textually saturated and satisfying poetry that embodies the transient, the ephemeral, the flickering in translucent surfaces that we call painterly for lack of a term to chart the refusal of a pseudo-depth of field that remains a ghostly presence in much of the poetry of

our time." It seems to me that this statement is not, in fact, a statement grounded in any firm sense of the efficacy of "rationality" — rationality, as an absolute (grounded either in the mathematical certainties of Plato's *Timaeus* or the religious certainties of Kant, or the abstract certainties of Science or the historically-ordained certainties of the State), is not being referred to here as referee in determining the qualities of this "poetic" writing, but rather (in my opinion) a rather contingent form of humanism, which is to say a humanism that itself doesn't refer to a higher authority but recognizes the provisionality — in some sense, the irrationality — of its own language. Is could someone "rationally" praise the "transient, ephemeral, flickering" qualities of someone's work — isn't the idea of "rationality" predicated on clear terms, on eternal forms for thinking (i.e. "final vocabularies")? Then there is a description of some sort of "ghostly presence in the poetry of our time" — it doesn't seem that a "rational" writer would want to mention the fact of ghosts (unless religion played a very firm role in the rational system). Maybe I'm taking the word "rational" too much to heart, but it seems to be used pejoratively in this context, and yet it seems to have been a project of poets and philosophers for some time to investigate this very term (Raymond Williams devotes three full pages to it in *Keywords*, right between *Radical* and *Reactionary*, which get less.) [Note: Were the Surrealists "rational" or "irrational"?] Actually, now that I look at it closer, I realize that HG seems to build a similar sort of structurally-threatened platform on Beth Anderson's essay, which didn't strike me (in my dim memory of it) as being particularly "rationalist" or "materialist" (but I'll reread it tonight). HG says (writes?):

[Anderson] looked at some "painterly" poems by Stevens, Guest & others from standpoint maybe similar to Bernstein here [in his introduction to Guest's reading]. The idea [or the "premise," one presumes] is that poetry is a progressive force for a demythologized, egalitarian materialism - by analyzing and rejecting all forms of idealizing/poeticizing rhetoric. I thought it [not sure which piece of writing he means here] was really well-written, though I disagreed with its premises all the way through. Maybe if you take these premises to the limit, as Bernstein tries to do, it can be understood as "revolutionary": in a rationalist post-Enlightenment sense, uprooting all remnants of antique, medieval and romantic spiritual "aura" around language on behalf of the demystified human will. So Bernstein & others attach themselves to abstract expressionism in painting (doing away with the "hooks"), to deconstruction in criticism (doing away with the "aura"), and will round up any stray calves in the field of outsider & marginal art (even if those strays are from a different ranch) to forward this project.

[On my second read-through, I realize there's a problem here. In his summation of Anderson's essay, he seems to be describing the conclusion of her writing, not the

premise — i.e. that poetry should or could be a progressive force were it to "analyze and reject.. etc." However, he refers to this idea as the "premise," which suggests that the idea is that poetry is, and always is despite its particular features, this progressive force, and by extension that it always is "analyzing and rejecting all forms... etc." If it is that latter, then the conclusions based on these premises haven't been stated. Etc. etc.]

There seems to me quite a lot of ideas to unpack here, but I would like to ask some questions about what he means. For instance, when he writes of a "demythologized, egalitarian materialism," is he talking about a state of thinking, an essentially private state of thinking about the world (i.e. Nietzschean irony, "god is dead," Kierkegaardian self-creation, one's attachment to his or her dog, one's interest in wearing make-up to parties) or a physical social creation, i.e. if this poetry is written, the State will be transformed into something we can describe as embodying the principles of "demythologized, egalitarian materialism." That is, is he describing poetry as a "progressive force" for certain private world-view (can one be "progressive" about a private world-view, like Jehovah's Witnesses?), or is he classing it with movements such as Marxism or Anarchism which sought/seek to change social structures. If it is the latter — one sense, granted the spin he puts on the statements, that it is — then is it really the society of the State that he is writing about, or some other society like that of the "world of letters"? Where is this "demythologized, egalitarian materialism" supposed to exist? Consequently, what does the binary that HG establishes here — on the one side is the "demythologized, egalitarian", on the other side, the "idealizing and poeticizing" rhetoric — imply? It's probably not worth while pursuing the term "poeticizing" since, for me at least, it's always been a very ineffective verb — it just doesn't seem to mean much (I guess it's "anesthetizing" with a persuasive edge, such as "He poeticized what existence in Greenland for us would be like so that I would go there with him" — i.e. it seems to suggest adding an attractive exterior to something that is otherwise mundane or unattractive, the very opposite of poetry to me). But idealizing raises a lot of issues, at least in relationship to the words "idealist" and "ideal." Actually, does it have a relationship to those words — which suggest the idea of permanence, of the possibility of perfect good, and the individual striving for it — or is it as distant from "ideal" as poeticize is from "poetry"? Presuming that it isn't so distant (and, if you want, that poeticize is very close to poetry, or to what poet's are supposed to do), then why is "idealize" held up in opposition to "egalitarian"? Weren't many of the "ideals" of the Romantic movement the idea (spiritually confirmed by Hegel later on) concerned with egalitarianism, the God-given truth (hence eternal) that all people were created equal, etc? Since we are dealing with binaries, would we find the opposite of "egalitarian" to be "authoritarian" and/or "hierarchical" (class

wise, meritocracy, "poetocracy") — if that's the case, then why not just say it (to avoid confusion)? (I.e. if you're not a liberal, what are you?) Looking at this a bit closer, I would ask whether one could have a "demythologized materialism" — is materialism, or has it ever been, "mythologized"? If it has been mythologized, i.e. fetishized (though non-anthropomorphically, as we must assume) as the defining factor of the movement of "spirit" in history — is HG then saying that Bernstein and Anderson have a goal to demythologize this reading of materialism?

There are other parts to this paragraph I have questions about. For instance, HG writes that "Bernstein and others" attach themselves to Abstract Expressionism. It would be enough to ask where any substance exists to the claim that Bernstein felt any particular fondness for Abstract Expressionism, or whether he felt it was useful to him (he tends to write more of people like Arakawa/Gins and people in the constructivist/dadaist axis, as his peers like Watten have stuck to other conceptualists like Smithson, Burden, etc.). But moreso (and this is trickier, but there is substance to it): has any literary movement, or group, ever actually benefited from a relationship to Abstract Expressionism, or even particularly acknowledged it as leading them to their respective discoveries? (It seems to me that Ashbery didn't particularly like them, at least the males, O'Hara was a great fan but used it mostly early in his development [when he was equally imitating Joyce and thousands of others], and Schuyler, who was very much into the "cult of paint" of New York nearly always had a closer affinity to Fairfield Porter and certain types of landscape painting, as did F O'H.) Consequently, why would anyone want to "attach themselves to Abstract Expressionism" for the sake of the goal of "uprooting all remnants of antique, medieval and romantic spiritual 'aura' around language on behalf of the demystified human will." Was that Pollock what was doing — isn't it, in fact, the exact opposite? Didn't the shapes and magnificence of religious iconography, not to mention the splendor of the clashes of color that one witnesses in cathedrals, inform much of the scale of the project, and wasn't putting the gesture of the individual, the man, in the middle of it creating a "mystification" of the human will all the more? (This is thumbnail interpretation right now.) Imagining the Abstract Expressionists as inheritors of the Surrealist project, is the image of the human psyche they present more or less mystified? And what is HG suggesting the "hooks" are here — does he mean figuration? So is the sum of his statement here: the Abstract Expressionists did away with using figuration and narrative in their paintings because they felt they created religious and idealist subtexts to their work concerning the human will and provided ease of viewing by a popular audience, and this provided Bernstein and his friends at the time with the idea of taking figuration and narrative out of their poems, in their similar goal of doing away with religious conceptions of mankind and the nature of the will." Well, there are many ways one can take this

(it doesn't sound too bad now, but needs work), but it seems to me that Freud had pretty much "demystified" the human will — at least divorced it from any ideas of elective salvation, indivisible structure, eternal qualities, "essences," etc. — and created the context for the great jokes that we, the ironic artists that succeeded his and others' battles with metaphysics, can make regarding it, and that the Abstract Expressionists — who were, as the name suggests "expressionists," not constructivists (i.e. concerned with the agonic will) — were not very ahead in that game, and in fact rendered the conceptual (or "rational") component of art further "medieval" with their work.

I feel I could go on — this essay is chock-full of phrases that don't seem to add up, but probably could with a little work. For example, what's a "rationalist post-Enlightenment" sense? Does he mean, perhaps, the particular spirit of rationality (or the claim to rationality) of post-Structuralists? Is it "deconstruction" that Benjamin claims "did away with the aura" in art? If the "aura" in art is the sense of its permanence, it's one-of-a-kindness, it's presence in the eternal frame of a history and scale of values, wasn't this "aura" being "done away with" long before deconstruction? Does Bernstein, in this statement, or in his poetry, ever actually "deconstruct" meaning (or make any claims that meaning is so entirely textual that it can't be found and kicked around) or does he "ironize" it (i.e. highlight its contingencies when it is masquerading as permanence — "pseudo-depth-of-field")? What's the difference, here, between Enlightenment rationality and post-Enlightenment rationality, and does it matter for the sake of this particular argument?

Anyway, I only ask these questions — rather long-windedly, I confess — for the sake of showing that this interview has significance in regards to its contexts (HG's personal context, for example, in anticipation of his new book, or the state of poetry discourse as it's carried out among "us", or the state of why we claim not to be very well understood by others, the state of the list), in terms of larger (or maybe smaller, if you think this trite) frames of discourse that are of interest to people not personally involved (philosophically, politically "from a different ranch" [does he mean "race" here?]), in the way interviews can serve to entertain or project ideas, etc. I'm approaching it as a sort of Curious George (a touch of mischief, of course, but really trying to understand what's going on here) — I'm not a trained philosopher, kind of a dilettante, and have no doubt screwed up much of the above. There's a lot of interesting language in the interview, I feel, and interesting gestures within it, but I can't help feeling, myself, that it needs "unpacking" before it is to be "understood" — which isn't to say it has to be "rational" by any means (whatever rational means, of course), just a little more nuanced, so that it's rhetoric doesn't brush so roughly — perhaps just "clearer" so

the reader can trust that he's not always going for laughs and easy kills. But that's just my opinion, I'm sure many of you who know him know what he means by these things. Any idears? (Please forward this if you'd like.)

Brian

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Re: RHIZOME_RAW: Cyberpoetry

January 2000

On the theory-and-technology beat, Stefans makes the tidy observation that the field's patron saints — Deleuze, Benjamin, Foucault, McLuhan — began as literary critics, then offers his own credentials: a Sinclair 1000, a Vic 20, and a boyhood of peeks and pokes abandoned, he says, for his libido. The founding-fathers list is candidly apologized for mid-sentence; the confession of not being smart enough for machine language is the more disarming credential.

One thing I might mention about poetry and the discourse on technology is that many of the founding thinkers that are often alluded to in these discourses, such as Deleuze and Guattari, Benjamin, Foucault, MacLuhan, Derrida, etc., were literary critics (and only occasionally, it seems, art critics), concerned with people like Kafka, Brecht, the Surrealists [the writers], Joyce, Plato, etc., in the formative parts of their careers (sorry for the male-o-centric list, can't think of a woman writer this group I wrote about). Hugh Kenner, the great Pound critic, wrote a book called "The Counterfeiters" a long time ago that went through people like Babbage and Turing, and it's worth noting that the Turing Test for Artificial Intelligence was centered around language, as was his job for the British during the war, figuring out German ciphers. Finally, people like Cage, with his mesostics, or Jackson MacLow with his semi-intentional works (his books "Forties" for example), were pushing the idea of "process poetry" into the realm of the semi-automated, or computer-influenced (some will write "chance" but as we all know the random-number tables on computers are hard-coded), hence subtracting or transforming certain notions you allude to below — the "spiritual" component of poetry, poetry as personal expression, as transcribed "overflowing" speech — into a discourse on cybernetics, without, consequently, cramping or slanting the process by using the _language_ of technology in their works (or, differently put, rendering the works "strange" by the use of this language), fetishizing the sheen of technology over the larger social and aesthetic aims of their writing.

I was a computer programmer before I was a poet — I had a Sinclair 1000 when I was a lad, and got the Vic 20 when it first came out, programming mostly games (o lovely peeks and pokes, where have ye gone?), but gave it all up in high school as it didn't seem, to me, to hold much promise for different sorts of communication, i.e. I felt work in computers kept me away from the world too much,

it was contained on the little cassettes and went nowhere. (Also, I just wasn't smart enough to learn machine language, and being in high school, I was more interested in my libido than my own personal version of Lunar Lander.) The internet, obviously, changed all that, and since the mid-nineties I've been learning, or have learnt, C++, Java, Javascript, a handful of other web-tools, etc., and I see these studies as an extension of my interest in language. So that's my connection.

*Dear Brian, What is the relation of poetry, written out longhand and typed with a typewriter; maybe mailed to a journal and maybe not; to the technological concerns of network art? Is poetry dependent on tech? Should I want to write I might sit vacant-minded, but when the spirit moves me...oh! The spirit. Let's say when the pressure of events beyond my conscious understanding sets all those computers (deep-down-in-the-mind) crunching through the myriad of facts I consciously missed, sorting through the data, reassessing the values of events scarcely noticed... Motivated by intense emotion, any tool will do; a pen and pencil, computer and keyboard, even a quill with human blood will serve; Holy Mary, mother of God... I yearn for the red of your menstrual blood. I heard your Jesus died on the cross; was it really such a great loss? I'd love to wield the hammer and nails, and make God feel humanity's pain; make God feel the way we do, as you love me so I love you _____
Let's say there are things beyond the intellect, though intellectuals may chafe at such remarks. _____*

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The Resistance

January 2000

A reply to one John — otherwise unidentified — who had caught Stefans in what looks like a dogma about the 'resistance of the medium' and wanted to know whether effortless poems are therefore not art. Stefans wriggles free by parsing his own word 'note' as Jamesian and provisional, faults Language poetry for handing readers a geodesic dome when they came to ride a seesaw, and tips his hat to Rebecca Wolff on the way past.

Hi John,

You write:

so then the question arises; are those poems that just flow, seemingly without resistance, not art ? it wd seem that if i was in agreement with the quotes that started this posting then i wd at least need to be pretty suspicious about such a spontaneous and effortless work's art status, right ?

Yes, you can. Suspicion is a good instinct to have. But that suspicion can be part of the "content," once it is accepted as a form of response, and some art flies based on the level of suspicion it raises — like Cage's.

I think your problem with what I have written, or with your use of what I have written, seems to be that you are looking for some sort of dogma supporting my sentence, but the sentence "resists" such reduction — the phrase "first note" tips

you off to that, since it implies second or third notes, or the provisionality of the experience (a "note" in this instance being a lesser form of a "perception," which implies a truth content — "note" is more aesthetic, Jamesian). I didn't write that the "resistance of the medium is a defining trait," that is obviously very oversimplified (though Adorno's lovely essay on Valery, which I've mentioned before, is a good read if you are interested in this issue). My idea is that each reader, or receptor, of a work of art has a series of expectations it, that most of these people are not "ideal" readers who cater to the pleasures of their suspicions, and that one can play off of these searches for the "resistance of the medium as a defining trait" to create an engagement with the reader. Part of the reason I think some language poetry fails in terms of this "reader created meaning" is that the terms of engagement are so much a development of the poet's advanced views of literature (often based on a counter-agonic constructivism, or a "pure" anti-subjectivity, or maybe Cagein indeterminacy, all of which is so "right" to the poet that they can't fathom the reader not seeing these things) and there is little attention given to what might be called (with a nod to Rebecca Wolff) the "general" understanding of poetry (which can involve the "resistances of its medium") that the reader is often in the position of feeling quite put out by these terms, or even worse, completely unengaged (hence with no sense of anticipation of what a true "engagement" would feel like). It would be like inviting someone to play on the seesaw with you, and then presenting them with a geodesic dome — the "modern" version whose utility in terms of pleasure is not very apparent — and saying "take a seat, swing your legs" — huh — and then providing you with thousands of theories of "tensegrity" and economies of matter and balances, etc — huh, woah? All of which is right, and more interesting than general news, but engagement, which needs some "organic" component, would probably not happen. Well, I don't know what I mean here, but you probably get the drift.

Anyway, this is what I wrote (quoted from your email):

"Another way to phrase it, using the above terms, is that you would like to spot the resistances in the work since it is that which gives you the first note of understanding of why a work is "art" and not something like a letter, or a call in the wild."

It's funny that you quote and then contort it into one extreme, so that you can provide the opposite extreme. In a way, I would say you didn't see the "resistance" of my sentence, or the concept.

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Re: Questions on the APG

18 Jan 2000

The follow-up, in which Stefans tries to defuse the argument he started: it is "wearying many people," he allows, and then clarifies at length anyway.

Hi Folks,

I only have a few moments, but I wanted to clarify certain aspects of my approach to this APG thing, which is obviously wearying many people.

My hope was to put across the idea that a group of poets need not define themselves along the terms that anyone else sets out for them, nor that they need define themselves at all. This was why I described the whole situation with O'Hara, and the apparent perception of "positives" before "negatives," etc. etc. What I wrote about the music scene, for example, wasn't intended to suggest to these poets that, were they to write about music in Atlanta, they would be legitimized as a group — it was just a concrete example, better than a term like "how do they represent the 'local'". I think my mention of the "private language" was misinterpreted — I'm not quite sure how it was interpreted, but all I meant was that rather mundane, but probably idiosyncratic, language that many of us use in casual or not-so casual face-to-face conversation, in bars or in homes (many poets in response to my post have specified, for example, that they have not "agenda" in their meetings — this is an example, itself, of an element of this "private language" — it seems to be a common element to many of these poets that they have "no agenda", a term that means something specific in their context). I think this language — just like, say, the language of the Beats — can be used in critical writing or poetics writing to suggest unique values, but it doesn't have to be. I wasn't suggesting much more than that. I wasn't suggesting that the APG had to have a politics (though to have "no agenda" is to have a politics, I feel), nor a common aesthetic approach.

I thought, in fact, that the point of my post was that the poets concerned need not use any of the terminology that is mostly taken for granted on this list and elsewhere, by myself and others, when talking about issues of contemporary poetics. We use this terminology because we are pretty sure that it's been adopted by a wide group of people (were their more Iranians and Taiwanese, for example, we could not make this assumption, but we do), more than have adopted the word "skanky" as a critical term for describing a poem (for example), though we consign it to scare quotes anyway. This is exactly, I feel, what Dana meant when quoting John:

*I strongly agree with John's post yesterday where he says, "it seems to me that the apparent *need* for an oppositionality and vanguardist posture in contemporary poetry has become so deeply entwined with poets in these waters identities that it is*

ourselves that we end up opposing ... but, when this gets bolstered with theory and directed at others more than at self i begin to question its use for any of us."

I guess I was looking to the "APG" to make a move in trying to get past any of the given terminology — "oppositionality," "marginality," the "avant-garde," the "local," any of the terms which are proving themselves not very useful anymore — and so was being a little pushy. I would like to get away from these terms myself, but need the content for the new terms. What I have heard from these poets seems to suggest to me that there is little desire to do more than not "share an agenda," which is fine with me — it's obviously a position itself, of sorts, and, were it to be tested and stuck to, will produce a new way of thinking. Imagining the "not sharing an agenda" as the paradigm, it will no doubt push itself toward something very different.

Consequently, I never suggested in my post that there was anything like "careerism" involved — it's not quite right to mix that terminology with my own. I couldn't care less about "careerism" — it would be like suggesting that Olson wrote "Projective Verse" because he was interested in a "career" in poetry (or Hopkins wrote his diaries on "parnassian" verse, or Rimbaud wrote his "Letter of the Seer") because of careerism. I think these poets were interested in an "idea," which, concerning another post, I will try to address later, though I feel it's probably kind of boring to most people now.

But concerning that post that suggests that I think poets should have "ideas" because of some idea of "exclusion/inclusion" which involves a "litmus test," this seems to me a forced reading of what I have been writing for the past several weeks, on the APG or not, since all I have written about is to suggest that a new language for describing things would collapse any sort of outside/inside, and would have no judges to decide its relative virtues, only the people actively concerned to suggest improvements (they would be only people who would care to suggest improvements). It would be a project in flux, in motion, nothing settled, no criteria. This is the power of the concept of "redescription" — you can't hear it until it happens, but when it happens (such as "the verse that print bred" and the "page as an open field" in Olson's writing) you know it happens — the "whole area is lifted," which is what Williams wrote of Olson's essays (or something like that). The same with ideas: if you've never had an idea, you are probably going to be confused when someone suggests that a good idea would make things different right now. If you equate ideas with "that thing that those other 'included' people have" and equate it with the language that "they" use, you will be hard put to find your own ideas because the language you are using to find them (your "private language") is not their language, not recognized by them. "Exclusion" is practically implicit in having an idea (the reverse of what you were

suggesting, Jordan). O'Hara's ideas in "Personism," for example, would not have been recognized by the New Critics, partly because the terminology "going on your nerve" would have no content for them, but any close reading of this text shows that it is filled with ideas. If one is stuck on the idea of a "litmus test," that probably means that one's ideas have suffered greatly because of someone else's judgment —that the litmus test proved one's ideas false, "unworthy." But most likely this litmus test is just the barriers between different versions of "private" languages (languages that are masquerading as the final, permanent one) and most likely it is you, not the evil doctor, who is holding the urine stick (one kind of litmus test).

I do think poets today have ideas, of course, I was being flip and pushy with that one line.

Now, what has become increasingly clear to me is the use of the name "APG" is problematic to the theorists on this List because of the unspoken implications of naming, and ties to/breaks with historical groupings that have become named. Also problematic is calling attention to said named group because it calls motive into question. Well, I don't necessarily disagree with any of you on these points because theoretically I understand what arguments you're trying to make. But, if you're saying it's wrong or problematic, then propose a different solution.

I was suggesting that different solutions were possible. But anyway, the subject of "naming" is one of the great philosophical questions, but has a everyday basis, too. (Go to Montreal — the government is constantly trying to keep new words out of the language, good words like "spermicelli.") Think of how you stuttered the first time you used the term "email," how you spoke it with a slight grimace, how you thought it less substantial than a "letter" or a "poem" even. It seemed dirty and mundane (at least it did to me). But after a while "reality" sets in, or experience suggests the solidity of the category, the content for this word fills in, and it takes on substance — it's "naturalized". Perhaps this is what is happening with the name "APG" — it's being said with a stutter. Doesn't mean it's a bad term.

Anyway, apologies if my previous posting was a total misfire. You can shut off your TV now, and at any time, and think.

Cheers,
Brian

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Lyn Hejinian, *Happily*

19 Jan 2000

The inaugural strain of the "Little Review," Stefans's standing dispatch of capsule notices—here on Hejinian's thirty-nine pages of ambient thinking. Watch the scare-quotes multiply ("ambient," "mental furniture," "dailiness") as he tries to name a book whose whole method is refusing to conclude; he gets closer than most, and knows better than to plant a flag on "Now is a noted conjunction."

Lyn Hejinian

Happily

The Post-Apollo Press, 2000

This small book by Hejinian presents a linked series of pleasures, pleasures that are not corrupted by over-arching theoretical significance imposing its will on the structure, though, indeed, a "theory" seems to be at its base. That is to say, there is an "ambient" quality to this work, an attempt to provide the "mental furniture" (it Satie's phrase) to daily living and thinking which approaches as from a distance, but a distance that is neither exterior or interior, but is to be found in language. That it appear "far" is mostly a quality of the measured incompleteness of the phrasing, which can be contrasted to the overdetermined quality of the aphorism or rhymed couplet. The sentences have a self-containment — they can be read individually for their contents and aporias — but fall, when taken on a long-view, into a pragmatist's discourse of viewing thought in its moment-by-moment self-creation: "_Now_" is a blinding instant one single explosion but somehow some part of it gets accentuated / And each time the moment falls the emphasis of the moment falls into time differently / No sooner noticed no sooner now that falls from something / Now is a noted conjunction / The happiness of knowing it appears" (27) The reader is guided along by a rhythmic certainty that doesn't fall into a regularity suggesting "pace" or a normative meter; likewise, "conclusions" appear — "Now is a noted conjunction" for example — which can spiral off into an entire philosophical thesis (suggesting closure) but which, in obedience to the method of the poem, leads only to the next moment and the promise — the best promise of poetry — of further discoveries, of "possible futures". ("Dailiness" seems to be some aspect of this, that one should not create thought or linguistic structures that could not, in fact, survive the contingencies of day, whether these be impositions on one's reading time or the hierarchies created when values are too much analyzed, too much banished to the linearities of, say, academic discourse.) "There is no 'correct path' / No sure indication / It is hazy even to itself" she writes, echoing, in a sense, Dante, but subverting in some ways the entire mythos of the "bildungsroman" and the promise of metaphysical certainty, in which humans are banished to the second-tier, "mundane" task of the approach to essence and the ideal. Some lines read like counter-arguments to the accusation of relativity; Hejinian opts for the approach that pragmatism

relieves one not just of final vocabularies but also of any myth that contingent values fail in their relationship to the "eternal verities": "From the second moment of life, one can test experience, be eager to please, have the mouth of a scholar, hands never at rest, there is no such thing as objectivity but that doesn't mean everything is unclear and one doesn't fail to choose the next moment for a long time." (30) The poem ends beautifully, and it sounds like a beginning, subsuming within itself both Bergsonian notions of time as a tactile, immeasurable quantity but whose recognition is revelatory, and the Marcusian argument that uncontaminated "pleasure" is a quality worth fighting for in the economic/political nexus, though difficult to deduce freed of the needs of capital: "No, happily I'm feeling the wind in its own right rather than as of particular pertinence to _us_ as a windy moment / I hear its lines leaving in a rumor the silence of which is to catch on quickly to arrange things in preparation for what will come next / That may be the thing and logically we go then it departs." (39)

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

José García Villa (ed. Eileen Tabios), *The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings*

19 Jan 2000

Stefans in recovery mode, greeting Kaya's selected Villa—the Filipino American who turned up in the 1948 Gotham Book Mart photograph among Auden and Bishop and then, symbolist to the end, simply stopped. The reviewer is generous to the eccentricities (the commas between every word, redeemed by P. Inman) while quietly conceding they look minor beside Pound; a notice that respects its subject enough to measure him honestly.

José García Villa (ed. Eileen Tabios)
The Anchored Angel: Selected Writings
 Kaya Press, 1999

Kaya Production continues its innovative line of Asian American poetry with this selected edition of the writing of Filipino American Jose Garcia Villa. As the famous 1948 photograph from the Gotham Book Mart reception of Dame Edith Sitwell suggests — in which he appeared with the likes of Elizabeth Bishop, Delmore Schwartz, Gore Vidal, W. H. Auden and other luminaries — Villa was something of an anomaly, in that he was a writer coming from a colonial property of the United States who was created a poetics that was as unquestioning of the premises of high modernism as he himself was unquestioning of his abilities and preternatural calling as a poet. The excellent essays appended to this collection by important writers such as Nick Joaquin, E. San Juan, Jr., and Luis H. Francia, along with the introduction by novelist/poet Jessica Hagedorn, present the man in a variety of guises, from the imposing, learned, often didactic, never passive literary mentor that he was to several Filipino writers in New York, to the provocateur in the Philippines who never failed to cause a scandal with his tart

tongue and demanding aesthetic tastes (he was, nonetheless, put on the government's payroll, and had a troubled but intimate relationship to the Marcos). As if testament to his chosen tradition of late symbolist poetics, Villa — like Valery, Rilke and Rimbaud — reached a point in his life when he felt that he had "said all he had to say" and let silence reign — in fact, he gave up writing poems after the early sixties, though he often spoke of an enormous work on aesthetics which he had been preparing. The poems that he did leave behind foreground a set of values that might strike one today as antique, and yet they are surprisingly fresh, and when focused, very powerful. The echoes one hears are from writers as diverse as Hopkins, Dickinson, Blake and Cummings, and his various innovations — his idea of "Reverse Consonance" and the later idea of putting commas between every word (which he linked to "Seurat's architectonic and measured pointillism," and which, dismissed for many years as a laughable eccentricity, has resurfaced in practices by poets such as P. Inman) — seem minor in retrospect compared to those of Williams or Pound, but attest to the care for the small event in poems that only surfaces upon a very close reading of the language. The purity of his approach leaves one nostalgic for a time before deconstruction and the politics of the referent had converted the aporias of language into the ironizing of essences and the critique of public values (which is to say, "before Auschwitz"): "Silence is Thought converging / Unprecipitate, like / Dancer on tight wire balancing, / Transitive, budlike, / Till — her act finished — in / One lovely jump skips / She to the floor, bending / To make her bows, dips / Herself in bright applause — / Then silence is / No more. Not it is the rose / Called Speech." (15) The comma poems challenge the reader to break apart and reform meanings, as if to dissuade the imposition of final interpretation that eventually weigh on many poems: "As,much,as,I,perceive,the,Future, / Lo: the,Future,perceives,me: / A,Mutuality,of,Eyes." (45) (This suggests Karl Kraus's famous assertion, as cited in Benjamin: "The more you stare at language, the more it stares back.") His later syllabic approach to the stanza resembles, mostly, that of Marianne Moore's, but unlike Moore, he attempted poems that were not merely assemblages of "found texts" but which were based on a single sentence of a single text, hence testing the integrities of syntax. One based on a sentence from Andre Gide, for instance, permits him to escape the more fiery, messianic tones of his earlier poems and yet access the integrity of his personality which he cherished so much: "Night and sleep alone / Permit metamorphoses. Without / Oblivion in the / Chrysalis the caterpillar / Could not / Become a butterfly: The / Hope of awaking someone else / Urges me to let / The man I am to sink in- / to sleep." (83) As some of the essays in the end argue, Villa stands at the crossroads of many discourses, specifically those of postcolonialism and the transition from modernism to a postmodernism informed by the West's imposition

of values on non-Western peoples. But Villa seems an unlikely candidate for this position — he seems to ignore these issues all together. However, by his unflinching devotion to his notions of craft and calling, he becomes a diamond in the rough — the diamond he hoped his syntax would find in language — and it is this diamond that serves, by its aspirations to integrity and wholeness, to aggravate and permit growth to a number of concepts that swirl around the political/aesthetic nexus, each end of the axis threatening the other. Besides all that, this book, excellently edited by Eileen Tabios (who also edited the seminal *Black Lightning* published by the Asian American Writers Workshop), is a study in how a relatively small contribution to two nations' literatures could serve to transform an entire discourse, once the discourse is forced open by the contradictions of poetry, and a poet's life.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Enrique Lihn (trans. David Oliphant), *Figures of Speech*

24 Jan 2000

A Chilean poet condemned to Neruda's shadow gets his brief American hearing; Stefans reaches for "The Waste Land" and Rimbaud's "Seven Year Old Poets" to place a sensibility "shoring its ruins against the request for identity." The slim posthumous selected, he notes, offers the false comfort of a life made whole—a wholeness Lihn never granted himself.

Enrique Lihn (trans. David Oliphant)

Figures of Speech

Host Publications, 1999

Figures of Speech presents, in an all-too brief format, the life of an interesting, unsparing poet; indeed, the format of the posthumous "selected poems" often provides the illusion of a completeness to one's life, but a reading of Lihn's work demonstrates how this struggle with a sense of wholeness seemed not to be resolvable even by the prospect of death. Lihn was one of Chile's foremost poets, yet, despite a collection published by New Directions in 1978 (*The Dark Room and Other Poems*) and an earlier translated volume from 1969, he has not acquired the reputation in the States of his countryman Pablo Neruda. This careful, liberal selection from the poet's first pamphlet to his deathbed poems (but not including his political poems and long poems such as "Written in Cuba") by Lihn's friend and translator David Oliphant, goes far to redress this situation. The opening "Portrait" describes the poet at his most bitterly reduced but most youthful as well, a self-description that rivals such works as "The Waste Land" or Rimbaud's "Seven Year Old Poets" (and, even earlier, Nerval's writing) as an image of the fractured sensibility taking on the ancient mission of the bard in the modern world: "Poet from head to toe / a man of bitten fingernails, convulsive, neurotic, / orphan of the eagles, father to his own increase, [...] / his soul rarely

diminutive, / appeared on going away, / furious in his happiness, joyless in his grief, / abortion of his very chaste orgasm, / the gardener's dog... [...] / his secret transparent not by choice, / obscure from convergent intents." (3) It is these "convergent interests" that mark the site of the ambiguous self shoring its ruins against the request for identity, public or poetic (or, conversely, shoring its sense of identity against the request for plural universality. This image of the writer is revised in the later, more complex poem "Literature," where he considers not just himself but his South American countryman in their quixotic mission, corrupted by it is not just by self-delusion but the mundane nature of social recognition (he is almost Artaudian in his iconoclastic reduction-to-absurdity, but humbled by his unheroic, bureaucratic muzzle): "When I find myself around other writers / we do little more than speak like good or bad functionaries / of Literature [...] / When I run across such stars of the first order / and those peacocks shine with the necessary prudence / I'd like to invite them to puke, because writing as well as they / is to perform the blandest task. When I come upon myself / facing the empty page I think of peacocks / and try at least not to show off, but I write / to the extent of my hatred for literature, / and to young authors I would like to yell / cut it with the farce, you too will enter the business / because literature is the softest of jobs [...]." (41) His sonnets — which Oliphant translates in their exact rhyme scheme thought the original Spanish is *en face* (these can be awkward, as when he breaks the word "chorus" into "cho-/ rus" for the sake of rhyme) — states the case more poignantly, conjuring the image of a man just barely being kept afloat by words: "What would I be without my words / without my signs of impotence," (55) and earlier, in which he imagines meeting his double, he concludes that he walks "in vain / behind his very self minus his literature." (49) (Ironically, one of the poems Oliphant translated was lost in its original Spanish, and Linh had to reconstruct a Spanish "original," included in this collection.) That the occupation of words, of naming, is growing ever more tenuous, and that syntax's value is fading among the proliferation of the values inculcated by telecommunications, is conveyed in the effective title of one poem, "Age of Data," which concludes "data is just the opposite of God." (39) The section "Brooklyn Monster" contains poems Linh wrote in his travels in New York, Texas, Canada and Spain, and will, of course, evoke for American readers Lorca's poems of "Poet in New York," mostly through the vignette-like approach and empathy for the dispossessed they share, as in the poem "Brooklyn Monster" itself, in which he creates a frightening, expressionistic portrait of a lone rider: "The man / — if it is not a woman — dresses like a half-naked conscript, like a cadaver / they would have carried from concentration camp to the crematory oven / With feet much smaller than its destitute shoes / The woman — if it's not a man — with white / plaster make-up running down its face / in the ritual expulsion of sex" (107). Linh's Toronto is unlike any you will

find elsewhere, but is worth reading as a contrast to the relative disinterest in mythologized "cities" in Canadian poetics. In "Europeans," which is set in Paris, his mixed-feelings about the continent's cultural legacy are most completely asayed; at one point he mocks a tenet of Godard's semiotics while, later, he admits he is "wrong," finding some value in the philosophy of surfaces, a philosophy much at odds with his Latin American (perhaps both Catholic and American Indian) need to read below the surfaces, to find correspondences. This is not to say he is unsophisticated or baffled in his outlook; in fact, he finds a way to read the paradoxes of what he experiences, such as his run-in with a European whose words contradict her own novelistic presence: "Those people that French lady those noses like / a lady's antennas and stilettos or radars [...] / We're all dead — she repeated — even though her / wonderful legs shouted to the contrary / and her nose flitted ecstatic over tropics / with a modesty occasionally exemplary among / her transatlantic kind / stripped of excesses of / intellectual curiosity / as ever happens / when a woman of fifty travels / universally alone be she French or not [...] (97)." The several poems from his deathbed are, the translator notes, among the most moving written on the subject, but as they are often more abstract they don't often carry over well as the earlier, satirical or expressionistic ones. The title "Pain Has Nothing To Do With Pain," for example, hints at the difficulty of translating these poems — it sounds a bit awkward, even if those words correspond directly with the original. Nonetheless, as Oliphant writes in his introduction, this is a scathing metaphysical critique of the roles doctors seem to play in prolonging the process of dying: "Perhaps doctors are nothing but experts and death — the apple / of their eyes — is a pet problem / science solves it with partial solutions, that is to say, it puts off / its undissolvable nodule sealing a pleura, to start with / It may be that I am one of those who pay anything for the procedure. (153)" The "Art and Life" section contains some of Lihn's many poems on the visual arts, concerning such artists such as Turner and Kandinsky, but it also includes his most humble, and most affirmative, credo on art in society: "People who circle around the museum pieces / forgetful of their condition as museum pieces / and who seem, well, to ignore where they are / The Metropolitan Museum of Art is a work of art / accomplished by their artistic lavatories. // We are works of art momentarily alive." (65) This poem, itself called "Art and Life," envisions a unified field theory of art, speech and personhood that serves to override any neurosis about the fragmentary human self, and even death, suggesting, with a sort of nod to theories of ambience, that individuals, like art, are vessels of meaning, with the added bonus that we know something of what these meanings are.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Possible Futures 1: What I (fixed)

25 Jan 2000

A collage-poem in cascading indentation, splicing a Guernica figure and Rimbaud and a Chagall Vitebsk into the marketing copy of Delphi Developer — 'a comprehensive set of professional tools.' The software manual as a nightshade of the sublime; the seams are the point.

am calling
a Guernica figure lolls drowsily
in my New! Delphi Developer is a comprehensive
set of professional tools,
combining the view. Take it down, you
say? The nightshift can smooth
over particulars. Cayenne
SYNONYMS: chili,
red pepper,
bird pepper.
BOTANICAL

DESCRIPTION:
Cayenne
if it seems
obscene, well
that's Rimbaud;
this is him at Stranger,
if thou hast learnt
a truth which needs no
school of I spent one Sunday
in Vitebsk. Snow on my tongue,
performance of a 32-bit optimizing
native-code compiler, the productivity of
a visual component-based
environment,
and the flexibility
of his most
imagistic,
but consequently
most psychological
and long experience,
that the world
is full of
guilt and misery,
is a member
of the
nightshade
family, which includes potatoes,
tomatoes, tobacco, eggplant, and has
seen enough of all its sorrows,
crimes, and cares, to tire scalable
database development, in a
robust object-oriented

architecture.
You get
everything
you need

thee of
it, enter
this wild wood
and view the
haunts of Nature.
Dung on my mind;
it's such an old town,
and henbane. It is available
either as a spice, or the calm
shade shall bring a kindred calm,
and the sweet breeze that makes
the green leaves dance, like the layout you

see on an old
map. Chagall
and that woman
shall waft
a balm to thy
sick heart.

Thou wilt find
in black lift
heavily off
dreaming of
a nightmare.
Dolorous sighs,

sleek
to create powerful
Windows 95, Windows NT, and
Windows 3.1 features, but I am always
happy in this truck, nothing
here of all that pained thee in the
haunts of applications. The
new 32-bit optimizing
native-code
compiler
lets you
in the

form of
dried pods
of variable
color and size,
containing many
subversive (in a
juvenile way) manner.
Even these verses from
quickly create standalone, royalty-free

executables with no runtime-interpreter
DLLs men and made thee loathe thy
life. The primal curse fell, it is true,

upon the unsinning
earth, but
not I've got
plenty to say
for it. Seeds.

HABITAT, CULTIVATION:

It is a native
of Central
America, and
was introduced
to Europe and
India in the

fifteenth
century by
the Portuguese. It was then
introduced to Africa, my translation,
which are the most successful,
are pretty awkward, from which most
British supplies come. PARTS
and there are more shifts
in tone in
the original
I ignore
the raven.

Yes, it's
true this
speckled surplus
USED: The dried
ripe fruits. PHARMACOLOGY:
The constituents
of cayenne are has
been provided by one
of your admirers... sitting
at the bar Required. Delphi applications
run up to 15-50 times faster than
p-code interpreted applications. And with...

with an eye
in the mirror,
and a perfect
Lucky Strike.

No prime contender
but waiting
is always French
poem which
don't come
through in

this condensed
 version - a

 holiday
 in places like
 this, forgetful of other alkaloids,
 carotenoid pigments (including capsanthin
 and capsorubin), flavonoids,
 ascorbic acid and volatile oil. Of the
 alkaloids in cayenne, the
 most important is capsaicin,
known to mimic
16-to-32-bit
compatibility,
a quick

 recompile
 of existing
 16-bit applications
 will boost
 performance it is
 the failure to render
 these shifts in tone,
 in by 300-400% and produce
 20-25% smaller EXEs! Delphi
 leverages the power of Windows
 fact, that screwed up the translation
in the first place in vengeance. God hath

 yoked to guilt
 Her pale tormentor,
 misery. Hence,
 these holidays.
 Now the step
 turns to caramel,
 and after strange
 wads, unfinished
 paragraphs
 sticking in
 the toaster,
 that it overruns,

 it is
 shades are
 still the abodes of gladness...
 it is worth taking a look no fun, no
 more. Sing a new song, write
 the letter to that girl whose poem you
 missed as much as you at the
 "art" of "heart" in this
poem. Carlyle,
in Signs

Of The
95 and

Windows
NT. You
will have virtually
unlimited (I
realize now). In
any case, that is
the best explanation
I Times, thought that
the primary metaphor for the
can give for the final lines of
my poem, times was that of the
disease (was the effect of prostaglandins

a skin cream
called "Zostrix."
Containing
capsaicin has
been shown
to though it
may make it
appear a bit
cheaper as
an effort.
I'm surprised
that you would

wonder
memory because
the compiler runs in a flat
32-bit address space. No more about
the "function" of a line,
since none of the lines seem, to me,
really to "function" in any
way, he the first? (
that an individual
was healthy
when improve
healing

in cases
of postherpetic
neuralgia,
and to reduce
pain in diabetic
neurapathy. Cayenne
not conscious of the
mechanism of the body
or mind. Hasn't Finlay used
the most volatile symbol for death

and illness to has also been claimed
to stimulate circulatory read it, and wanted

it, and yet
the connections
were severed.
No flight though
I suppose you
were wondering
about 16-bit
64K barriers
anywhere -
now you can
the rather
adolescent,

or pornographic,
nature of its
sexual content. I really wouldn't
create arrays, strings, records, and
other data structures up that
day, the clouds were revealing new seaside
properties for these to two
gigabytes! New multi-error
compile with
hints
and warnings
increases

productivity
by allowing
programmers
to resolve
errors know how
to answer that,
except to say that
it's in complete his
image of the pastoral, and doesn't
faster. It is now possible to fix
multiple and digestive secretions
and perspiration; the volatile oil is probably

a significant
he do justice
to this symbol
as that of
problems in
a single compile.
And hints and
warnings about
possible problems
death (i.e.

not trivializing
it, which is

what an
American such
as Warhol might do, or theorize
it factor in this activity. One suggested
explanation was that the... the
original - hardly adequate, I suppose,
since my "translation" (i.e.
the second "Language"
version) makes
Pound's
Cathay
appear

rather
conservative
(also much
more impressive)
in comparison. Herb
releases endogenous
gastric secretagogues
which increase the perfusion
of the body tissues into non-existence
like the French)? Doesn't he make
art more (Corn, it appears, is
a symbol of potency, and I know of something

called a "Corn
King," probably
an agricultural
deity, "real"
this way? Or
do we wish
he permitted
"reality" talents
of ours, new
inklings of
stars and they
felt avoiding

its to
keep its distance
from art, at least that appears
in a poem of Randall Jarrell's, but
that's about it) until we
feel that this reality has been company
was the only proper thing
to do, so we stayed down.
Let's in your
code make

it easier
to deliver

bug-free
applications.
With 16-to-32-bit
compatibility,
Delphi allows you
to protect your
application investment
while not spend much
time here. By blood. In studies
carried out in India, Cayenne,
or equivalent amounts of the main
constituent capsaicin, sufficiently historicized.

Of course history
is an attempt
to make the
please don't
hesitate not
to use it (obviously);
no need to
send it past
seem stable
and of course
it's all a
lie. Nero must

mean Nero
or the game's
up. But moving to a new operating
system. FREE! 16-bit Delphi for Windows
3.1 was shown to eat away
at cholesterol levels, back. I hope
things are well with you.
You is included. This
means you choose
the (
though
killies

have green
backs and
white are lucky
to be in New
York in this weather,
though I must say
it's beautiful out
here, now. Best platform
to meet your needs. To promote
excretion of excess cholesterol,

and even prevents its absorption.
The study also showed that Cayenne was more

effective than
capsaicin bellies,
zut! for the
bass and hawks!
When we've
tired of swimming
we'll go climb
the ledgy forest.
Confute the
sages. Alone,
suggesting
that its other

constituents
contribute
to its potency. Cayenne also
controls lipid levels. CHINESE MEDICINE
ENERGETICS: Taste: acrid temperature:
hot action: produces perspiration, stimulates
circulation, stimulates gastric
secretions, carminative,
anti-septic,
counter-irritant

for Kim Rosenfield on her birthday, 8/1/96

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has anyone else noticed

26 Jan 2000

Hi Tony — who had complained of posters seizing 'power over the discursive space' through sheer length, and Stefans, self-nominating as the list's chief blabbermouth, rises to a genial several-hundred-word defense of doing exactly that. The irony is not lost on him; he simply decides the archive, read at leisure, absolves everyone.

Hi Tony,

"Reading all postings as offering 'states of feeling', not a few seem keen to assert some power over the discursive space, over listeners, — sometimes with sheer length, sometimes with judgements 'supported' with argument of (variable) cogency, sometimes with postings that seem to be demonstrations of literary critical academic professionalism."

I fear the following may refer to me partly — because I know I'm a blabbermouth and probably post too much (I mean this) — but I'd like to know, in general, how this "power over discursive space" is enacted in something with the structure of this list (which could, for example, have as 683 posts a day if those 683 Americans would post once daily, along with the 8 Australians etc. etc.), and how one is to satisfy one's demands for this power even should that be his (in this case we

would say "his") goal. And what's wrong with "demonstrations of literary academic professionalism" and how does one suss this out? What's wrong with arguments of "variable cogency" if you are available to make them cogent, or to inject a new set of insights to perhaps produce something new?

I guess the question is:

Are we to take no chances at all when trying to discover, or uncover, what is the nature of poetry today, or who is writing interesting poetry and why, or is one to adopt a "common sensical" approach, a conservative and not unsettling manner that leaves us secure with our sense of "art" and one as an individual is. Are we always to refer to the "eternal verities" of literary value, or do we try to see the future for what it's worth?

There seem to be three ways to read this list: 1) as individual emails, 2) as a big "digest," and 3) on the web in the archives (my preferred method, it saves you from the anxiety of having to read several emails or a long one). I'd be the first to draw back if I thought I was just crowding other people out — the effect would be most strong on the digest, I presume — but I tend to think the forum is still open to contributions from anyone reading the thing.

My sense is that, while some of the "threads" could be trimmed at the end, just like any poem one writes (Schuyler used to say that he only cut off the ends of his poems as revision, because they got pretty bad there), or even starting from the middle, that most threads at least have some kernel of value to them, and that it's unlikely a thread will be hot metal intellectual discourse throughout, or "good poetry." And since this is a group effort by a bunch of people who don't know each other, we're not going to come up with War and Peace.

[Start threads!]

If we choose to approach threads as involuntary geological formations, like mountains, and appreciate the shapes they adopt rather than the "human" content, it would enable one to appreciate all forms of "variably cogent" behaviors therein. At least that's the way I see it.

In any case, I wonder why there are so many people who are, in general, very silent on the list, and the only time you hear from them is when they suggest that the list is merely exposing how aggressive, hypocritical and pretentious poets are. Poets have to be pretentious — just like Max Harris (hurray!) — it's their jobs! I don't much care if people think I'm pretentious.

If I may make a rather subversive comment: if you subtract all the loose talk on this list, the pretension and so forth, you are left with a bunch of magazine announcements and reading announcements — which, when you think about it, is

really just the "voice of the art bureaucrat" — which isn't to say that that's what these people are by any means, they are often not getting paid at all and put in long hours of work to keep these things going, and they are often poets, very good ones! I'm just suggesting that the background hum this list performs would be reduced to that component, and wouldn't have any chance of being enlivening.

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Cyberpoetry

28 Jan 2000

Seconding Kominos in praise of a Rebecca Wolff post, Stefans wishes poems were as absorptive as horror movies, inverts Bernstein on absorption, and drifts into his theory that one might program a form and thereby reprogram a personality — offering, as evidence, the day he spent being Gary Numan. Where it lands is anyone's guess, but the ride is characteristic.

I agree with Kominos, Rebecca's post was a startling post for me to read, very beautifully put ideas. And the analogy with horror movies ain't bad —it's an argument for the "absorptive" to some degree, in the sense that we expect readers/viewers to ignore the frame of the experience (the movie, the poem) but only so that the experience of the work be so complete that, once escaping from it, the frames through which one views the world (the eyeglasses, the 61st story window, the circle of friends who keep telling you "you don't love girl," the newspaper) are permanently altered. Would that more poems were as absorptive as horror movies, or that the forms don't nag you with their pretensions of "heightened language" and balanced emotion, or maybe I just mean, too bad more poems don't seem to want to be "of their time" in the way mainstream cultural products have to be. This is something of an inversion of Bernstein's idea regarding absorptive poetics, and yet absorption, to some degree, has to occur somewhere — I call this the "entertainment value" of the piece (Smithson is turning in his spiral-shaped grave right now); Brecht, for example, a key figure for CB's essay, often wrote adopting these popular forms. It is these vehicles that may hold more "keys" to our understanding of today than the stripped down, value-"neutral" forms of most poems.

I, like Patrick Herron I've discovered (haven't checked out his site yet) started my creative life in computer programming, and then immediately took to Pound once starting poetry with the basic understanding that one poet can, should the decision be made, adopt pretty much any form to write provided the devotion to investigating the form is complete enough to follow it to its grisly ends. I thought that forms could be programmed — indeed, you mention the masks, a Poundian interest obviously — and by extension one could reprogram one's personality, which of course proves nearly impossible but to pretend, for a day or so, that you have adopted a series of values is something I do quite often (involuntarily,

mostly). (Gary Numan was a recurring one.) To follow a form to its "grisly end" could mean a flirtation with values that, under daily, normal circumstances are repulsive or unattractive (try being the Marquis de Sade for a day), but I think the experiment a good one, and, yes, cyberpoetics could be the best field right now for exploring these. I have this idea of the interface creating, or recreating, a user's perceptual frame for the moments of engagement, and creating works that operate through several different interfaces (which is what I tried to do in "Naif and the Bluebells") challenges the idea, I hope, of the permanence of one's engagement with the computer, and by extension with any engagement with "reality." Well, my idea needs flesh.

| *And what could be more fascinating than expressing it in a language of transition and device.*

Also unsettling, but with great erotic potential.

| *Is the webpage, therefore, the mask of the cyberpoet?*

And are all of Pound's personae merely web-pages (alternative interfaces)?

| *The structure of the communication is certainly ritualistic.*

If you have the stomach for dense, uncolorful texts, you should try checking out Donald Davidson's writings on language, titles of which elude me right now but there are only two (Actions and Events may be one of them).

| *One must perform the ritual to gain the secrets that are gradually revealed: clicking, clicking, clicking, moving in deeper and deeper as a relationship develops between the cyberpoet and the viewer/reader.*

Funny how many people don't see this as a pursuit of depth, but an avoidance of depth. This [Rebecca's post] is practically a manifesto... When I was in Philly for the Philly Talks, some of the phone in questions asked about computer poetry (in this case, programs that are used to create poems that, in their "final life" are words on a page like any poet) where the content of such writing is. I rather inadequately answered that the poems enact a series of interactions with the computer, and by extensions certain types of systematic thinking, that provide something in the end of a drama, if we understand drama to portray interactions primarily, through humans. The first law (easily broken, of course) of dramatic writing is to make sure the people on stage are arguing about something, not agreeing and describing things in a similar fashion. (The first law of the poetics list seems to be that the argumentative threads live a little longer, and are I think more interesting, but they get tired when we take them too seriously, try to find "final" answers, as we would were Brian Denahey to take a swing at someone who's beeper went off in the audience, as he nearly did on Broadway.) I figure these works (which often involved the uses of "lyrical" texts, critical texts such as

Bloom's *Anxiety of Influence* in one case, weird translations of people like Nerval, etc., were creating a field in which these figures argued [various figures like Brad Pitt and Gertrude Stein would make appearances, too]. This was to assure that they weren't leveled to a plain field of "democratic" mutual existence, the pop, the discursive, the artistic living on equal levels in some sort of utopian vision — quite the contrary, the premises involve an understanding that, to most of us, even the "advanced," these discourses have their places in hierarchies, but hierarchies that are rather personal, not "eternal," and whose sounding (like one sounds a jungle jim by hitting it with a pipe) could provide pleasure. In any case, the main argument in these poems would be between the "natural hand of the poet" and the "system" that tends to want to compartmentalize and de-organicize this sense of naturalness, of wholeness (Anselm: I would say the *Selected Poems* de-organicized the continuum of your father's achievement in this way, punching holes in the sense of wholeness that was created by the day-to-day "project of the poet" that was TB's particular mission). The phone-in caller was not impressed.

This, educative aspect of cyberpoetry brings to the forefront a question of ethics. Do we really know what we are doing out there? Do we understand the relationship between the screen, the eye, the mind and the heart?

This is interesting phrasing. Art as "educative" in some ways is not a generally held view, interesting that you find cyberpoetry being particularly positioned to pose these questions. I posted a long thing a few weeks ago — that was rejected, unfortunately, or didn't show up — that was a ramble to Jim Andrews about how all these web artists here in New York are working by day for major corporations, making tons of money, and seemed to have no problems having "two careers." My sense was that this dual careership actually hindered one's interest in web art as "educative," or as a philosophical or investigative field, in which ideas could be followed to their ends; the commercial relationship, I feel, will compromise this aspect, since my experience in the corporate world is that any sharp edges — to one's personality, to one's speech, to one's ideas — are always having to be rounded off, or to stop just short of the idea of retreating from the institution. I don't think that one has to retreat from the institution, but that one could possibly decide this and should be in a position to do so.

I hope it maintains a balanced representation.

Imbalanced misrepresentation has its virtues, too.

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Frances Chung's booklist

31 Jan 2000

Addressed to Anselm Berrigan, another indentation-cascade poem, this one weaving a booklist — Lorca, Cathy Song, Frances Chung's 'Picture Bride' — through a disquisition on proxemics and 'proximate communications.' The bibliography dissolves into theory and back; Jacques and Patrick make cameo appearances in the falling text.

Hi, Anselm.
First, let
me try to say: the game, thinking
in diversity, our bewilderment detracts
"down on yourself" the best
shot as the words portend — as split in
All. (I've been relatively
quiet on this.) WHAT THE
NAME? The site
is named
'proximate'
as a nod

to the...
THE SELECTED
POEMS OF FEDERICO
GARCIA LORCA,
ed. Francisco Garcia
Lorca, and what is
at stake when I talk
about success in relation
to experimental poetry. Obviously,
I am not talking about Economic
Donald M. Allen (various translators),
PICTURE BRIDE, concept of proxemics in human
communication,
"proximate communications,"
specifically
oral communications,
Kapital, even
though this
is in fact
obtainable
by contained
extralinguistic

information,
e.g., body

language
& context.

That remote communications
such as recordings or textual communications
do not have, cannot have,
the hope of the very small minority
of experimentalist poets in
the form of grants, issues
aside from
several
respectful
conversations

backchannel
with Internet
(as some sort
of transcendent
medium) deserves
serious skepticism
when placed, in the
hundreds of thousands
of dollars, or in the endive
tunnel (location prefigured in
Tron) who, returning no e-mails,
in such a light. Such a light? CATHY SONG,

NO MORE MASKS!

AN ANTHOLOGY

OF POEMS BY

Jacques, Patrick
and others.

Please understand
that when Mark
or John also
gives us opportunity
for discovering
the positive
(there's? "choose

to post
to the List")

they are doing the sale of
personal papers and correspondance (an
unusual example would SO, only
speaking for themselves), I think of always
the tension, the conflict.
The name "proximate"
is also a pun
on intimacy
on the
internet,

as in
a proxy
mate. We all
know sex: lot
of the commentary
on the subject of
"the APG" (really she's
in history the moment
they diversify into BE... say,
Ginsberg's selling his papers to
Columbia for a million WOMEN... ed.
Florence Howe and Ellen Bass). THE has to

do more with
how the APG
has been viewed
based upon
NEW AMERICAN
POETRY, 1945-1960.
Ed. Donald
M. Allen. THE
VOICE? wingdings
as the beatbox
track chimes
in austrian

vicinity
in dollars.
But the fact that anyone reading
this post would feel that, is GREAT.
Within us? AMERICAN POETRY
OF THE TWENTIETH CENTURY., ed. Hayden
Carruth, FIVE DECADES, A SELECTION

(POEMS 1925-1970), Pablo
Neruda, all
uncomfortable
with the
idea of

their
postings
from mainly
two people
than it does with
the APG as a heavy
bastard on the beach
ball fired from a canon,
communitas in the cloisters
commingling with trismagistus, swathing
their heads, being any possible
financial renumeration for experimental writing

would only
demonstrate.

The extent
to which the
game of poetry
is one of _loser
wins_, it will
always be an
oppositional
game in text
and a battle
of rhetorics

such inasmuch
as it functions
by the *inversion* of the
principles organizing sells, especially
on the internet. The internet
seems to be used as an actual group of
individual people, but I'm going
to give my (that the corsair
archeologist
makes
intelligent
play) take

on some
of the questions
Brian (so Brian
Eno: "fuck-a
dis, fuck- dat,"
sometimes thoughtful
people are) confined
to wheelchairs in memory
for the seven reasons punk died.
Plastered to proxy for human contact
and proximal communication, which
gives me, asked, regarding the APG: the APG
does the business
economy—in
that cultural
production
exists fundamentally
as WHEN THE
FREEWAY AGAIN,
ANONYMOUS WITH
A SEVENTY GALLON
HAIRCUT, SOMETIMES
BRAS, Ed., trans.,
Ben Belitt., and
SUNFLOWER
SPLENDOR. Ed.
Wu-chi Liu and Irving Yucheng
Pause. Such an intuition adds to what
I sense as a sort of growing
desperation for real, physical human
contact, particularly in America,
with everyone it is as
severely restricted
as exp
poetry
is, a
production
for producers.
Which, however,
is not to say
that LOW COLD MOUNTAIN,

100 POEMS BY THE
T'ANG POET HAN-SHAN.
trans. Burton Watson, or
TRANSLATIONS FROM THE CHINESE.
trans. Arthur Waley, lead the world
of alternative poetry and the world
of business, and not CH'ING-CHAO: COMPLETE
POEMS. trans.
Kenneth Rexroth
and Ling Chung.
Homologous!
The alternative
poetry world,
whatever else
it is, is a
hierarchical
social space
in which agents—poets—
working on

him- or
herself, never
time for affection, only time
for status, career, a new car. Such
use of energy may be at odds
with a not-have-an-agenda, other than
providing an opportunity for
CHINESE FOLK POETRY.
(trans. Cecilia
Liang.), or
ONE ROBE,
ONE BOWL.

(trans.
John). Make
sense, hippie!
Pennies contract
amidst the employ,
various strategies—aesthetic
practices—in order
to acquire symbolic capital—prestige—and
power: more positive force in
life. The world has some strange

dynamic property (of a certain
kind). Indeed, the power resulting from the

people interested

in poetry and

poetics (other

than the usual

Southern narrative

poetry [Stevens,

ONE HUNDRED

POEMS FROM

THE CHINESE.

trans. Kenneth

Rexroth, ABC

OF READING])

to it;

there's something

beyond our knowledge, yet

within, around: SELECTED POEMS,

Ezra Pound, THE COMPLETE POEMS

OF CHARLES BIG SUR, cataracts, dungareed

dudes with digeridoos, values,

every other muscle pure

snowflake (that

is prevalent

in Atlanta).

To get

together?

REZNIKOFF,

Vol. 1 and

2. SELECTED

POEMS, Kenneth Patchen!

Perhaps such a thing

helps explain the necessity

for contact. The acquisition

of symbolic capital is the very

thing — and that's where the pastoral

begins the satire that legitimizes

the authority of critical interpretations

and aesthetic

judgments, generally

to discuss
same, share
what they've
written, work
on some occasional
collaborative
works, and
try to get
stuff published.
Perhaps. (And

their
reproduction
through the efficacy of institutional
cultural [the problem from the beginning]
was that since the APG defined
itself as a "group." It allowed for others
EMERGENCY POEMS, Nicanor Parra,
trans. Miller Williams.)
CONFIGURATIONS?
Internet
is often
used as

a substitute
for that
contact, but
it (to assume
that we were grouping,
because we had a
shared: (1) private
language; (2) politic;
(3) aesthetic approach, and;
(4) careerist plan) NOW can't
do that well... there IS no substitute.
The "I" that the pun Octavio Paz. trans.

G. Aroul et
al. SUN, v. 4.2.???
I was not there
from the beginning
which offends,
in case this
ambiance is

protective
spring (1975),
NEW POETRY
OF MEXICO,
selected with

notes
by Octavio
Paz and others, ed. Mark Strand
(quite early one) — ain't such somonex
clues us. It was decided somehow
that this bunch-in on the big arrears,
"Papa don't do the small phrase
anymore," leaping leotards,
batman (my piracy's
now the
mode) cushion
— pomo,

airy and
tight — the
fragility of
a mind on ACID
MORNING (Dylan Thomas), and
ONE HUNDRED MORE
POEMS FROM THE JAPANESE
OF PEOPLE, would call
themselves something. When I
met up with John and Randy all
they told me was: "Offends... leaping
over the desert highway... into technology
and exchequer..."
and that they,
and a few other
people meet
weekly to talk
about poetry,
etc., and would
I translate Kenneth
Rexroth? "IF
YOU WANT." To
be interested
in stopping

by? "There?"
Was the stetson
blood? Is restless my bod? "On
a zine haircut, beneath the cloying smile
pill." Seems I've pivots:
"on" is relevant to a constant concern
throughout the site: no agenda,
no sales pitch, no 12
step program—just
"this
is the
poetry

that we
know": WHAT
WE ARE: A CARLOS
BULOSAN READER.
Ed. E. San Juan,
into, sort of, like
the idea for starting
the List Jr. ("HOME TO
STAY, ASIAN AMERICAN WOMEN'S
FICTION. ed. Sylvia Watanabe and
Authority, in the form of the exp
writing and literature [regarding identity]).

"I"? Y? WHY
THE SITE? I
have authored
this site as
a byproduct
of (I'm posting
right now)
a community
of discussions
I have had
regarding the
internet, Carol

Bruchac,
TAKING TO WATER
POEMS, Roberta Spear, AMPLITUDE,
Tess Gallagher, where water forgotten
my form again, rambling endlessly

in this pissing christian vision, Tron
for the babies and bacchanals
leaping before programs,
organizations
like St
Marks,
the most

influential
interface
design and
human gesture,
the pretensions
of proximity in
small presses and magazines,
and so on, success, web
pages, and the actual distances
constructed by them, and some resulting
poetry (most of COMES TOGETHER
WITH OTHER WATER, Raymond Carver, and mystery

and detective
novels by Sue
Grafton, Elmore
Leonard, Marcia
Muller, and
Robert People)

interested
in similar
ideas about/works
of poetry and
poetics in
poetry.

re: SPRING AND ALL

thus
depends
not as much
on intrinsic abilities
and
gifts (since

aesthetic value
is social

not VAN GULIK: THE "JUDGE
DEE" SERIES), short stories. The discussions
were this past summer and
autumn through subsubpoetics
(an e-mail
list started
by Jordan
Davis)

as to
political
or philosophical
ideas... Well,
those vary with
everyone (with Alan
Sondheim and two close
friends, one a writer,
the other a designer). Some
material from these dialogues can
be found at another web site: the
weather screen, using dem types of woids to
muscle support.
Is a natural,
creation, as
on the extent
of the poet's
cultural capital—that
is, his or
her sense of
the State of
the None
have become
our defining

motive(s)
for talking
about poetics, or writing by
Anne Beattie and Ethan Canin? William
Carlos Williams: "If we have
history gracelessly, the pedestrian

surrenders difficult brilliances:
the game as it being
played _now_.
It goes
without
saying,

 however,
 that both
 learned anything
 as human beings.
 These past poetry?
 Nope, no real hook
 ups with the instinctual
 sham-o-meter, that any
 given night gives reason to
 pay the rent, that reason, lost
 pump fist over the castrates from
behind the gleam, <http://gesture.org/text.html>.

I am interested
precisely in
the type of
relationships
that web of
armor defecated
by choice republic
— poets and
critics have,
obviously,
a certain self-interest
in disinterestedness—that

is, a
stake: arts/music
scene in Atlanta, although
some of us know people who pages build
between people. I have observed
that this internet aesthetic, in a _belief_
concerning the absolute or
autonomous aesthetic
value of it,
are doing

things
around

town.
(Hell, my
few generations?
It's that differences
make life interesting!)
Cyberpoetry! (These
thoughts fancy across
the water of talk, the
vandal in work per se.) As for
the term "conflict of values" which
Stephen asked about last week,
it would implicate, of only connection with
the music scene
here, is (I
should be as
diverse as
our eclectic
tastes) these
days we know,
this relater,
is a duplicitous
one (getting
back to the
original definition
of art)
— got some
musician friends who have
toured with/partied, of course, various
investments, it is possible
to make re such issues as the nature
of subjectivity (& its representation
in poetry), the objective
character of
language
and its
relationship
to the
world of

things? The
connection-
career blemishes
the tubeways suspiciously,
courageously, morphs
the museums where the
more, about the esoteric rituals
of a Yao shaman than with bands
like the Black Crowes, but I discourse
fairly — sucks, sucks, sucks discordant channels.

With texts by Jacques Debrot, Patrick Herron, Rebecca Weldon Sithiwong, Dana Lustig, etc.

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Berrigan's Cigar and Lemon Shoppe

04 Feb 2000

Written "a few days ago," posted late, addressed to Jacques, and prefaced with an apology for answering an argument that had already moved on. It usually had; he answered anyway.

[This doesn't take into consideration much more than Jacques initial two posts, so pardon me if it seems to ignore other commentary. I wrote this a few days ago.]

Hi Jacques,

I was intrigued by your post on Berrigan as are many others, obviously. There are good ideas here but the language seems a bit off, overdetermined in a way that ignores some of the "play" in the works of the figures you cite. I am not sure how this sentence operates:

You make it sound like all poets have some sort of vision of the "game," a game of critics, fans, canons, ideologies, etc, and that this game is entirely one of acquiring cultural, or symbolic, capital. But then what of the "game" that, say, William Carlos Williams played, which he played up to the end when he asked (apparently, on his deathbed): "But will they last?" He had obviously, I think, won the game you write of, which is to say he had acquired some sort of position among the high canon of modernists, and had visitors from all over the world paying homage to him, etc., and holding him up against Eliot and an entire establishment of writers, but why doesn't that satisfy him? One could say (rather cynically, I think) that the question concerned some sort of positioning in some immortal canon, but I think there are more self-deceiving writers who are quite assured of their position in this "immortal canon" who would not ask this question on their deathbed (some of them appear in Bloom's book). I tend to interpret this question on a more basic level: he had made an investment in one particular aspect of his

own game, which is the reduction of his poems to typographical creations, to words bashed out by an old whatever, Smith Corona, devoid, in their most radical moments, of the sort of poly-referentiality and "deep" meanings of Pound and Eliot and whatever the establishment represented, devoid of homages to past forms, whether in terms of rhymes, meters, stanzas, and he was not quite sure, at the end, whether he had played this game quite rightly, whether it was a waste of time. Which is to say, he wanted to know if he had reinvented poetry (the guiding myth of the best utopian poets), or had he merely disappeared down a dark sidestreet. (Hopkins, I feel, was another, and so was Dickinson — though I know you are mostly concerned with modern/postmodern poetry, though I don't see quite the break most people do between poetry production "then" and "now", except that now we are all deluded into thinking that the most interesting writing is making its appearance the day after it is written, and is not being stored away in a trunk on account of the poet's modesty or sense of shame.) So he was probably asking not whether he had, himself, acquired symbolic or cultural capital — I think the awards, biographies and commentaries prove he had — but whether the poems had and can survive their immediate context — whether they will be "seminal" (not to get male-o-centric on you), which is to me a more interesting, perhaps truthful, way of approaching this issue.

[I'm probably taking "success" all wrong in your post, I realize.]

[Nonetheles...]

You probaby think I'm oversimplifying or romanticizing, but I think that we can give poets (poets that we happen to admire or respect, with some knowledge of their "lives") the benefit of the doubt when it comes to perceiving wider dangers for their poems than can be described merely by looking at the "public sphere", or the materialistically-determined sphere, in which poetry is produced. I think Anselm's post hits upon certain aspects of this, especially as so much of TB's writing (though he appears to have been a far-from-"modest" poet) seems not to have seen the light of day (I mean outside the apartment), but contributed, at least in TB's mind, to some image of the flux of his activity, hence, in a private canon which, with its idiosyncrasies, virtues and blindnesses, is unreproducible for the "market". In this way the poet's private economy operates as a standing, in-motion critique of the prevailing economy, since the "meanings" of private symbols never become detached from their objects, though we as poets always have to remind ourselves and, moreso, others that this private economy exists, or existed, since, once the production appears — the Selected Poems of Ted Berrigan — we are confronted with the "closed" version of the poet's "career" — the happy-ending version (snipped up as The Sonnets in it are).

By the way, I saw Padgett read from the book you mention, and there are two things to note: one, that TB may have been "very much concerned" with his inclusion in the anthology, but that it doesn't really come across that way in the book, as it was only noted in the course of a joke, when TB joked to RP that he was not in there, which was very funny when Padgett read it (he used a sort of "Me Tarzan You Jane" kind of voice), and two, that RP didn't seem to much care about not being included, as he doesn't seem to care much for "symbolic capital" though he is, as far as I'm concerned, a terribly underrated, sometimes very ambitious, and in the end fine poet (kind of like Herrick, a poet who seemed a bit "old-fashioned" once people finally recognized he was there, but whose civil, almost hedonistic temperament has more or less kept him on course, terribly unanxious as he was for popular approval). In fact, I ran into RP at a book party for some journal he wrote of, I think, Sweden, and he told me not to buy the book, saying simply: "It sucks." I don't think he was waiting for me to argue with him, that he was treating me like an adoring acolyte, but that it was his "modesty" (and Tulsa humor); in any case I didn't experience any sort of clash of symbolic capital there, nor even a clash of discourses — I got the joke, took the advice, moved on. In any case, RP is a counter-example to the image of the poet you present, and though you may argue that he has a small circle of admirers in which he is respected and among whom he possesses "cultural capital", one would have to ask, then, what he has to done to expand this capital, since it seems that one would, in an effort to get over anxieties of losing this capital, one would seek expansion — new markets, younger, better-looking, wealthier.

My sense is that many of these arguments which use basic figures of poets as their examples often use figures that are most aggressive in asserting discourses as the sort of Everyman, reading a Barrett Watten beneath the skin of a Ted Berrigan, for example. When you write that:

*What was also largely at stake here was the inevitable dialectic of change that constitutes the shifting hierarchical structure of the cultural field (in other words, the breakdown in communications was *not* some unfortunate misunderstanding but was intended as a direct challenge to the cultural practice in which Berrigan had accumulated symbolic capital. Since ideas were taken somewhat more seriously at this time, the poetry world wasn't able to accomodate the legitimacy of both the Lang Poets and the 2nd gen NYS. Again, the discourse of "poetic community" entirely conceals what was essentially a conflict of power).*

While I don't want to imagine TB as some sort of divine innocent here, and I don't know much about this exchange, I think there are a few things to note. I think the use of the term "poetry world" here is not very helpful — who are what is the "poetry world" and how did this world demonstrate any inability to accomodate these dual legitimacies? Did the poetry world fail to accomodate the legitimacy of

the original "New York School" and the "projectivist school", and the "Beats"? All three of these groups have more definitive contours than the 2nd generation New York School poets, and certainly more "cultural capital" and contrasts in values, and the Language Poets, at that time, were kind of just starting out (which I mention since I wonder if the Language poets were in the position of creating a discourse for their predecessors which they could then critique and overturn, since one wonders how oppressive this prior discourse, or rather cultural economy, really was — wasn't there a larger, more oppressive cultural economy?). In any case, what kind of opposition, in terms of discourse, did TB really propose, except perhaps to claim that he didn't understand what the Language Poets were talking about, or didn't care for this sort of ideological thinking (carrying over the "Fuck Communism" from the Bean Spasms, which he probably didn't "mean" in an ideological or normative way, over to this part of his life, a phrase, by the way, that seems to prefigure in its graffiti-like brevity and overstatement the even shorter "I HATE SPEECH" of Grenier). While I would agree with you that TB was probably blind to the play of these cultural institutions on himself and his work, or at least rarely thought about it, and hence would react to defend this level of culture in which he felt comfortable, one would have to ask why his writing and life seems so "fragmented" and small-pub based as it was. Wasn't there as much money in his "art world" as there was in that of O'Hara and Ashbery? I also don't understand, based on your paragraph above, how a "breakdown in communications" could serve as a "direct challenge" — is this a transplant of the Dadaist gesture to the realm of cultural discourse, so that we are questioning discourses ability to determine anything by throwing static in its path? Is one able to create a productive discourse at the same time as enacting a "breakdown of communications" — and did the Language Poets really do this? I agree with you that the term "poetic community" means almost nothing, but once you do away with this "poetic community" as a category, you realize that those who were once considered actors on this stage are really subject to much greater forces that extend beyond it, which is to say that you can't (to get metaphorical on you) usefully isolate the different currents of air work in a limited space, say in a bedroom or cafeteria, and hope to explain how hurricanes and typhoons operate — there are connections, but one must keep things in perspective.

The reason the List carries so many mentions of the Lang Poets is an extremely ironic one: They stand in the way of the next generation, but, as cultural values themselves don't matter really anymore (not as much as symbolic capital does) the next generation cannot dispense w/ the Language poets function to confer legitimization.

I'm not so sure this is true, and I'll use, for lack of more knowledge, myself as a counter-example. I was recently visited by two Canadian concrete poets, Darren Wershler-Henry and Christian Bok, and they have been very supportive of my

web work, as has Kenneth Goldsmith, not himself a "language poet" but a visual artist. Steve McCaffery, associated with the Language poets (though excluded from *In The American Tree*) and a friend of Christians, doesn't actually, so I hear, think much of some of his work, maybe even lots of it — regardless, he carries on, and my sense of Toronto is that it is quite vital in terms of exchanging ideas and charting out possibilities for poetry (oddly, all the writers seem to attend the same parties there, whether they are selling screenplays or basing poems on the sounds of electric razors). I am also in contact with Keston Sutherland and Andrea Brady, presently in Cambridge, UK, where the LangPos hold no sway, and yet they carry on with their own various senses of tradition, along with the Asian American scene in New York (and in L.A., ie. Walter Lew), though only rather peripherally. Another strand would be "cyberpoets", and as yet inchoate set of circumstances as far as I can tell. Most of the poets who have recently come to New York, most of whom are 5 or so years younger than me, have far less anxiety about this group of poets than those poets slightly older than me (to be general and reductive). My point being, simply, that there is quite a lot out there that is free of this Language poetry orbit, and that one can submerge oneself in these various vectors without any sort of idea of the Language poets "conferring legitimization" (where is this done anyway?). I think the problem is more concerning where the next level of "discourse" about poetry is to emerge, where find these terms, how to make them vital, etc., without succumbing to a sort of tit-for-tat with the wide-ranging critique and discourse provided by these poets. But if you choose to sacrifice the need for this discourse (I called them "ideas" in other posts, and I obviously argue that this discourse and these ideas are useful) then one can do fine (sort of).

| *Emerging poets are thus caught in the double bind evident in the Talisman anthology.*

I'd like to know what this double-bind is, since I couldn't make much out of that book myself. I thought the anthology rather premature as an "anthology" and, as a result, very awkward, providing a not-very clear window on some developing but as yet inchoate poetic activity (it would have been a good special issue of the magazine, but it provided no punctuation to the course of poetry). The poetry being written right now is much more interesting than what was being done back then, not so long ago, though I don't know how much credit could be given to that book for spurring this activity. Anyway, do you really feel caught in a "double bind" that is presented in that book?

Anyway, just some ideas — hopeless ramble. Took the day off of work today (had an "upset stomach").

Best,
Brian

Up front, etc.*04 Feb 2000*

A 'quick not' on Ellis's post, which Stefans finds confused but answerable: yes, private authority trumps the 'public domain of language,' chiefly because our posts are closer to fortune cookies than to Finnegans Wake. He arrives, en route, at a genuine grievance — a post of his republished without permission — and admits in the same breath to having done the same to himself.

Just a quick not in response to Ellis's recent post, where he asks:

Are we to presume that respect for one's private authority take the place of that authority's expression in the public domain of language?

Without going into the entire paragraph, which seems to me to present a very confused argument, I think in a nutshell that I would answer Yes to this one, provided one changes the term "private authority" to "sense of personal determinacy," which is to say that I think the personal contracts that people generally honor amongst each other are to be held in higher regard than any sort of abstraction concerning the "public domain of language," whatever that is, simply because we all have a "right" to feel in control of our actions, even if these actions are somehow sublimated to the level of "cultural productions." Another way of putting it: those of us who post to the list trust that our "actions" in this event, the creation of language, is going to be read in the context of a "thread" and we expect any interpretative glosses to be provided with the consideration of this context, which is a matter of trust (more than "right") — it would be cynical to sacrifice this trust to the cause of some idea of the "public domain of language" (basic to this understanding is the idea that "writing," like shouting "kill the motherfuckers"* at a football match or weeping hot tears in a movie theatre and commenting on it afterwards are all forms of "action" that can be later recalled and commodified, and if this seems ridiculous because I am not citing aspects of "literary" activity, think of how unliterary most of our posts are compared to, say, The Ambassadors or Finnegans Wake — we are basically writing fortune cookies.) Most of us gladly give up the right to, say, the quotations of one of our poems in a review, as we basically understand that this is what happens to poems — no appeal to universals is made — but to, say, publish the poem in a book or magazine in a context in which it is supporting some cause that is repulsive, then any issue of the "public domain of language" falls immediately to the side. I don't even think people should take posts from this list and publish them elsewhere — as has been done to one of my own posts, without "permission" (a post I had regretted writing in the way I did) — since it separates the text from the situation in which it was proposed, or for which it was produced (though in fact I have guiltily republished prior posts to the list, which I have mixed feelings about

having done). That, as Ellis writes, concerning posting one of Jacques "retracted" posts to the list, "[a] sort of offense can be generative as well as merely offensive," he is of course right, there can be a generative aspect to any sort of literary terrorism — by this I mean those acts that step outside of the contracts that writers/editors have among each other, even if one has decided these contracts are stultifying — but then why justify it with these sorts of arguments that aspire to absolute determinations of what is "public" and "private" — why not simply say he broke a law, and suffer gladly for it (and risk a friendship, I would presume).

* interesting though brief story on John Rucker in the Village Voice this week, concerning mostly how indecent the New York fans were to him when he was here. So it's not just us who are ga-ga about language in the public sphere.

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success

07 Feb 2000

Flagged for deletion and posted anyway — a recovered Friday post plus 'further blather.' Stefans presses on Debrot's use of Bourdieu, arguing that a too-trusted frame 'invariably affects the data' it means to analyze, illustrated by the homoerotic subtext a friend retroactively conferred on a tennis match. His real complaint: the thread refines its model while its range of reference narrows.

[Here's a post from Friday that somehow got dropped, along with some further blather from today. Please delete!]

Just wanted to mention that Maria Damon's brief post kind of sums up a lot of what I meant in mine — for her "diaries" I have "modest and/or shameful poets" like Hopkins who didn't publish, and for her "alpha male" I have (pardon me) Barrett Watten.

I think Jacques makes some interesting points, though, in one of his follow-up emails, which is that he is using Bourdieu's frame of discourse not absolute as a mode of looking at "our" work [which I think he renders rather monolithically, unfortunately], but that it helps bring in focus many neglected aspects of this sort of discussion, hence it is merely a tool that can be put away at any time. The problem with a too-trusted frame of discourse is that it invariably affects the data, the literature or the biographies, that one is attempting to analyze; that is, the "realities" are created by the frames by which we choose to discuss them [they simply didn't exist prior to the frames and language]. The homo-erotic subtext of U.S. Open tennis matches, for example, simply didn't exist until I went to a match with a gay friend of mine, and he basically transformed the experience into something rather different, and in a sense a "total" interpretation. Consequently, we spend a lot of time trying to tell people what they are really thinking and really doing without spending the time to enter into this activity with a sense of

detail, "luminous" detail, if you will. An example: when people were asking whether WCW as an "anti-semite," an answer just couldn't offer itself because the frame of the discourse didn't permit a suitable answer, it was either/or, and it seemed ridiculous to put WCW on one side with the Nazis and Ezra Pound, but not quite right to put him on the other. If you had none of the Puritan furor that characterizes some writers on writers, then the frame here is totally useless — the statements are lifeless. The frame of the discourse should be malleable based on the topic or materials being examined; also, we should be satisfied with no answer.

One of my problems with this thread is that there's not a lot of new data being presented, just revisions of the model of analysis, hence the frame grows more complex but the range of references becomes very isolated, and generalizations are tossed around, such as about the role of Donald Allen's anthology in the plays of cultural capital. My sense is that the role the anthology played in New York culture among those who were actively involved, i.e. "included", in it, was probably much smaller than what is made of it by us, the successors who view it as some sort of milestone. [Bourdieu seems, to me, to be writing the story of the "successors," the ones who look back, whereas I think the view from over here, the present, while not having the benefit of being based on the past and hence based on a close set of texts, is better and more complicated.] It probably wasn't a milestone to Frank O'Hara, he knew all that work (and probably thought a lot of it was terrible) — just a drop in the bucket, something to chat about between movies — there were more exciting things happening. As for how it might have given him more prestige among his peers and readers, it's probably safe to assume that, say when it came time to have a coke or have a lover, this prestige could have been a hindrance, or at least a non-entity. That the anthology was the shot heard around the world may not have meant much to him (just as we can probably agree that Rimbaud didn't care much for what the Season in Hell was doing to Paris when he was in his thirties, or Hopkins what his sonnets were doing in Bridges' underwear drawer). How, in this Bourdieu-ian scheme, in which the politics and symbolism of religion seem to have been entirely absorbed (the transubstantiation of matter plays a role here, for when writing becomes "literature" and hence cultural capital, along with the near-paranoic interconnectivity of motives and actions, at least as presented by Jacques), how does one then explain what is, in Hopkins, a tension between his life as a priest and his desire to write poetry, which he equated with earthly vanity? Or the tensions Dickinson felt — her consciousness of this very issue was intense — in writing her verse? Or Blake? In other words, how does it account for those spheres in which cultural capital can be acquired — as any religious order or religious social system would have to be considered — and where it is negated by the accessing of

other cultural spheres which are destined to be unsatisfactory? I guess the problem is with envisioning a sort of totality for this cultural stage, and an inability, or unwillingness, to see the various blindnesses that exist between them.

As for the "why write" question, one thing I might suggest is that one writes to render one's immediate environment either more predictable (Davidson/Rorty again) or more interesting, perhaps even more "stimulating" in a sexual way (somewhat different that the idea of the poem as unalienated labor, which is worth mentioning since my own computer-poems are very alienated labor, but I think they're "stimulating" to me to have in the environment). This basic idea encapsulates, I think, the idea of writing as the creation of "cultural capital" since one is writing to propel oneself further on some path toward, on the one hand, self-identity ("predictability" from day-to-day, satisfaction) which one perhaps mistakenly believes comes through public recognition, and the chance to enter new spheres of being (getting a little reknown, going to better parties), on other words in changing one's lifestyle (because one thinks that having money and being famous is more interesting than not). But it also takes in those writers who don't operate in any of these ways, such as those who keep poems in diaries and those who, in a different light, write some version of pornography for themselves just to keep them going (such as R. Crumb, or his brother who, in the documentary about Crumb, wrote line after line of tiny type which was not legible to anyone), or those whose writing, like Edward Taylor's, were spiritual exercises in preparation for sermons. But that's just an idea.

Maybe, in sum, the problem with this framework is that it envisions all writing as productive and doesn't take into consideration inversion, or "perversion", i.e. that which is rejected by the symbolic system — can an author with a sense of the "habitus" etc. write "perversely" or "inversely" or only willingly strange?

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exemplary success

February 2000

A postscript to the Debrot argument, taking up Jacques's Mac Low example — the '42 Merzgedichte' that 'anyone' could have run through TRAVESTY, yet which won an award because Mac Low signed it. Stefans refuses the tidy irony: the work's existence doesn't hinge on publication, and Mac Low's placing Schwitters in the title betrays a fairly traditional sense of ownership and tradition. He declines the de-authorized author.

Just a postscript to my ramble:

Jacques writes:

Just quickly, to bring various of my points home, let me bring up the example of Jackson MacLow's _42 Merzgedichte in Memoriam Kurt Schwitters. This book, largely

*composed through chance operations, is a work that in a real sense *anyone* could write running Schwitter's writing through the TRAVESTY or DIASTEXT programs. [...] My purpose is *not* that MacLow's book, or similar experiments cannot be extremely interesting, but rather to think for a moment about the work's reception. It almost goes without saying that had Jacques Debrot— or any of thousands of other poets— written In Memorium (& in fact many have—texts written w/ TRAVESTY proliferate everywhere) the book would certainly *not* have been published by Station Hill Press (or likely anywhere). But in fact, not only was In Memorium published, it won Sun & Moon's America Award for best small press book of 1995. *Ironical that work which attempts to de-authorize the author's authority, depends for its very existence on that authority.**

I think a key to my problem with your ideas is here, which is that you feel this work doesn't exist until it is published, and that your point hinges on the idea of its being published immediately. If Jacques Debrot had created that work, however, say in high school, being the only kid in his high school who knew about DIASTEXT, and who had never heard of Jackson Mac Low before but had an interest in say Cage and industrial music, who's to say that, after meeting up with a friend who had an interest in "poetry" who recognized the "literary" value of this work, it would not have been published? And is a work more a work because it has won an award (you've never met anyone that thought a different work should win a particular award, or does everyone buy into the prestige?) Also, where do you come to this understanding that Mac Low's work "attempts to de-authorize the author's authority"? It's not that easy. Obviously, if Mac Low is placing Schwitter's name in the title, he must have fairly "traditional" ideas of the ownership of works and of the meaning of lives ("In Memorium" not being entirely ironic), and in fact in the idea of tradition at all. It's works like this that point to a different sort of irony, which is that of the "modernist tradition," one which we are a "part of", in that we have adopted various forms of form-breaking that have become this "tradition," though as you would agree this irony, complexity, the social institutions associated with it, etc., is at the core of many of these issues we are discussing. What you also fail to note, in this case, are parallel examples, such as: Hugh Kenner, not a poet, had a book published using this program (hence, the frame extends to the literary critic, not just to the operations of poets, so where does this frame stop?), and that Charles O. Hartmann's name will be attached to all of these works as a collaborator of sorts since he in fact wrote the program (programs, as a programmer will tell you, are often "beautiful solutions", never quite "beautiful" but can have an elegance which, when placed with the data, contribute much to the nature of the satisfaction). I don't feel there is anything about the Merzgedichte that suggests that Mac Low believed that "anyone" could have written them, or that he wanted anyone to believe this, actually, just as I don't feel anyone could have written my computer poems, even with the program. If you want to fault the reception of this work, that is fair

game, but (not to open the bogeyman of "intention" here) I don't think that, in going through these processes (and in revising the text, which I don't doubt he did, though I could be wrong — Cage revised his) that he felt that he was merely following through on basic implications present in the literary and/or scientific universe, that anyone could have done them, and that he would not, someday, translate this work into spoken speech, using his particular skills of performance at a later time (where intentionality and "authority", like in much music performance, is played out in the between spaces, the slurs and flourishes, between moments dictated by textual form). Our young high school poet (or for the sake of argument, very old gardener who had an interest in linguistics, or maybe ex-Republican speech writer who wanted to make a change in her life) could, perhaps, have written this work, but it would have been with a different series of contingencies, one of which may have been publishing opportunities but others of which exist, and require attention (maybe his great grandmother was an ex-schoolchum of Schwitters, who knows?).

How would you explain what happens in McCaffery/Rasula's *Imagining Language* — did those people operate along the lines you mention? And what if Bodenheim's poems printed in *Revolution of the Word* had taken the world by storm, and today we thought him the master and Williams the fool — then what?

*For what ultimately authorizes a book is the cultural businessman/woman—or publisher. It is he/she who creates the creator. Indeed, a relatively small number of publishers (those associated w/ the most prestigious presses) have a kind of unchecked power to determine & shape the field of alternative poetry—unchecked in the sense that there is an alternative press scene that churns out positive reviews enthusiastically ratifying any editorial decision these people make. But, it's funny, even though these arbiters are largely *self-appointed* (distinguished largely by their access to economic capital), the audience for experimental poetry never questions *how* or *why* the determination is made that X's or Y's judgement of aesthetic value will be/or should be a decisive one.*

I don't see where you come up with this — unchecked power? Sure, a lot of this contains truth, but who is this "audience" and how can you say they "never question" these hows and whys? Who are you talking to? What about the power of the larger publishing scene and the way it plays on "ours" —i.e. isn't the context of these flattering reviews (and I agree with you some of this) really the still continuing battle between what the true moneyed press sees as worthwhile — the Knopfs and the Vintages — and "our" presses? (It would be a more interesting place if anyone believed this war going on — it probably isn't, but I still think it's a component of this cycle of reviews.) Consequently, in general I think you snap back and forth between basing your theory on things you think about writing *_today_* and what happened in the past (when, for example, a poem like *Kora in Hell* would have had to have been published in France, or when Mac

Low's early works didn't appear in book form but were, rather, performed at the New School, or were the backdrops to dances or other cultural events, or even shouted on street corners). What is your intention — to discover an all-time, or at least widely applicable, truth about cultural production and meaning, or to find a platform from which to lambast the present time, and our present community?

Lastly (sorry about this length, again!) I also don't understand your point on Williams and OTHERS — it seemed that, with the writing he wanted to do, he would have distanced himself from them, but you seem to suggest that he promoted or supported their work because it took him along with them? Why wouldn't he develop his work from their methods, seeing as they composed the "habitus" in which he was playing out his game? Maybe I'm missing something. Did he expect Duchamp to take him up, and push him into the French avant-garde? Also, why read my little deathbed thing — which is probably baloney anyway, I admit — in the context of a VICTORIAN novel, why not place it in the context of a novel by Robbe-Grillet, where such things can appear? It would be the same moment, different meaning, less determined frame. Are you trying to read literary culture in terms of the Victorian novel — what about in terms of quantum physics?

Respectfully, Brian

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gender count (or whatever it was, can't remember)

February 2000

Addressed to Elizabeth Treadwell, on why some list posts read as "academic" and why those are precisely the ones that draw replies — Stefans theorizing the list in the act of posting to it.

Hi Elizabeth,

My sense on why some writing on the list seems "academic" and why these posts generate response probably has to do with the fact that these posts promote frames which extend beyond their particular subject matter, whereas appraisals often remain generally confined to the issue at hand. However, my experience is that appraisals, and enthusiastic posts — I will even say "happy" and "humorous" posts, positive thinking posts that seem to imply possibility in poetics rather than limitations — are often read with great pleasure, as I know I have read them that way. As a frequent and often inconsistent poster — haranguing one day and trying to say something nice about a recent work another — I find that I never get responses to the posts that approach specific works whereas the ones that take on another person's frame, usually in an attempt to adjust the frame, maybe even destroy it, or at least to add peculiar data to the discourse to suggest places where the frame is limited. I don't think there's anything terribly wrong with this;

for example, a review posted out of the blue will most likely not be dropping into an existing thread, and if nobody's particularly angry about what it says, or intrigued but actually just pleased by it, there is little need to respond in public (that is, because the review is not attempting a "frame," it is talking about possibility). But I get a fair amount of backchannels saying "nice review, I'll check out the book." (I usually take a cigartette break then.) I didn't read Wendy's post on Debbie, but I bet it might have not registered partly because few people have seen or read the book (the problem with reviews, they discuss books that people have not yet read, so who can complain?). I think Debbie is quite complicated and really interesting and important — I'd love to write about it myself — and Lisa gave a tremendous reading here which, I think (not to overstate it) literally changed people's lives. I'd like to know if anyone experienced the Williams-seeing-the-Duchamp-in-the-Armory-show feeling about it — that would be very interesting to me, since I sense that others in the room felt this (I've known her work for years, so alas I did not experience this myself, not to say I wasn't impressed). All sorts of young poets walked out of that room with their little blue books in hand —and Lisa's Canadian, which made it doubly interesting since I've wondered whether New York is not very interested in what's happening elsewhere. Anyway, I guess my point is that it's hard to gauge what gets responses and why — it's pretty complicated, but I think can be interesting to think about from a sociological perspective. I'd be more humorous now myself, but I've had a rough day. Consequently, with the (undestandable) prickliness of some of readers, and the way that "tone" is often not conveyed completely on this list and can be mistranslated across cultures — ranging from California to New Zealand — it's hard to inject good wry humor in a post without possibly offending someone. I often think a solution is "decorousness" rather than "humor" — i.e. try to write like T.S. Eliot (with different content, of course), so as not to bother someone intensely. This may in fact "dull the senses", and it can, indeed, be boring. Alas! What to do?

As for censorship, I know for a fact that several emails have simply not made it due to technological problems the EPC has been having (notice the new icons?) — David Bromige, for instance (as he mentioned in one of his more recent posts), lost a few and was feeling orphaned and lonely, and I lost a few myself (my best writing!). Maintaining a server can be quite hellish, I know from experience, and we often don't appreciate the effort these guys make to keep the thing alive. So at least, on occasion, it's not censorship, though I felt that's what was happening to me. (I don't know what Kent has to say, I don't have the issue.)

I don't quite know how to discuss gender in a productive manner myself, ditto for race — I prefer social experiments rather than discourse in that instance. (I'm

playing Yoko Ono in an upcoming Kevin Killian play in New York, for example — that'll be a trip, got to get my greatest hits CD out!) It's too prickly for me, and I'm afraid people would take me for a "native informer", or at least get confused in the tangle of ironies I have erected for myself when talking about this. I had a pleasant experience yesterday, though, at an Eric Gamalinda reading (he's a Filipino poet whom I've known for a while). I had thought someone we were talking to was Japanese, but she was Filipino, and so she asked me, "Are you Japanese?" and I said, "No, I'm Korean," and then (very jokingly, it was humor, "I hate Japanese." This was, of course, a reference to the colonization of Korea by Japan, which few non-Asians seem to know about. Eric, not missing a beat, looked up from the book he was signing and said, in a fake-fatherly voice, "Now now, that's all in the past!" In other words, he totally got what I meant, but I think in another context it would have brought dead silence, discomfort, etc. I call this a "pleasant experience" since, the "avant garde" culture in New York being pretty monotone in terms of race (which never really bothered me, just concerns me a bit), and it was nice to share that kind of joke.

Anyway, gotta run.

Yours,
Brian

More censorious questions or why I generally lurk. Why does the discourse have to be so - to put it politely -academic? Is this really the only way to be rigorous? What about the rigor of humor? David Hess posted a piece about a Gertrude Stein conference to this List some time ago in which he made his points with big tasty dollops of hilarity. Hoa Nguyen, who later printed the piece in Skanky Possum (issue #2 i think) mentioned backchannel to me the profound silence with which this was met, listside. From my early days on the list, I also recall fondly Wendy Kramer's happy post on Lisa Robertson's Debbie: An Epic, in which she rendered both a scan of the scene at a reading Robertson gave in New York and her own reading of Debbie with an enthusiasm at once intricate and flip, like a flower. Alas such pleasures are few and far between. Is it the nature of listservs to dull the senses? Are we to believe high seriousness to be the only argot that translates on email? (I work at Kmart so I don't have to talk like that. A joke.) (A joke is offensive. — My fake Gertrude Stein quote.)

sent with good wishes, Elizabeth

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"Cyberpoetry"

February 2000

A salvage job: an old note to Jim Andrews that the list's technical troubles had swallowed, reposted here. Addressed to Jim (not, Stefans clarifies, Kirk), it worries at a net-art event where the artist cheerfully mined his own avant-garde ideas for a corporate site — both prophet and profiteer — while the sponsors noticed nothing amiss.

Here's an old post of mine which never made it to the list during it's recent problems. The Jim is Jim Andrews (not Jim Kirk). I had posted it to the Rhizome list as well, where it caused a little stir (but not enough —soon they were just bludgeoning each other again).

Hi Jim,

I went to a Rhizome event a few days back, at which an artist gave a talk on his work over the past 4 years, which was pretty interesting — the work spanned uses of Java applets and Flash, not to mention really fine uses of sound collage and very basic (quick-loading) imagery to great effect. But I was struck by the frame of the event, as it was sponsored by the magazine Silicon Alley as well as by Artbyte, which seems to have only practically no consciousness of the potential dangers of the role corporate (meaning capitalist) entities play in this dialogue of corporate (meaning web-based community) art creations. The artist himself calmly noted frequently that he had "two careers," one as a web-designer for a company and one as an artist. This, I think, is different than being a poet and a some-time writer of book reviews, teacher, or editor; it seemed that he was mining his own artistic ideas for later use on a corporate website, kind of like when MTV mined the ideas of avant-garde filmmakers for their videos, except in this case the artist (whose work by the way is at www.lightofspeed.com) was both figures, artist and exploiter. In Artbyte itself, there was an article called "Prophets and Profits" about figures such as philosopher Stewart Brand who, in their theories of the "long view," are really selling their ideas as vehicles for solutions in business concerns (a relationship MacLuhan could be said to have foreseen with his work with advertisers). I guess the reason why this isn't totally scandalous is that the underlying assumption is that businesses have to survive these days based on the degree of "innovation" in their products, and since business moves so rapidly these days — a major site, for instance, can be set up in 3 months and go public probably soon after (I don't know much about these things, actually), they move nearly as rapidly as artists used to move (inventing cubism over the course of a summer, for example), a contrast to how long it took to build the railroads. Obviously I'm not the first to notice this paradox or problem, but I was surprised at this event at how it was merely overlooked — perhaps we have adapted so much beyond the old individual/institution

(romantic) paradigm that there really isn't any adequate to describe the present situation with these terms, and no one cares to find new ones.

I didn't know that Strasser set up the weak blood site, and I don't think of the site as a "failure" not seeming to fulfill certain promises that were suggested in the format — it fulfilled other promises very well. So I guess it's "noble" in that way. Are their other similar projects where one could find a quick introduction to international web-poetry?

I haven't caught much on the "antiorp" thread — what's that?

I'm somewhat familiar with that work. Talanbooks published a handsome selection of that work about ten years ago, edited by McCaffery I think, after Nichol's death called Rational Geomancy. I wouldn't think it would be Rhizome territory, though I might be wrong.

Yes, it's through this book that I know the work. I'm amused by your phrase "I wouldn't think it would be Rhizome territory" since implicit in the idea of the "rhizome" is that pretty much everything is in the same territory, you just have to find out how. You're probably right, though, I wouldn't guess that there are many on that list familiar with the work, but a familiarity with it might help shatter this print (passe)/web (present) assumption that underlies, again, much of the attitudes that I hear at places like the Rhizome event or other web events I've been too. I think the TRG work, or McCaffery's work in particular, is more successful than you suggest when writing that it seemed more the "application of theory" than work — check out Evoba, one of my favorite short works, or Panopticon or the poems in Theory of Sediment. His early "concrete" epic is presently at the Coach House Books site (www.chbooks.com) — it's called Carnival.

The machine, small and large, is corporate or governmental in its construction. We can then be pirates and anti corporate netizens should we please. But we are faced nonetheless with our place in a collective undertaking that involves the corporate and the non human at many levels. This should not be unexamined. And how can one be other than ambivalent about it, regardless of the choice you make?

Yes, this relates to what I wrote above. How effective a pirate is one, however, having been feted with high paychecks your entire life (the "bohemian" artists I survive among here in Williamsburg, for example, make their money in large doses at a time, once a month or so often, on large projects sponsored by businesses, and hence live better than me who work a 9-5 slug job — could they give that up? Would they ever have too? This isn't to totalize the situation — there are many different types here, and I'm being really reductive — but I wonder if this influx of money, which is part of the art world in general, effects one's selective blindness to these issues. And I also wonder why they seem to be blind to the idea that poets are not antiquated figures who are "missing the point" of

technology — I wonder if the problem is that poetry has long since lost its connection to public utility, or when it does connect it is very selectively so, as a sort of calming agent for bourgeois lifestyles.

Ted Warnell's work (<http://www.warnell.com>). He uses Windows 3.11 and no plugins and an intelligent modicum of javascript. He's very fond of Photoshop though—and uses it with great skill and effect. But primarily his work is in the HTML itself, not the bitmaps, which is very unusual (to do it well). I mean his visual works are made primarily of HTML. That is his primary material. He posted a note today thanking another poet for posting a work he could surf without having to upgrade his system or installing any plugins. A quiet note of protest or possibly exasperation. His material is largely HTML. He doesn't need plugins. Or he has chosen his material to avoid plugins? Or what? Is his art somehow more pure or unsullied by the corporate by virtue of this? Although the question may have something to it, at this point I look to the art itself, not so much what it was made with, though some work on the Web is incompetent enough that it shouts Flash or Photoshop or whatever.

I don't have anything at all against plug-ins. The time will come when plug-ins will just install silently behind the browser as the page comes up — it often does, already. People can program their own plug-ins too —they just seem a distraction now because of download time. But I'm very interested in Warnell limiting himself to a few basic tools to create his art, it means he carries out a more intensive investigation based on a few premises. One of my favorite pieces of web art uses just HTML in fixed-length font, this being Juliet Martin's piece at www.ubu.com. Wait, here's the URL:

<http://www.ubu.com/contemp/martin/martin.html>

This still strikes me as a superb piece, and I know she's working slowly on other things. It's one of the first things that struck me as not being threatened with being "dated" over time — hence the virtues of avoiding the "latest technology." It's also utterly useless for business, there isn't a single image in the piece, and the cleanness of the concept along with the overriding metaphor, whatever that is in fact (it's called "ooxxxxooo"), that quietly hums in the background, is very satisfying to think about. It's something of a "hypertext" fiction, though much better than any of those fictions that I've read online that involve prose. Anyway, again, she limits herself to a set of tools and carries through on the promises. I haven't looked enough at the Warnell stuff, but I remember liking much of it, just concerned that the pieces were a little too self-contained, too static, not using the aspect of the web-page having several layers beneath its surface, of the possibility of true change within it, the layers of links and associations that, like lava below the surface, forcibly recreates the work each time you see it. I have similar misgivings with Strasser's pieces, incredibly effective as they are. I think Warnell's pieces, though, are pretty successful, as they follow through on the promise of gallery-type art getting off the walls and into the homes, and escaping

the fetishism of the unique art object, and of exploring how digital imagery — the types of disruption peculiar to pixelated photographs — affects the way one sees.

I never connected strongly with concrete poetry. Part of the 'platform', after all, was to create parallelism between the look and the meaning, simple mindedly mimetic, often, was it not?

Yes, I agree. I think, still, though, that the Brazilians have/had a lot to offer but we don't understand the frame of these creations enough — as an attempt at an international art, a dialogue that transcends language which is particularly useful for a young country (or young literature), as a series of values conveyed thorough typeface (certain faces suggesting utopian attitudes, certain nostalgic romantic) which had particular meanings in Brazilian culture at the time, etc. Haroldo De Campos has extended all of these issues in ways that have to be "translated" like any poetry. In any case, I wish there was a good study of Brazilian concrete in particular apart from the "international" movement which seems, in general, simplistic. The problem is the cost of getting these books out.

Doubt: you extend your arm to draw and see a metal claw.

Yes. I see it often, and now it ends in a "mouse."

Anyway, gotta run. Thanks for the links — I've seen most of those already, and liked the one, especially, that slides down the page. The sound piece is interesting, too, hope you do more. You should check out the Macromedia site, there's a pretty good sound piece out there that uses the metaphor of a surgeon using a pick on a person's spinal column to produce sounds from, I suppose, the _inside_. It's for some site that makes music sequencers. If I find the URL I'll send it on.

I have one work in Director which I'd like to finish this weekend. I'd tell you about it but it's already 10am and I want to enjoy my freezing cold apartment on this Saturday. Going to see Mark Wallace and Buck Downs read today at Double Happiness, and then to the "Shark" party.

Anyway, cheers, Brian

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To Kent Johnson

February 2000

Written first as a backchannel to Kent Johnson — the era's most industrious literary prankster — who then asked Stefans to post it; he obliged without rewriting, tedium and all. David Bromige supplied the rejoinder some months later, under the title "The Sense of Humor of Mr Kent Johnson," which tells you the weather.

I had written this to Kent as a "backchannel" and he asked me to post it to the list. I haven't rewritten it, so please skip the tedious parts. He had cc'd me on the post.

Hi Kent,

Thanks for sending me the URL, it saves me the trouble of trying to get a copy of Skanky Possum, though I may anyway for the other stuff.

I rarely "backchannel" unless it's to perhaps apologize to someone for having written hastily and heatedly, or to address some issue (like with Henry) which someone raised with me. If I am upset about something on the list, I try to convert my feelings into some sort of "productive" post rather than rag on someone behind the scenes to calm my aching soul — which is to say, I don't particularly care about my own ideas or how they have been changed, interpreted, perverted, admired, etc, in a vacuum. The only reason I write to the list is to be share ideas, not to circumscribe, for myself, my own ideas, which I can do alone. My hope is that my ideas will be attacked and turned-over, since I feel that I could be as bad a dictator as anyone.

Anyway, I'm writing to you "backchannel" simply because I haven't, in my brief time reading on this issue (and mostly your writing on it, though others as well) seen any development in thinking about this, and so in general don't think it's valuable for the list. I think I have (eh hem) things to write on the topic, but I'm pretty well aware that they are boring to other people, and I hate to bore people.

My problems with your reasoning, though, in your posts to Chris (who, I think, says about everything I would want to say, and even boldly with his full frontal statement that the list is "ideological") are basically the following:

1. Your use of the word "censorship" is misguided. "Censorship," for it to carry the moral weight that you intend it to, for it to be tied to some sort of contract of the "rights of man" that is at the heart of our Consitution (certainly the subtext of your rhetorical use of the word), and for it to resonate with the use of this term historically in regards to revolutionary activity, requires some sense of the totality of the control by authorities, which is to say these authorities would have to be "managing" all of dissemination of media in a particular, isolated location.

An illustration: we generally champion Dostoyevsky for having written under "conditions of censorship" (i.e. everything that was published in Russia itself went to a censorship board) and to have utilized an array of rhetorical and narrative strategies to get some pretty unseemly and difficult ideas into the public (or at least literary) realm. However, such an activity, the work of utilizing these strategies, and hence to be a more subtle writer, seems not to have entered into the equation of those writers who seem to feel "censored" from the list — quite the opposite, these writers become more self-contradictory and high-minded about their position, shuffle around abstract terms like "censorship", shout bloody murder, engage in really poor puns, enact every other sort of ploy to manipulate the "spectacle," etc. but little more. I think this is so because this is not a case of "censorship" as I recognize it; it is a case of "editing," and as editing cuts awfully close to being completely "open," for which it can be commended. If this were true censorship, like the kind of censorship that puts people in prison (like my friend, a Korean novelist who has spent the last 4 years in prison for a series of historical novels [historical because he knew they would be censored if he placed them in the present time] he wrote years ago and for a visit to North Korea) and exiles (like my uncle, who hasn't been able to return to South Korea for his student activities), and if the writers were indeed representing or attempting to express a range of ideas that were of genuine use to a wide range of people for whom the writer felt sincere responsibility, then the writer would restrategize his/her methods, take stock of the situation, and act accordingly. To do anything less would only trivialize the value of one's discourse, not to mention to project the very lack of this sense of responsibility to others.

In any case, I think you, whom I understand have a great interest in world affairs, do a disservice to those who don't have the luxury to cry "censorship" because they are not permitted to post on this, or any, list. You use of the word "censorship" in regards to this only exxagerates my sense of the banality of this issue.

2. You are careful to state that there is some sort of correspondence to what, in this case, Henry writes to the list, and the "ideological" line of the list, and yet you have never (nor has anyone else, far as I know) ever offered an observation of how Henry's views contradict the views you feel are stated on this list. With this bird's eye perspective — the present looking on the past — and with the archives there to be read and studied, I have never seen a description of how these forces were arrayed, what positions were adopted, how they grew, were constructed and destroyed, where they brought people. If Henry is so "passionate" a poet and thinker, then why, in rehashes of what happened last year (or whenever) have I never seen anything like a position adopted by Henry (or any of the poets

mentioned) that was, itself, enough to get him "banned." The object of the controversy is always centered on this issue of "banishment" itself, never on the ideas. This leads me to suspect that there were no ideas, only gestures — "flames" is what we call them in e-land — the culminating one being leaving the list (or being banned from it, or whatever). And if there were ideas, I trust that I would have discovered them by now because these "banned" poets would have utilized their brains to find other avenues through which to propagate them, of which there are many. I try to read everything I get in the mail, and get quite a lot.

As we are all amateur anthropologists — it's probably one of the defining traits of this particular generation of poets, a trait that we adopt, ironically, from the Language poets introduction of anthropological (usually read as post-Marxist or materialist, but more generally anthropological) methods in the reading of literary culture (an introduction which, I believe, was poorly executed, replete with blindnesses and biases which, I think, are causing some of the growing pains we are witnessing today, but which was totally necessary), we should perhaps take the next step and really consider in more detail how literary culture operates, considering our own biases (your use of proper names being one of them) disrupt whatever analytical framework (provisional as it may be) we are attempting to construct. If we don't care to construct a framework, that's fine, but then you are impotent to appeal to issues of "rights" and "censorship," which are words that have engaged the minds of people for centuries.

I, myself, don't particularly care how literary culture operates, to be quite frank, or at least haven't found this subject to be more interesting than, say, artificial intelligence or Matthew Barney. Maybe it's because I live in New York and have the luxury of attending several readings a week, sometimes 2 or 3 a night if I wish (never), and even of holding a well-attended reading in my apartment, that I don't feel quite as handcuffed as you or others do about what happens on this list. Most of the poets that I correspond with on a regular basis are not on this list, and I feel conversations in bars and apartments are often more constructive, anyway, and more nuanced — nobody can take advantage of you in these situations, you live on your wits, which is more exciting. (To go back to our regular bogeyman, WCW never had a list, only some rather soggy poet friends, and Pound in Europe, and if anything this isolation seems to have helped him.) Nonetheless, I think the list is a valuable compliment to these activities, since it offers an opportunity to work through several ideas in a somewhat organized fashion, and even to make mistakes on which people can pick and from which I and others can learn.

Anyway, I had thought to post this to the list, actually, but I think I take up too much room there and I've failed once again to get my ideas in under a paragraph, so this is for your pleasure. I don't see why Henry or you don't just start up

another list, since if these issues that you feel are being "banned" from the list are so valuable, and if Henry is the "passionate" poet you believe he is, then no doubt the energy and interest is there to make such a list thrive. I would encourage that, in fact, in the interest of "dialectic" since that's how things happen, how ideas are created.

I had more to write, but am getting rather tired. Hope this fragment of an idea makes sense.

Take care,
Brian

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Re: 'cultural capital' and 'prestige'

29 Feb 2000

Stefans, freshly through Bourdieu's The Logic of Practice, gently corrects Jacques Debrot's use of 'cultural capital,' arguing the habitus is more fluid than the mechanical A-to-B reading allows and that Jackson Mac Low deserves a less flattened background. The correction is careful to note, twice, that Debrot has already conceded the point — collegial disagreement at its most padded.

I think one of the problems with Jacques analysis, which he has acknowledged, is that he was using terms from Pierre Bourdieu which are very specific to the contexts of PB's argument, one element of which has to do with "subjective" and "objective" analysis of cultural phenomenon. Having finally read the great PB, a book called The Logic of Practice, which concerns mostly an analysis of Algerian culture, I realize the difficulty in applying these terms, or at least the difficulty in not using the terminology with a sensitivity to certain issues PB raises, such as that of time. He contrasts an "objective" analysis, which tends to render things in a "mechanical" way — A does A, it means B, therefore A becomes elevated to state of A to the B power, hence a new A — when there is really something much more fluid and contingent involved, especially in those instances where A deviates from the norms, hence the meaning of "B" cannot be easily determined via some static paradigm but must, in a sense, alter the paradigm to make way for new meanings, or irresolutions of meanings that flatten out elsewhere. (This "paradigm" is, in Bourdieu's terms, the "habitus," in another's the episteme, there are several variations with their specific meanings.) Anyway, this is an oversimplification, but his example Jackson Mac Low and awards, reception, etc., seemed to lay out a too flat background on which JM's activities were enacted, not recognizing the deviations in the activity, the unpredictable elements, the alternate outcomes, etc. — which, again, I think Jacques acknowledged. So the question of how "cultural capital" and "prestige" differ would be a different question based on how much you tie the former term into Bourdieu — in layman's terms, they are

probably very synonymous, but "cultural capital" — as in, say, the case of Jean Genet — could conflict with any notion of "prestige" that we know of, and yet, in a realm in which deviations from the norms of cultural engagement possesses positive value (as in artistic circles with fairly recognizable standards, as much as they conflict with the "mainstream," say in Cocteau's circle), the terms may very well become synonymous again, though not as static or ossified. A Genet could operate with some confidence that his works were entering into the field of literature not entirely unnoticed, not entirely without precedents, and yet also work with the knowledge that he was deviating quite strongly from the norms, though in meaningful ways (perhaps his syntax gave him some confidence along these lines, hence freeing him up to investigate other darknesses). Not everyone pulls this off, of course — the rather antique looking modernism of, say, Williams circle, as Jacques pointed out, looks rather silly or strange to us today, yet at the time we can believe that these writers thought some sort of axis of deviation and acceptance was operating, hence the "self-interest" which he, Jacques, writes of is present even in the "vanguard" which, we generally believe (as in Van Gogh) had not faith in the system — there was probably more of this faith than we realize.

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Tom Raworth, *Tottering State: Selected Early Poems 1963-1983*

07 Mar 2000

The Englishman whom Creeley called the best living writer in England—Stefans triangulates him against Berrigan and the Ashbery of "Some Trees," then lets Raworth's own "[this poem has been removed for further study]" do the arguing. A review happiest when it stops theorizing and just quotes the wound snapping shut.

Tom Raworth

Tottering State: Selected Early Poems 1963-1983

O Books, 2000

Hot on the heels of the American publication of fellow Englishman J.H. Prynne's Poems is the expanded edition of Raworth's underground classic selected early poems, originally published by The Figures in 1984. Ranging from the author's debut volume, *The Relation Ship*, to his major long poem *Writing* (not included in the original selection), *Tottering State* is an colorful, resonantly sunlit window on the work of a writer considered by many American poets (such as Robert Creeley) as the best living writer in England. Indeed, the American affinities — along with echoes of French poets like Pierre Reverdy — are most visible in his earlier work. At times he seems like a more cerebral, dark version of Berrigan, or maybe a departure from Ashbery of *Some Trees* into more formally wilder territories, but this is never to the detriment of fun, a zen-like openness, and a English rapier's

wit. His cerebral quality comes through in the precision in his choice of imagery, his modification of the moods of conversation, and the surrealist dive into absurdities arriving at just the right moment to both deepen his sentiment and render it more painterly: "now the pink stripes, the books, the clothes you wear / in the eaves of houses i ask whose land it is // an orange the size of a melon rolling slowly across the field / where i sit at the centre in an upright coffin of five panes of glass // there is no air the sun shines / and under me you've planted a quick growing cactus" (31, sic) The philosophical underpinnings — always that of a layman, never venturing far into "theory" unless it's to present it as possible in normal conversation — bubble to the surface of the work when least expected, as in an anecdote about a child that has eaten green crayons (which remains — like a solipsism — the same green upon reaching the other end), to the quick-stab poem "Univesity Days," which runs in its entirety: "[this poem has been removed for further study]". (76) Nowness, thisness, hereness, but also you-ness, I-ness and witness, are the axes around which such linked sequences as "The Conscience of a Conservative," revolve, with such choice moments of telescoped, daily life as the following: "o / hand / make a circle // how / the wound / snaps shut." (103) In such poems, Raworth seems as full of child-like amazement and blissful, paratactic perceptions as another New York poet, Joseph Ceravalo, though he surehandedly connects it to a private/public sense of responsibility and opinion. In the later work collected in *Tottering State*, he seems to have entered adolescence, as the long, slender word streams in poems such as "That More Simple Natural Time Tone Distortion," push the once retreating poet into a more directly politicized, consequently more filmic than painterly, consideration of time. He almost illustrates Bergson's once-radical request that we not divide time into weeks and days, but a slipstream of contingent moments: "slow / low / thump / long flame / dry / flash bur / just / move / tree browns / to south / our horse / white / no trace / of action / in memory / and fear / but this / is / clear / this area / this never / ending / song / to last / gasp / cold colours / enough / flashes / to leach him / out" (134). If such extreme forms suggest a relationship to the American Language poets, it is there, but that would be to miss the humanism in Raworth's work, the persona he has unwittingly created for himself as benevolent, however mischeivous, tourguide to the hear and now in its many ambivalent (drag) disguises. Only he shows how interesting this this this can be.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Andrew Klobucar & Michael Barnholden, eds., *Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology*

13 Mar 2000

Here the reviewer turns social historian, tracing the anarcho-syndicalist Vancouver of the KSW from a shuttered university to the Wobblies to the breakaway "Giantesses" fed up with the boys. Stefans regrets the anthology's missing manifestos even as he grasps why a group suspicious of "discourse" declined to supply them—the rare notice that argues with its book's own principles and loses gracefully.

Andrew Klobucar & Michael Barnholden, eds.

Writing Class: The Kootenay School of Writing Anthology

New Star Books, 1999

The KSW was, and continues to be, a grassroots organization in all senses of the word; shunning any sort of professionalism and codification of attitudes, and opting instead for an "anarcho-syndicalist" model of community, this group of experimental — and highly political — poets has formed something of the underskin to Vancouver aesthetic radicalism since the mid-1980s. As the informative introduction by the editors states, the school surfaced as a response to the closing by British Columbia's right-wing Social Credit government of the David Thompson University Centre in Nelson, a small city that had, since the 19th-century (when the Doukhobors, a Russian radical spiritualist sect, settled there) a reputation for progressive, even utopian, attitudes. Started by writers such as Gary Whitehead, Calvin Wharton and Jeff Derksen (who has since become an important Canadian critic as well as poet), the school forged early, however troubled, ties with radical labor movements in Vancouver, most notably with the Wobblies. The writers themselves found inspiration in the New American poetics of the sixties (channeled through the Tish school of Canadian poets), but later made a turn toward "Language writing" techniques, though always maintaining a distinctive refusal to assimilate into any sort of literary or academic culture. Indeed, the "class" of this book's title leans more toward this forging of identity against the mainstream — as a self-conscious "class" of writers — than anything to do with "workshops" and preparations to fame. Such fruitful, long-term community radicalism is rare; indeed, testament to the anti-authoritarian nature of the group is the sub-group, "The Giantesses," formed by women writers — such as Lisa Robertson and Catriana Strang — who were troubled by the KSW's male hegemony. This anthology doesn't include theoretical or descriptive statements by the poets, which is unfortunate, though little theory, in fact, was produced; the members felt that published "discourse," even manifestos, played into the norms of class rule. The poetry, however, by relative unknowns such as Gerald Greene (a intricate, long poem called "Resume" [i.e. the document with your work history on it, not the verb]), Peter Culley (elegant social-pastorals such as "Winterreise"), Kevin Davies (the bracket-within-brackets section of his book *Pause Button*),

Kathryn Mcleod (technically hardcore and dazzling work, like "The Infatuation"), Dan Farrell's entire "Thinking of You" (long out of print) and Dorothy Trujillo Lusk's sand-blasting "Oral Tragedy," along with excellent work by Robertson and Derksen, are bound to pique interest in this distinctly West Coast phenomenon. The question, of course, is if the language of an activist, radical, at times abrasive, group is taken out of the contingencies of its immediate situation, can the poems achieve the effects intended, that of rearticulating and rendering visible the toxicities of class relations, or will they retreat into the history of literature, as the secret hobbies of a learned social strata? Writing Class doesn't answer this question, but nonetheless it is a call-to-arms in the wilds of contemporary times in which commerce has superceded community as our main "moral" interest, both on this continent and abroad. This book, more than any anthology of "avant-garde" American poetry produced in the States recently, fulfills the promise of Donald Allen's seminal New American Poetry, bringing as it does a truly secret, unacknowledged and often masterful group of subversive works into the light.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Re: critics/commodities

13 Mar 2000

The thread in which poetics briefly met the actuarial tables — whether health insurance might have prolonged Ted Berrigan's output. Stefans doubts it, tenderly.

Well, I'll pipe in since the name has been mentioned (and I am beginning to lose track which Brian is meant — nice to know the age of Brians has survived glam). I do hope to write for more "mainstream" journals on the things I'm interested in, but don't really have the time, frankly, to do the job very well, and my only goal in writing for these journals/magazines would be to present some not-yet-uttered perspective on things, new and old, and some degree of depth but, as well, in a language that is both appealing and detailed, transformative, and not highbrow and oriented toward merely revising extant opinions on things for the sake of it — which is to say in a way literary criticism is generally not written, I feel. I don't have that language myself, but think it could be done and is worth the effort. I'm not polemical by nature, believe it or not (I think I am read as a polemicist, but that's because, in some ways, some of the things I write tap into other people's deep-seated ideological notions, notions which they don't choose, or are unable, to recognize); I'm more of a diplomat, I think, but like to stir things up anyway, for fun, and get people talking if possible. I don't, however, think that the little magazines, or the poetics list, are lesser forums for poetry criticism — quite the opposite, I feel if I were to write some fabulous essay for some glossy journal that cost \$10 and which might not be of any other interest to me except for a poem here or there, and most of which is bosh, I would end up having to xerox my

fabulous essay just to get it read, because I would never ask them to buy it; consequently, I would be signalling my approval of the editorship of said magazine, or maybe the contents, and hence in a way the status quo, which is not something I'd like to do. So the pressure, then, would be to write something very controversial for said glossy journal, with the hopes that it would cause a stir and people would go out and buy their only issue of, say, *Parnassus: Poetry in Review*, just to see what said tyro (in this case, me, but it could be anyone) wrote. To write a rather tame, coherent and nice thing for that journal would be to condemn oneself (in my mind) to more obscurity than to write something interesting on the list, which as far as I can tell is being read by a lot of interesting people — 867 of whom are Americans!

What should really happen, I feel, is that papers like the *Village Voice* should give a few more pages to really good writing about poetry, and should try to integrate it into their image (or non-image, which is better) of New York and world culture; similar journals in other cities should do the same. But then again, as poets, the only thing we can really think about is how to write poems that have anything at all to do with "today," and in a fashion that is both interesting and upsetting (i.e. can drive them nutty so that they want to know more) to a lot of people, rather than soothing and boring (making them think that, if they don't hurry to get in line for *Scream 4*, they may have to wait an extra week to see it), which is tough. So the criticism question always ends there, as far as I'm concerned.

I actually had this idea, recently, anticipating this panel with Perloff/Vendler et al, that literary criticism was really only a matter of creating myths, whether they be of persons, or of reading styles, or even of meaning, since poetry itself is really just data that, without criticism, would really just be scattered over the terrain with no linkages between them, and which can be approached individually without an apparatus at all, picked up, discarded, etc. I don't think poems take on their talismanic flavour without something of what criticism provides — either as history or theoretical framework — though a "time before criticism" is hard to imagine. The "myths" of criticism provide the social glue that lumps poems and poets together, or poems and poems together, or whatever, and is necessary in that way in order to continue public interest when private interest is waning (I even read criticism sometimes, when I'm a little bored with poetry). Of course, "folk" poetries — like oral poetries or other types of quasi-non-literal poetry, like that of OE, would not fit into this, but they also don't possess that talismanic flavour that we generally feel poems are supposed to have to be "poems." This would be a severe reduction in the idea of the critic's "task," they would be merely story tellers with no claims to greater truths (certainly not in the area of refining aesthetic sensibility, which is what they often think they are doing) — fine, that's

good, hope someone's bothered by it. I also think most of my poems are literary criticism, of sorts.

As a last note, I have written longer essays, but they've always appeared in little journals or specialist journals, like Korean Culture. The only people concerned were those I mentioned in the essay.

Last last note, I'm only interested in criticism insofar as it concerns ideas for writing poetry.

Cheers,
Brian

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Re: critics/commodities

March 2000

Blaming his previous 'confused post' on a colleague who wandered into the office mid-sentence, Stefans turns to his real enthusiasm: collecting the scattered critics, chief among them Steve Evans, and hawking his own under-construction website with its pile of 'forthcoming' projects beside the desk. A disgruntled older poet's verdict — this generation writes better poems than criticism — gets weighed and, characteristically, complicated.

One thing I might add to my previous, rather confused post (someone just walked into the office, and I was trying to write while talking to him, tacking sentences here and there — this is true) is that I've been interested in collecting the writing of some of our scattered critics as well. The only one I've actually gotten is Steve Evans, the complete leather-bound edition of whose Notes to Poetry can be found on my site (<http://home.earthlink.net/~bstefans/>) (Before you go there, please note that it needs a lot of work, the links are semi-dead, the "forthcoming" projects are indeed forthcoming, but as of now are a neat pile next to my desk.) Anyway, I couldn't think of anyone off the top of my head who was writing like this, with the idea of a critical project in mind, and who had adapted his strategy so well to the new medium, or even the "coterie" aspect of the old medium — anyone come to mind? I'm very open to suggestions; I have a few ideas myself but haven't followed through.

I'm also open to anyone who wants to make an editorial contribution to the site, by they way — this would be in collecting, say, links for a special page devoted to this or that. But that's another story...

I was talking to an older, somewhat disgruntled but interesting and engaged poet the other day, and I was surprised to hear him say that he thought this generation of poets, meaning those about 25-35 (and mostly in New York, since that's what he's looking at) are better poets than critics, which struck me as surprising since I was thinking something of the opposite, but he was mostly reading things like

Publisher's Weekly, and maybe the back section to Lingo or something. I think the issue is pretty complicated, but I don't think it's that important to fetishize the idea of "criticism", especially criticism by poets, without maybe looking at the history and asking who were, indeed, the good critic-poets, and were they ever, in fact, writing "criticism" and not something like "theory" — by this last term, I mean something like Pound's "Do's and Dont's of an Imagist," which is what "theory" (like "Symbolist" theory) used to be. But as Bruce Andrews pointed out to me in a conversation once, correctly, Pound didn't write about "new" books, he mostly wrote about his previous generation, like Swinburne or James, and occasionally would write an essay in support of a new writer, like Joyce and Lewis, partly for polemical reasons. (So in a sense, he was never really a "critic" — though his "never trust a man [sic, or need I even mention this] who has not himself written a good work" always struck me as quite accurate, the key term being "trust," which is what all critics ask, but which I hesitate to give, my hope also being nobody ever trusts me even if they like my poems.) I actually think one of Pound's better essays in this line, which Eliot surprisingly deemed worthy of the Selected Essays, is the one on Williams, which is not really polemical as we know it — hence, as it was a stretch for Pound to appreciate this sensibility that was so different than his, it's a bit more imaginative, to me. Anyway, who after Pound and Eliot (and, say, before Bernstein) could be said to be writing "criticism" — stuff that's wide ranging, dealing with sensibilities very different from your own (my own kind of highest goal as a critic) — and not polemic, or theory, or broad-based statements on the state of the art? This isn't to say unbiassed — all of the good critics are biassed, or want to paint a picture (maybe create a myth, as I mentioned). I know there are easy answers to this — Nathaniel Mackey immediately comes to mind (he's fantastic and, I think, under-recognized). I'm thinking of real-time, play-by-play criticism, not more philosophical ruminations, which are often useful and great to read (I like Leslie Scalapino's book by Roof, for example, very interesting and precise, though found much of the "good stuff" somewhat couched in various literary gestures, which perhaps I just have to learn to read).

I love to read excellent critical writing by younger poets who either didn't strike me as critics — like Anselm Berrigan — or who are fairly reticent about pushing their views — like Pamela Lu or Miles Champion. Not sure if I'd want to ask these people to do more than they're doing; it seems that if a piece of critical writing is a mere side event to one's engagement with the art, it's often quite good, but once people get a little vain or start to wield that sledge-hammer of cultural capital (and they won't, without a doubt), it can crumble a bit, especially when it tries to hard to be witty, which is tough in criticism.

To go back to my last post, I think part of my problem with bigger journals, as well, is the timetable they operate on — things sit around for months, even years, since space is limited, budgets are limited, etc. I have an essay I wrote two years ago, a monster on Asian American poetry, which I finished in the summer of 98, which is basically a dated contraption right now; my little essay on Moxley is sweating it out in an editor's drawer, and I've had some things on which I spent much time on, and which were commissioned, rejected by editors since they didn't fit the model. Anyway, so with one's limited resources — running a small business is time consuming — one ceases to aspire to that timetable, or to those "heights"; consequently, the silence upon publication is deafening, a big "who cares?" seems to loom out of the distance. Lastly, I think that I have a fear of print these days, the internet just seeming to be a more alive place to put words; I can't help but think that words stop when they are in print, they seem kind of helpless there (not to connect myself with a great writer like Proust, but I think he had a similar instinct; he was notorious for filling in all the white spaces between the lines of the printer's proofs, probably because the words just seemed to waver before his eyes).

Anyway, touch of insomnia this early Tuesday morning... Brian

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criticism conference

March 2000

Stefans's conference report, defeated at the threshold by his own handwriting: "does the phrase 'prathas about epistimomolg' mean anything to anyone?" The rest is sharper than the transcription.

I think Jacques gets what I would have said. In general, I would doubt that health insurance would have prolonged Ted Berrigan's output, or altered the quality of what he did put out — or maybe it would have done both, he would have lived longer and written less. Who can say? I just don't think there's a mechanism there. I tend to think TB and Alice Notley lived according pretty specific ideas on how much they would want to assimilate into US culture in order to reap the benefits of a corporate lifestyle; there seems to be some issue there about being liberated from these structures while suffering whatever blows that entails. After all, he was the one who rejected a Master's degree though he had completed the thesis, and he did teach a fair amount. Which isn't to say attention wouldn't have been nice, just not sure how that would have worked for them (as it possible after the big public reception of the New Americans?). As for Ashbery being picked up by Bloom, I tend to think Ashbery, regardless of critical acclaim, would have taken the turns he did — it's worth noticing that he was a very successful art editor and writer, and probably, without the awards, would have

trucked along in that circuit pretty happily, which is to say he was never really a social radical, always kind of a nice fellow who got along with people and had three meals a day — I think that same temperament went into the Tennis Court Oath and Hotel Lautreamont ("you mop your forehead with a rose, recommending its thorns"). I doubt he was much of a firebrand back then, though we like to think so with that book.

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Gillespie

March 2000

A field guide to Abraham Lincoln Gillespie, the 'Joyce on speed' modernist Stefans has been scanning onto his site typos and all: disowned by his family, cross-eyed and diabetic after a car crash, blandly handsome with an eccentric bloom. The affection is real; the bibliography trails off into 'that guy, what's his name, the anthology guy' — Jerome Rothenberg, unnamed.

Gillespie's Syntactic Revolution can still be found in libraries, and I've posted some of his stuff at my website, though as I scanned the material in it may have some typos (I tried to proofread it, but he writes like Joyce on speed and with two left thumbs at the typewriter). I had a weird conversation with the editor of the book whom I had contacted regarding posting this stuff — he couldn't have cared less, he only published the book to fulfill a promise to some friend of his who had started it. Gillespie's family disowned him when he became a poet; consequently, like Duncan he was cross-eyed, and like me he was a diabetic, but both things happened when he got into a car accident — a precursor — and he lived to almost tell about it (he was very "normal" before then, as the early writing in this book shows)! He actually looked a little like Duncan in middle-age (like Duncan looked in middle age) which was kind of blandly handsome with a touch of the eccentric just beginning to blossom. I think he was a Philadelphia native, and he used to talk like he wrote, apparently. Anyway, Bernstein has written about him in Poetry of the Americas and I think the Artifice of Absorption, and other works can be found in Revolution of the Word, the anthology edited by that guy, what's his name, can never remember, the anthology guy.

http://www.geocities.com/arras_online/archive.htm

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criticism (Geraldine MaKenzie)

March 2000

Praising Geraldine MaKenzie for catching the split between essentialism and contingency, Stefans offers himself as proof — nearly every poet he loves (Ashbery, O'Hara, Bernstein, Hopkins) he once despised — before recounting the Random House dumpster that yielded him a complete Anthony Hecht. He concedes Hecht the virtuoso even while filing him under hard-boiled Robert Lowell.

I liked your post a lot — it suggests what I think is that perhaps obvious dichotomy between essentialism and contingency, that poems don't have values that are always "there" even prior to one having read them. This is the problem with one's initial reading of "classics" or revered authors, that one is expecting some dramatic rush of meaning and excitement from them since they metonymically represent "poetry" but it never arrives in the same way it's announced. Most of my favorite poets are ones I've more or less despised at some point in my life (Hopkins, Ashbery, O'Hara, Bernstein, are all poets I would have, at one point, thought were terrible), but when the understanding and the interest finally arose, it had nothing with the words on the page being any different, nor did it have anything to do with the critical atmosphere (there are enough revered poets who I think are pretty terrible).

As for taste and form, I tried to shock my friends this evening by announcing not only that I had Miles Champion's new book in my backpack, but I also had Anthony Hecht's! (We had just left a Frank O'Hara celebration with Elsmilie, Myles, Yau, etc., so I thought it would go over well). I work at Random House, and they, meaning Knopf, were tossing out all of these books, so I picked them up — I have the complete Hecht, Kenneth Koch, Sharon Olds, and Mark Strand, now — a motley bunch — don't know who will make it to the permanent collection. Anyway, I used to like a poem of Hecht's quite a bit when I was younger — "The Feast of Stephen" it was called — though not most of his writing at all (it reminded me of the drunken spats in Who's Afraid of Virginia Wolf, but without the fine accents and terrifying wit — kind of like hard-boiled Robert Lowell). This one had texture, though, and lines like "the kilowatts of noon", which I thought was cool at the time. And I kind of admire his sticking to his guard about being a "formalist" — he's practically founded a generation of poets, but I think he was the only one in his time (meaning those decades ago) writing quite like that — there were the Wilburs and Merrills, but Hecht seemed to want to really be Alexander Pope, or someone from another age (I admire Amy Clampitt for her engagement with older poetries as well). Well, reading the poems now I do still think that, technically, he's a virtuoso — I think, for example, his imitations of (the meters derived from) formal speech and use of meter surpasses most of what I read of Duncan's "derivative" poems in his later books, which always struck me as stilted, or even some bits of Pound which are too large-scale (and he wasn't no

wit) to be subtle, and he finds a way to use the forms in a satirical fashion without being suburban (there must be life outside the suburbs), which is to say Hecht has that sense of "play" that the metaphysic poets were so good at, and he is never behind a pulpit quite like Duncan (who, I think, was better at something else). Nonetheless, the occasional (perhaps profound) sexism in his, Hecht's, work, keeps me at a good distance — it's not just his sexism but that of the class he seems to want to represent — which points, by extension, to his refusal to engage with any aspects of the "dialect of his tribe", to somehow deal in a lively way with the things of this, our present-day, world — to be numerous, to question assumptions. His being "above it all" smacks of a true conservatism that spreads out horizontally, like a stain on the landscape. He would probably hate everything I stand for, *helas*. Eventually, a "political" reading of his work would have to get in the way — strangely, I was reading Terry Eagleton on Yeats and pleasure just yesterday and he says much the same thing — if you're an Irish nationalist and sensitive to sexism you are going to find his "terrible beauty" hard to swallow. So anyway, this issue of "taste" — which is so complicated — the idea of a "standard" for reading poetry, of course, seems impossible, but it's an interesting idea.

Any Anthony Hecht fans in the audience?

One thing I think of when I meet a poet, or a question I used to ask, is: who were you obsessed with as you were learning to write, or who seemed to take you over for a time? I think most poets went through a time when they engaged in some sort of imitative phase, and I think it's a round-the-clock, creates-arguments-with-your-family, makes-you-eat-poorly kind of phase, which is to say kind of extreme. I'm not sure that any critic — who will want to claim a large portion of the "field" to maintain a decent reputation — is quite capable of this kind of insanity. Luckily as poets we don't have to insanely like every poet the cat dragged in.

Does this make sense?

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Criticism Conference

16 Mar 2000

A brief coda to the conference thread: Stefans cedes the point to Jacques Debrot and doubts, gently, that health insurance would have lengthened Ted Berrigan's line.

I tried to take some notes about the conference, but I can't read my handwriting (does the phrase "prathas about epistimomolg" mean anything to anyone?)

Generally, though, I would say that there was a skittishness about delving deeper into much of what was being alluded to. For example, much of the talk centered around the idea of "negative" criticism, which basically means those reviews of

books in which the critic foregrounds his/her displeasure with a particular text. This was placed on the tolerance/intolerance axis that Marjorie set up, her argument being that "tolerance" should not be fetishized for a critic — that is, that a critic need not advertise her ability to appreciate poetry from a diverse range of sources to claim respectability, that a critic need not make claims to non-partisanship, etc. — which, I think, is a generally a good principle. The question, though, of "intolerance" and by extension the idea of "negative" criticism, was not approached with any degree of depth. The problem with this is because there was a degree of muddiness about the following (as far as I could tell):

1) the distinction between criticism of new books, that is "reviews," which provide opinions to people with little or no knowledge of the text at hand, versus that criticism of older books, literary periods, the life-works of a writer and his/her value for the future, and expository writing that describes more than evaluates, etc.

2) the distinction between that criticism written by a poet —which, I think, by nature has to do with how such a book could create possibilities for future writing (by oneself most importantly, by others secondary, though the poet-critic usually reverses these values in public) — and that written by a professional critic, one who's aims are to, one suspects, create a consistency among her distinctions and propositions, to create a sort of critical vocabulary that could be extended to other works not being discussed, and which would, one presumes, have a wider scope of views and claims even to knowledge (all of which a "poet-critic" could do, though we don't necessarily ask this)

3) the distinction between how criticism could work in one sort of literary society, and how it would work in the "public," which would be the readership of, say, the New York Times Book review (being an exponentially larger number of people than those in the "community" type society)

4) the distinction between critical writing that is consciously "dialogic" and ephemeral and sets out to be, in the real-time attempt to find new values or discredit old or poorly stated ones (that is, writing for the poetics list was universally considered "preaching to the converted" even when, as in the example Perloff cited, this preaching was in the form of an argument [twixt Standard and myself, in this case]; most of Pound's criticism actually, is of this sort, and was being read by his right-wing audiences in The New Age, etc.), and that which is didactic and wishes to present a closed, finished set of values for the evaluation of literature, deduced from scholarship and "close readings", etc.

I'm sure some will disagree with me that these distinctions were not made, or need to be made. However, it was unclear why, for instance, Ezra Pound and T.S.

Eliot (and Williams?) were figured as poet-critics who were very frank in public about their evaluations of their peers work, and were not merely writing "positive" criticism about their friends — it's worth noticing that most of the "negative" criticism we read of these guys about their peers is in their posthumous letters, not in their essays. Pound, for instance, was very frank in his essays about saying there was lots of garbage out there, and that it was dangerous to society, but he rarely named poets, and when he did it wasn't in the form of a "negative" evaluative essay so much as in a nasty aside, or in the description of tendencies. What we know of Eliot's feelings for Williams are in his letters (he was "negative" about Edgar Lee Masters, and quite forthright yet decorous — a model! — but this was very early). Famously, O'Hara never wrote criticism of his friends that wasn't laudatory, nor does Ashbery, and yet the health of the "New York School" among themselves is inarguable. The role "professional" critics played in describing either of these groups of people is also arguable — one might say they played no role except to provide further scholarship or insights (Kenner on Pound, Perloff on O'Hara, etc.), but not to provide "real-time" senses of how this work is good, good for today, or bad, whether for "society" or the individual who wants to spend some money buying poetry, etc. — i.e. "negative criticism."

But the other thing that wasn't clear — and this is more to the point — was from what sort of ethical or philosophical or political or religious platform — that is, from what series of values, however named — was one to write this "intolerant" or negative criticism to which, Perloff suggests, one would aspire to do, at least on occasion. Because there were no allusions to wider spheres of knowledge, or greater truth values beyond "pleasure" to the critic and possible reader, the discussion centered around these issues: how a "negative" review would hurt a poet's feelings (Perloff stated, quite frankly, that she couldn't review a book of Philip Levine's negatively because he had been so kind to her about her previous negative review of one of his books; so she just didn't write one); how the limited amount of space in certain publications affects the possibilities of a review (which is arguable; some 250-word reviews say more than entire chapters; and some 3-page essays live much longer than entire books); how writing — or rather "preaching" — for those who are in one's "community" is rather useless compared to what a critic could be doing to create genuine popularity for new, difficult texts in what is considered "society" (no recognition at all of how limited this society is — is Amiri Baraka in Newark getting his literary opinions from the Boston Review?; ironic, also, that Perloff would be so dismissive of interactions among poets of smaller communities — she didn't say that what I wrote to Standard was worthless, but rather that writing to him at all was worthless — when in fact her reputation is based on her knowledge of smaller, self-contained communities, like

that of Toronto). It seems that the sort of psychological violence that a "negative" criticism could have could be justified by one's idea — as a provider of "truth," the Promethean idea which most of us, in our humility, don't hold as our model for anything, poetry or criticism — would override concerns for a person's feelings on occasion, and in fact would ennoble the task of criticism rather than make it appear a mere slug-fest. Were it to be ennobled, that poet being criticized would not be hurt by the criticism — good luck! — which is, of course, where this world of pluralism (where one can't even anticipate how a review would be received by the poet) has left us — which I think is a good thing, now's our task to figure out how to make this work in a lively fashion. Colorful detail:

I felt Helen Vendler was the most "avant-garde" of the critics in her rather bold statement concerning the fact that she never voted, never engages in society, etc. etc.; that her relationship to the poem was purely circular; I was reminded Roussel's legendary voyage(s?) to Africa in which he never left his room on the ship, or even of Dickinson. No one decided to take her up on this statement, when it seemed, to me, that the axis that thinking that would really divide a Vendler and a Perloff/Scharf and to some extent Burt, on the idea of which critics were contrasting the poems being reviewed to a sort of "ideal" state of poetry, with eternal values that exist regardless of society and contingency (Great Chain of Being, Platonic idealism, relationship to divinity, social coherence — whatever the system), and which are looking at the poems as they exist in their own time and place (the "gestural", as Michael Scharf put it, the pragmatists approach), which assumes the possibility of not knowing everything about the poem because it came from, say, the Caribbean. Burt's statement, which had ambitions to making great claims, and had a slew of references from Alan Turing to Samuel Johnson and named a thousand contemporary poets [but quoted the old ones], in the end was very confused because he was unclear about this issue, and so his attempts to construct an image of the historical moment was, to me, a muddle — this being a time of "epistemological" poetry (I think he meant "ontological" half the time, and his example was Michael Palmer) whereas the Modernists were concerned with myths and anthropology (as if anthropologists like Levi-Strauss and Bourdieu aren't leading figures in poetry discourse, and as if anthropology and social discourse aren't informing each other more and more, and as if Henry James, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Gertrude Stein, Wallace Stevens, a slew of Europeans [Rilke, Pessoa to a degree, Rimbaud, the aforementioned Roussel, the Cubist painters, etc.] weren't concerned with issues of epistemology (or ontology). It strikes me that critics would be better off not trying to "name their age," or at least play it safe and name it when the dust has settled — the "Pound Era" has at least a nice ring to it; the "new ellipticists" (or whatever) sounds like what a praying mantis must look like walking with a sprained ankle ("an insect is

an idea made of joints, as Dr. Williams used to say) — to think the term is being used in a classroom is unsettling, but better there than, say, the "public."

Anyway, I think this sacrifice — at least for the goal of making a pleasant evening out of it, noble in itself — of the possibility of a larger sphere of values determining one's aesthetic judgments beyond taste is why the discussion centered around the rather mundane — uninteresting and/or superficially considered — world of literary politics, how those in power presently use it or are able to use it, and why no answer to the question of why criticism should exist at all, or how wisely to use this power, could be answered — anecdote and "taste" took their places. And so a critic is to be appreciated because we more or less find his or her taste similar to ours. Why read a critic one doesn't like if they are not, in fact, presenting you with possible new values (especially if they are covering poets you are sure you don't like)? And it's pretty obvious that ideology and the discourse of science has fallen entirely to the wayside, since Marx (at least as responsible for the criticism of the "self" as Freud and, in a way, Darwin, and certainly the most vicious in the tearing up of bourgeois, private space) was not mentioned, which is fine — new languages are always needed. But no one else was mentioned either — though Turing would have been a good start!

Anyway, rant and rave...

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twisting cliches

06 Apr 2000

A note in the pedigree of the deliberately bad line: Stefans dates an Ashbery college poem to 1948, quotes Auden's 'As I Walked Out One Evening,' and argues that Auden's artifice is neither persona nor naturalized idiom but something 'open-ended' — a predecessor, he offers, for Bernstein's recent ballads. He signs off by finding worse verse on the internet.

Here's an example:

Darkness falls like a wet sponge,
And Dick gives Genevieve a swift punch
In the pajamas. "Aroint thee, witch."
Her tongue from previous ecstasy
Releases thoughts like little hats.

I think Ashbery wrote this in college, so I'll guess 1948. Auden was probably whipping around cliches before that, like in "As I Walked Out One Evening." I've found it online, it's not as cliché-ridden as I imagined but here are the opening stanzas:

As I walked out one evening,
Walking down Bristol Street,

The crowds upon the pavement
Were fields of harvest wheat.
And down by the brimming river
I heard a lover sing
Under an arch of the railway:
'Love has no ending.
'I'll love you, dear, I'll love you
Till China and Africa meet,
And the river jumps over the mountain
And the salmon sing in the street,
'I'll love you till the ocean
Is folded and hung up to dry
And the seven stars go squawking
Like geese about the sky.
'The years shall run like rabbits,
For in my arms I hold
The Flower of the Ages,
And the first love of the world.
'But all the clocks in the city
Began to whirr and chime:
'O let not Time deceive you,
You cannot conquer Time. etc., etc.,

While this is hardly Language poetry, it is a bit different from a Pound/Browning "persona" in that while Auden is expecting you to read this poem with an awareness that the language is artificial and false, or harkens to some other time, he's not framing it as a recreation of a particular voice. I don't think he's pushing this as some sort of naturalized idiom, it's a little too weird for that. Therefore one is forced to consider the meaning of its artificiality in a sort of open-ended way, or how the particular sentiment he seems to want to put across works most effectively in some rather bogus metrical and lexicographical — or maybe symbolic — realm, something alien to our "normal" way of speaking or using language. Anyway, Bernstein's recent writing in ballad and other forms seem to find some sort of predecessor in this kind of writing.

Hey, found this on the internet:

The Boy Soprano

Daddy loves me this I know
Cause my granddad told me so

Though he beats me blue and black
That's because I'm full of crap
My mommy she is ultra cool
Taught me the Bible's golden rule
Don't talk back, do what you're told
Abject compliance is as good as gold
The teachers teach the grandest things
Tell how poetry's words on wings
But wings are for Heaven, not for earth
Want my advice: hijack the hearse

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Clark Coolidge, *On the Nameways: Volume I*

12 May 2000

Coolidge's "slap-happy" bebop draws out Stefans's most gleeful excess: a single closing sentence stacks "quirky, jazz-suffused, horny, literate" and eight more adjectives onto one mind-at-play. The prose catches the contagion it describes—which is either the highest form of reviewing or a reviewer forgetting to review.

Clark Coolidge
On the Nameways: Volume I
Hard Press, 2000

Clark Coolidge On The Nameways: Volume I Hard Press Books

Like Ashbery in his recent "Girls on the Run," Coolidge indulges in fantasies of serious play among grownups, creating, in this long series of short poems (for which there will, presumably, be a Volume II), a landscape in which words themselves become characters, suggest psychological dimensions, and in the end depart having pleased, perverted or deceived: "In the Land of Oo Bla Dee / stooping distance from the Renal Tailpiece / wore the uniform to the very edge / clasping of the mudguard // Progress Hornblower was a liar [...] // But there's a lowline limiter / and Jimmy Semester is lifting it / riffs and breaths all hauled away / a general snuffing a total rolling / just no end to these shifting witnesses [...]" ("A Roll of Candy Dueling," 42) There is something that is not so much anti-intellectual but defiantly slap-happy about the way Coolidge uses language, and it's not because he always quite sure what he's doing (as he freely admits): "The Pillgollick has soiled himself again / stop fishing for end rhymes / would you paint beer cans? / I laugh at myself in Backwardsland / is there a brain at the end of this line? / Tsathoggua!" ("Dashiell Gorky," 64). If the Americans could not be given credit for having invented Surrealism, Coolidge proves that the basic premises of automatism —separated from an overdetermined Freudian symbolism and/or card-carrying Marxism — still thrum as the undertone to our collectively

scrambled, consumerized and even infantilized consciousnesses, as he takes his digitized bee-bop prosody — there's a touch of Kerouac here though the method is clearly Burroughs-paranoic — to the people in witty, electric doses: "The Indian on the penis / the sign of the only stable seating / in this country // BRAP / but it seemed like to me it wasn't / as hot as it had been / the porcelien fart had a flame embossed [...] / an umbilical wallet it was / the engine on my father's hands / (bent)." ("Kink," 13) The cumulative effect is of hearing a quirky, jazz-suffused, horny, literate, art-induced, troubled, lazy, friendly, rhythmically polyglot, Stein-bobbled, cranky and constantly energized mind-at-play, scribbling and scrambling through several poetic registers while watching the television and keeping an eye on the kids. Fans of Coolidge might be disappointed that *On the Nameways* doesn't extend beyond the exciting, nearly hallucinogenic writing of his earlier collections of short poems, such as *Solution Passages* and *Sound as Thought*, or that the depth of his imagination rarely goes as deep as in his classics *At Egypt* or *The Crystal Text*, and at times doesn't rack up its effects the way it could — the more minimal poems, for instance, suggest the early, objectivist Creeley, but Coolidge fails to go for the kill with a stunning finish — but for newcomers to this important American poet, this is a good, mostly entertaining, place to start.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Laura Moriarty, *Nude Memoir*

12 May 2000

On a book that is autobiography, screenplay, and "poem including history" at once—Stefans admires how Moriarty's own authority complicates the male-gaze critique she's built from, then does the un-blurbable thing and names the flaw: too many clipped, telegraphed sentences settling into stasis. Affection that keeps its critical faculties intact.

Laura Moriarty
Nude Memoir
 Krupskaya, 2000

Something of a spiritual autobiography, a pragmatist's enunciation of feminist issues of the body and love, a screenplay for a never-to-be-made film, a sort of ambient wash (in the spirit of Stein), and a "poem including history", Moriarty's latest book is a mature exhibition of the powers of late modern, and perhaps early "new modern," writing. The poem starts with what would appear to be the central theme, a reflection on the use of the nude in art and as metaphor, deriving from the privileged male gaze on the female body: "The nude is given / The nude is not a woman / Who displays a tendency to be naked / An artist keeps the whole game in mind / From her he learns / Replaced by physical presence / "With eyes shut like a bride..." (7) This relationship — often portrayed as one-sided in

feminist writing, but here complicated by the fact of Moriarty's power as an artist and creator, and hence not a spokesman for the "victim" — is torqued and turned throughout the early sections, as gender roles are troubled and estranged: "Diana puts together suspension systems beginning at 5 a.m. Energy. Apollo. The male nude. The female worker. Automobile. Moves and comes to rest. Potential movement. The machine. 'Eyes shut like a bride..' (Adorno) Stumbling into position. Precision. Accountability. Exhaustion is the steel of her eyes. She is a real woman. Paradise." (11) Themes intermingle with no obvious regularity throughout the work, as it dips into reflections on Duchamp's *The Box of 1914*, slavery in Haiti, Buster Keaton, Nietzsche ("Supposing truth is a woman," from *Beyond Good and Evil*), Moriarty's relationship to the late poet Jerry Estrin, and a figure called "Kim" who could be a stand-in for Theresa Cha or Myong Mi Kim ("Her name was Kim. She was named for the war."), whose works — part history, part autobiography — *Nude Memoir* resembles. Like Pamela Lu's *Pamela: A Novel*, *Nude Memoir* has a sort of fugal quality in its relationship to names, with figures and ideas reappearing at later moments in the work, troubling the relationship to normative narrative though the urge for anecdotal telling is very strong. But unlike Lu's book, which more clearly narrative, Moriarty's writing is a sort of a quasi-paratactic shorthand which often breaks into "poetry," linebreaks and all, and is perhaps weakened by a sense of stasis that one senses after reading too many clipped, telegraphed sentences, though she offers occasional commentary on what is happening: "Terrible grammar. The spelling of the murderess. Portable like poetry. Her notebook of lies. A convoluted spirit invading itself like a false idea of the soul. She stole from her victims. They all became writers. To say about her. To restate the obvious. The disappointment. The injury comes after pain. Followed by long scrolls of fiction. Women move through it. Frantic hieroglyphs. Nothing moves fast enough. Was she a mother or a monster?" (45) Perhaps this disembodied, somewhat monotone cadence is the most honest way to create a poetics that avoids the masculinity or orientalism of a single, judging perspective and the Faustian urge to hoard knowledge, and the low-intensity of Moriarty's writing, like ambient music, is pleasurable, textured and full of detail and insight such that one is pulled along in reading the book with trust and affection. It is an advancement on the modes of postmodern writing in that it is not troubled by a need to rise above its reader with top-down channelings of superior knowledge and radical ideology (though knowledge and ideology are present), but rather engages the reader in a competent, compelling and intelligent play of meaning and language. As Moriarty writes: "Commentary is what she provides. In the form of an amused silence." (72)

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Miles Champion, *Three Bell Zero*

12 May 2000

A young Englishman importing the American Language poets as a rebuke to England's "slumberingly conservative" verse; Stefans rates his staccato against Bernstein and Coolidge and credits him with the rarer virtue of not treating the poet as copyright-holder. The review's own faith in "making readers see and hear words" runs nearly as utopian as its subject's.

Miles Champion

Three Bell Zero

Roof Books, 2000

Each page of this young English poet's first stateside collection (Compositional Bonbons Placate was published by Carcanet in 1996) is brimming with the conflicts of intentionality and chance, design and improvisation, or perhaps simply work and fun, but not in drawn-out meditations so much as by well-honed linguistic breaks, taking the project of the Surrealist explosion of the veils of reality to the level of the word. Champion takes his lead from the American Language poets, and his poems sometimes resemble, page for page, works by Bernstein, Di Palma, Andrews and Coolidge, but his attention to this heritage — for him an overseas import rather than "native" — operates as an engaged criticism of the slumberingly conservative nature of English poetry in the century of modernism. But rather than take "innovation" as his guiding principle, Champion creates an entire culture or sensibility that, for all of its completeness and, at times, lyrical coherence (the metrical regularities of the quasi-narrative "Clovis," for example, greet aesthetic closure at every step), strikes always in the other direction, or as many "other" directions as can be contained in these careful, spare poems: "Signs the ever / Water & wine to form an oblong cut-off / Or baffle at social what's / That is, in Hegelian terms, the scarf cigar / A man is than made / I think ex-Parisian liver suit or difference / Perfumes the harder focus / Road or dog brains rise / Light is eat / You is in pellet-type pole / The clearing colour sort of adding the twig / & I found a kind of digital dried dill / Stick [...]" (untitled, 15) Champion rigorousness, adeptness with staccato meters, and learnedness measure up against any in the Language camp, especially during their "heroic" phase, but because he doesn't cling to the principle of author as originator, or even copyrighter, of his words or works — such that a Romantic or individualistic strain creeps in (this has affected a number of second-generation Language poets) — he is able to focus on the central, universal concern, which is to make readers see and hear words. His near-utopic faith in this project can bring on a Symbolistic, quasi-religious undercurrent: "The nod / dis- / members the / tactile / echo of / a solipsistic / gesture. Diffuse / summa-. I / mean, to / provide you / with layers. (Target / fit / mists.) I / was in / the twenty- / four-hour / metaphor, laundering / an intense / & crystalline / hush." ("Finishing Touches,"

45) However, for all of his graceful maneuvering among the most difficult postmodern practices, the spirit of community always peeps through in the generous imagery and the sheer pleasure in performing language: "Candour disposes the lustre / tinctures for what chance / the person's mount or invisible taipiece / free brochures impressing the indefinite fold [...]" ("Poem," 66). Though a slender 68-pages long, the poems in *Three Bell Zero* will remind everyone of what it felt like to read poems for the first time, with excitement and a sense of belonging and purpose.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Stephen Rodefer, *Mon Canard*

12 May 2000

Rodefer the shape-shifter—Villon translator under a pseudonym, author of the Language landmark "Four Lectures"—gets a review that gamely inventories his six borrowed styles, including a Watten pastiche Stefans reads as a dig at Language poetry itself. The last metaphysical activist in American nihilism, demanding a Pope from the Bronx; the notice keeps pace with the tonal whiplash.

Stephen Rodefer

Mon Canard

Hard Press, 2000

Stephen Rodefer Mon Canard Hard Press Books

Author of books as diverse as a celebrated, idiosyncratic translation of Villon (under the pseudonym of Jean Calais, Pick Pocket Books, 1968) to the spellbinding *Four Lectures* (1982), recognized by many as a distinctive masterpiece of Language writing, Rodefer has never been one to fit easily into a method or recognized "voice" — indeed, into a stable reputation. His most typical form of writing, as exhibited in several small-press books, has been the quick, elegant improvised lyric inspired by the writing of everyone from Olson to O'Hara, Baudelaire to Stein, Verlaine to Patti Smith, which is why this new selection of longer, more cumulative poems is especially welcome. In *Mon Canard*, Rodefer returns again to the large canvas of *Four Lectures*, as each of the book's six poems explore exhaustively a distinctive style: the short, linked prose poems (à la Rimbaud's *Illuminations*) of "Daydreams of Frascati"; the Williamsesque three-step in "Erasers" (which even sounds like "Asphodel" at moments) and the more acrobatic "Arabesque at Bar"; the projective, satiric apostrophe in "Answer to Dr. Agathon"; the high-flown erotic pun-machine in "Mon Canard"; and — in a sort of wicked inversion, signifying his embattled relationship to Language poetry itself — the quasi-constructivist stanza of Barrett Watten in "Stewed and Fraught with Birds." This isn't to say that Rodefer is derivative; on the contrary, he needs these forms to reign in the various tones of address (mostly ecstatic, but often

meditative and conversational) that he exhibits and which, one senses, society will never be entirely pleased with: "The ligaments / of your phraseology / will eventually get / put to some truth test or other // and you'll be lucky / if anyone reads / it with a big guffaw / or sneezes" ("Stewed," 114). This poet, like the modernists he most admires, and as distinct from the determinations of postmodernist gesture, is railing for a concept of value when the old, stable ones have vanished, mating duende with the suave anarchic undercurrents of parataxis. As a result, his use of reference resounds with the need to shore up history and knowledge against personal dissolution: "I am come to your cartop Ajax, waxing toward an invitation to an opening in some hedgerow. Our Leninist principles have toppled, to become fabulous and Sylvan once again. We are the last metaphysical activists in American nihilism. We demand a Pope from the Bronx." ("Daydreams," 10) Rodefer presents something of the classic, Kafkaian "description of a struggle" that is rarely seen anymore since the paranoid has overwhelmed avant-garde writing and deleted the agonistic persona, it seems, entirely. While some of the poems, like "Mon Canard," broken into 14-line "sonnets" but without their closures, can be faulted for a metrical repetitiveness and lack of progression, the gesture of the effort can be appreciated for erecting particular reading challenges when least expected — i.e. in the course of libidinous play and rhetorical directness. I like the graphic page a lot. Mon Canard presents in large strokes the depths to language and, most importantly, the range of human feeling — from the dark to the bright, the indulgent to the ascetic — that only a poet-as-dedicated-free-radical can provide.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Peter Jaeger/Dell Olson at the Zinc Bar, June 20th (Tues), 6 p.m.

16 Jun 2000

A reading Stefans wrangled into existence for two London-via-Canada poets, with a stern promise to start by 6:10 sharp because he only works four blocks away.

After many emails to and from various parts of the world (Peter is a rambling man), a reading has finally been arranged for him and Dell at the following location, time, etc.:

TUESDAY June 20th, 2000 ZINC BAR: 6 PM

Peter Jaeger & Dell Olsen

Direct from London (but apparently Canadian Nationals) Will Read From Their Work

PLEASE NOTE: There is a special Summer Weekday STARTING TIME 6pm (do not be fooled I REALLY will start talking by 6:10--I only work 4 blocks away.)

{Thus, we hope to accomodate your after reading dinner plans.} So don't be late.

ZINC BAR located at 90 West Houston St. {right here in Manahatta} just west of La Guardia Place.

Contact Douglas Rothschild [REDACTED]

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Stacy Doris, *Paramour*

12 Jul 2000

Doris's palindromic romp through "human sexual response"—part Satyricon, part Sade exhausting every possibility but God's—prompts Stefans to a genuinely useful closing question: can form itself be the only content? A review that has fun without mistaking fun for the whole argument.

Stacy Doris

Paramour

Krupskaya, 2000

A freewheeling manual on the intoxications of love may seem a poor career move in a day when Victorian mores and sexual disease have sent everyone willingly back to a public, post-60s sexual civility. Doris faces this challenge by going over the top, with an excessive, polymorphic romp through the many permutations love can inhabit, and in the meantime finds that off-stage, rarely-seen space where aesthetics and titillation meet in lascivious embrace. As she writes in her introduction, her task —influenced by the "current technological unconscious' restructuring of space... in which locations and identities shift with radical illogic" —was to explore, primarily through palindrome, the "demonstration and distortion of many kinds of lyric verse" and "human sexual response." What results is something both mythic (in the spirit of the Satyricon), medieval (with its gothic complexity) and somewhat late-Enlightenment (in the manner of Sade, exhausting all possibilities but that of God's existence). *Paramour* is a landscape strewn with figures — ballads, eclogues, prose poems — from the cultural tradition who meet again and again in a large box of mirrors to revisit their amours: "Pipe drives the kids wild, / Piping sprinkles bright goo, / In a cloud of chewy fluid, / And Pipe laughing sing to all: / 'Pipe a game about a toy!' / So kids pop with happy guns. / 'Pipey peek in fun again;' / So shoot too to tickle here." (4) Like Lee Ann Brown's *Polyverse* (Sun & Moon), *Paramour* skids through a variety of formal poses, transmitting its carnal logic through pun and prose, epigraph and song — no stone left unturned in its quest for momentary satisfaction: "Get all fuzzy Gets all mixed / when your body feels so rich / and in

me But in its / so fully seeps all destructs / may a new / a hand's more than / in all, more in!" (7) "A Four-Tongued Version" from the chapter "How to Love" is a beautiful long sequence of shorter, quatrain poems that are like versified fortune-cookies, each one either a sharp, beguiling puzzle, some kernel of "wisdom", or a telescoped narrative: "While she slept / he suffered her sister. / Whose weather / could be nicer?" (20) Included is a calendar of valentines — one poem for every day of February —, a manual of love and war based on the writings of Sun Tzu, several pages that seem like games (her last full-length book of poems, *Kildare*, took place inside a video game), all of which walks the cusp of this book's question, which is: can form itself be the only content, or must it ever point to a "moral," ideological stance, or philosophical pose to justify itself? Doris's book is both refreshingly free of the sentimentality of love but, as well, free of much of psychology most of us — in less extreme moments — identify with it.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Kevin Davies, *Comp.*

12 Jul 2000

The long-awaited follow-up to "Pause Button," and Stefans is alert to the melancholy under the comedy—jokes he insists "would fail on HBO" but cut the post-leftist literary community to the bone. He praises Davies for wasting not a line or a white space, then proves he means it by quoting sparingly.

Kevin Davies

Comp.

Edge Books, 2000

"What gets *_me_* is / the robots are doing / *_my_* job, but I don't get / the *_money_*, / some extrapolated node / of expansion-contraction gets / my money, which I need / for *_time travel_*." So Davies sets the tone in his long-awaited follow-up to *_Pause Button_* (Tsumani, 1990), a comic, but often melancholy mix walking the thin line between the absurdity of having utopic, progressive aspirations and a survivor's guilt in a world of opaque, socially indifferent economic commerce — indeed, of having a value-system at all. Like many younger poets from the west coast of Canada, Davies' poetics derive from the cross-roads of "projective" speech-based verse — his challenging, never imprecise cocktail of alternating line-lengths, swift-moving fragments and page-splattered stanzas are its noticeable traces — and language poetry, which unapologetically divorces the fragment from constraints of organic form, plunging each unit of the poem — rhythm, word, punctuation — into the realm of social critique. What strikes one is the elegance he brings to project; not a line is wasted, not a "white space" trampled on by some ego-driven drive to sully emptiness with authorial presence: "Yet / what if there is a perfectly natural / form, and god wants us to

kiss it and talk dirty?" (49) The long central poem, "Karnal Bunt", is a sequence of single-page arrangements hanging, like a Calder mobile, just tenuously and balanced enough to maintain its tensions. But Davies isn't one to fetishize aesthetic moments, as each line is spurred on by its incisive, informed comedy that would fail on HBO but cuts to the heart of the post-leftist, cerebral literary community from which he emerges. "An edited Scotch ambiance of translated Chinese reads to itself" — a line punning on Chomskian generative grammar and the synchronicity of global economies — would not bring down the house on the Dennis Miller Show. "Untitled Poem from the First Clinton Administration" takes the project a step further, adding the note of *_duende_* — a sort of heatedness that runs up against his constructivist leanings — as a stream of invective aimed at the NAFTA-flattened globe and its promise and pretensions: "They don't care about the details but fuck with the structure and they'll crush your spine / A shell of other people / Reflowered / Pressed into action / Figures of demented nostalgia / With diplomas, credit histories / Unbridgeable gaps where their eyes should be / The cramp as such / Because it is written / Veins in the forearms of Satan / Like unanswered mail in a bag of donuts / The entire earth / Trembles in the throes of its decision-making process" (85). Davies' humor — like the best of the counter-culture sixties — aims from the darker corners of the room, shattering the false light of economic progress and globalization. Nonetheless, he is not without light himself, bursting from the clashes of social contradiction and a not-defeated utopic urge: "Why be sad? / Kissinger will die / before they can upload him." (49) *_Comp._* is one of the best books of poetry to have emerged from the alternative American poetry scene in years, and is sure to revive many a reader's faith in the possibilities of poetry to speak, construct, goad, amuse, teach and, incidentally, survive the spiritual stasis of the present time.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Darren Wershler-Henry, *The Tapeworm Foundry*

12 Jul 2000

A single-sentence poem punctuated only by "and/or," billed as a list of book proposals and read by Stefans as a Dada manifesto that actually wants to reach people rather than intimidate them. The review turns its own defense outward, arguing that looking "juvenile" and "easy" is here a considered sacrifice of the hieratic difficulty he's clearly tired of elsewhere.

Darren Wershler-Henry
The Tapeworm Foundry
House of Anansi Press, 2000

Taking up the call of a global poetics infused with the criss-crossing of information flow, a local poetics (centered around a Toronto as you've never known it) and a need to communicate beyond the surface intensity of radical

form, Wershler-Henry muscles through a single-sentence poem of possibility whose only punctuation is the conjunction "andor." Any strand of this text — a DNA fiber for a new world of controlled chaos — propels the reader through a corridor exquisite options and micro-narratives, like a Borges short story compacted into the moment between breaths: "[...] andor realize your imac is just a big tamagotchi andor design a transformer to use up wasted ergs of energy from excessive pressure on electric buzzers andor quit making art in order to play chinese checkers andor tattoo your poems on the back of someone else but be sure to make no spelling mistakes anor prepare to correct them in a different colour of ink andor do it all for the nookie andor delete ambiguities and then convert to specificities [...]" Billed as a "list of book proposals," Tapeworm is actually much more: a manifesto for significant and/or excessive action in a world increasingly circumscribed by middle-of-the-road politics, false notions of rationality and productivity, and the infinite hunger of a technologized economy for all the good bad (read: useless, fun, diabolic) ideas that the young, the disaffected and the inordinately talented can produce. Tapeworm's various jabs at institutions, the "bourgeois", the mainstream and closed ways of thinking are not to be ignored; this is a book that revivifies the initial burst of excitement Dadaism and other modernist forms created, but unlike much "avant-garde" work today, it is not caught up in the self-satisfying, doxical terminology of the cultural institutions — schools, museums, even the cliques — but wants to reach out, to expand, to take prisoners and aggressively amuse them. If the work seems juvenile and "easy," that's because the author —who has conveniently been muscled out the back door by a totalizing process — has sacrificed the "difficulty" (often just confusion or a hapless shield against obviousness posing as hieratic) of much experimental poetry today. If there is an overriding metaphor to how this poem operates, it may be that of information itself; at times, even the simple construct (an advance over the conjunctivitis of much late "new sentence" work, including recent portions of *The Alphabet* itself) breaks down as a subset of phrases separated by "or" take over (here, in a rephrasing of one of Raymond Queneau's projects): "[...] andor find ninety-nine different ways to retell the story of one man accusing another man of jostling him deliberately on a crowded bus at midday but avoid all anagrams or antiphrases or alexandrines or back slang or blurbs or epentheses or gallicisms or haiku or hellenisms of litotes or logical analysis or negativities or permutations or proper names or prostheses or spoonerisms or syncope or surprise andor [...]" Like all great literary works, Tapeworm presents some fundamental problems, mostly centered around the meaning of useless discipline — since this is, if anything, a disciplined work (as his tourniquet approach to his Oulipian cousin suggests) — in world whose only avenues for progress — personal, social, and otherwise — seem to lead inexorably

into melding into the corporate whole? This book raises suspicions about everything, not the least of which is where the "author" of such a work stands, but perhaps, like in the radical performative work of Beuys and Acconci, the author is the gesture itself.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Andy Levy's *Paper Head Last Lyrics*

12 Jul 2000

*A review that likes the book and says so, tracing Levy's long title poem from Williams's *Asphodel* to Watten's *Progress* before conceding the trouble: the politics, when they take the podium, go slack — Nixon debunked as though it were still news. Stefans is most persuasive when praising the meditative drift and least so when he wants the poem to have finished thinking.*

Andy Levy *Paper Head Last Lyrics* 110 pp. Roof Books 0-937804-83-5

Levy sets out upon his poetic project with an ethics of observation and agitation, setting out with no definable goals but with a quasi-Buddhist, quasi-materialist calling to be in the world, moment-by-moment, recording its contradictions and, when there is beauty, its necessity and how it is learned: "A surfer in methodological self-consciousness / forward, not permanent, sweet, not lasting / to wipe clear this screen with / some cloth of disparity / What we will try to become, that labor / curious about each / Not curious about God, or sexual mores." (69) The idiom in the long title poem which takes up most of this book is somewhere between Williams' *Asphodel* and the fluid, polyglot and cross-spliced rhetorical strategies of Barrett Watten's *Progress*; Levy never sounds entirely like he's "speaking" to one singular figure, but this poem-including-history seems poignant in a way that suggests the Modernist, never entirely submitting itself to the rigors of method or foregrounded structure. Indeed, Levy is willfully "transcendental," not minding to point the eye up toward a "God" or an ideal otherness, even if it is one he doesn't choose to name: "Did you write the great line to take everyone / to another earth," (69) he writes, and later, as if turning directly on his Language poet heritage: "A philosophy of pissing off the other side / abandoning the secular car / making and unmaking time." (74) Later, however, he takes shots at what might be called the subtone of transcendental philosophy in mainstream, class-defined American culture: "A memory of light / The turd of transcendence establishes a hillside estate: / Transcendence Hill Club / Croquet is the game of choice for its ladies / All the members are ladies at / Transcendence Hill" (52) The tone is primarily meditative, but occasionally the "news" breaks in (not to mention the occasional Andrews-esque obscenity-as-direct-address) to trouble the isolation of this mind. The worst one can say about the poem is that its politics, when they take center-stage, seem undeveloped; one section riffs on potential lines of a Nixon biography (as if Nixon, and later Kis-

singer, were the figures most needing debunking in the world today), and some targets for a sort of name-calling include the GOP and the Democratic National Convention ("Troglodytes and Neanderthals"), the NRA, and the military, while passing up the contradiction inherent in some of the Protestant "good-works" philosophy of the poem — the Poundian "make it new" — and their linkages to the basic power structures of these institutions. But as a whole, "Paper Head Last Lyrics" along with the beautiful essay "An Indispensable Coefficient of Esthetic Order" — with their guerilla attacks on the problematic rise of "virtual realities," and hence virtual moralities, in a de-spiritualized America — presents the image of a complex, invested mind at play among words, and with a poetic ability that is rare. Levy, with his very readable, honest and public new book, is one more proof of the continuing validity of writing in the modernist tradition today.

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Adeena Karasick's Dyssemia Sleaze

12 Jul 2000

A Little Review in all but name: the same one-paragraph verdict, the same bibliographic header, filed without the label and so landing here among the arguments.

Adeena Karasick Dyssemia Sleaze Talonbooks 0-88922-434-X

Canadian poet Karasick continues her pop-inflected, extroverted and libidinal investigations into a deconstructive, pun- and anagram-motivated poetics in her most visually compelling, if somewhat overdone, book. A high-end production — one of the few books of poetry to boast full color, glossy pages through most of its contents — Karasick uses photographs, drawings, multiple typefaces, the classic spatial accoutrements of "projective verse" and just about the kitchen sink to propel her words across, under and on top of the page. The sequence "Menaheh Yehuda" treats the syllable as an erotically charged node or synapse, as each word is jarred forward by the phonemic contours of the preceding, trashing any notions lyrical cleanliness and opting for the morally "obscene" literary enactment of flesh-against-flesh: "And, as normative tilts ooze in a choreography of tropic / blot clotters / a cotillion of many cullers, isolata eros swigs in / blunt pulses & skins the surface of / her dimpled limits / fermented in riggish gashings / grasped in spronged frottage ruffled fetchings / fraught with haute conduits." (23) "Improbable Grammars V" takes the "wall" (or, at times, specifically Jerusalem's Western Wall) as its theme, a center around which Karasick assembles, with a Benjaminian nod, tons of quotes and images involving historicity and reading. Though this seems the most labor-intensive section of the book, it is probably the least successful, as a series of what have become postmodern clichés — the language of fissures, simultaneity, non-linear and paratactic grammar, virtuality, multiple identities, puns using parenthetical le(tt)ers and

s/lashes, dislocations, etc. — abound, and the cumulative effect of the clashing color images and attention-deficit typefaces — technicolor dreamcoats for the prose of the unadorned letter — begin to strike one as a good idea gone awry, or going nowhere in particular. Some of the most difficult passages to physically read don't yield much news, though often the contrast of theoretical language and the slap-happy graphemes conspire to create some intriguing hermeneutic whirlpools: "Exposing the fullness of speech, s/he mouths (muths) all the letters of the Hebrew alphabet, and becomes the writ(h)ing, the wound, the word. S/he swallows, devours and rends the world apart and at the same time (as a s/cite for ingesting, assimilating) becomes one with the wor(l)d thus, with a collapse of interiority, s/he transgresses herself and becomes an assemblage of surface disruptions." (56) Perhaps, as an example of tossing everything against the "wall" of the page and seeing what comes back, "Grammars" is successful as an exhibitionistic, youthful, and near-hysterical display of ambition and desire, though a more thoughtful, specific experiment, with the goal of aesthetic solutions for the new technolgoies (in the manner of MacLuhan's books, or the Coup de Des) might have been more satisfying, and perhaps monumental. However, Karasick's energy can be infectious, and Dyssemia Sleaze is unlike any book of poetry published recently, turning its back on (and turning over) the more conventional, nearly sanctified values of both the lyric and the visual poem (mired in its own traditions), and in the meantime looking toward the future.

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Re: Little Review: Kevin Davies' Comp.

22 Jul 2000

Caught having called a Canadian book "American," Stefans turns the slip into a manifesto: the alternative canon that survives, he argues, will be half Vancouver — Derksen, Robertson, McCaffery, Bök — and the anthologists who ignore them are keeping a corpse alive. The reflex to say "USA" not "America," he notes, he owes to Jeff Derksen; the pride in the roster he owes to himself.

Like many younger poets from the west coast of Canada, Davies' poetics derive from the cross-roads of "projective" speech-based verse —

Comp. is one of the best books of poetry to have emerged from the alternative American poetry scene in years, and is sure to revive many a

Good catch, I suppose I sort of did that on purpose. But along the lines of what Ken and George wrote, I don't think of "American" poetry as that written in the "USA", or at least I always refer to this country as the "USA" and never "America", probably a note of self-consciousness that my Canadian friends, especially Jeff Derksen, impressed in me. Kevin Davies, for those of you who don't know, is "from Vancouver" though I think he wasn't born in that city, and has been living in

New York for as long as I have (originally from New Jersey), so I consider him as much part of this "scene" as anyone born in the US, not that New York's is the only scene in the US. Consequently, if I were to record for myself all of the best poetry readings that I've seen in New York, a good half (or some lopsidedly large percentage) of them would probably be by "Canadians" — Jeff, Kevin, Dan Farrell, Lisa Robertson, Steve McCaffery, Peter Culley, Darren Wershler-Henry, Christian Bok, etc. etc. (there ARE more, just don't want to bore you) — and its very tiresome for me to see them ignored by anthologies and critical writers who dismiss them as not very important to the great American modernist tradition. There is a great "American" modernist tradition of writers from the US — I don't think Louis Dudek, Raymond Souster, Irving Layton, Earle Birney, those folks, offer nearly as much — but if it survives as anything, it's going to include Canadians as a substantial part of it. I think Roy Kiyooka is the most interesting poet in the Premonitions anthology of "Asian North American Poetry", and what about Daphne Marlatt? — more interesting than tons of writers we are so fascinated by now in an effort to keep this tradition alive.

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Re: my quarrel with negative capability

27 Sep 2000

On the pedantry of attribution: Stefans reminds the room that the idea belongs to Coleridge — who also coined the word 'psycho-analyze' — in a notebook nobody read; a footnote given the force of a position. Among the voices he is answering is one "Kasey": K. Silem Mohammad, the Santa Cruz poet who would shortly become a central figure in flarf.

It's actually, I think, Coleridge's idea, except that he called it "Negative Belief" or something like that. Coleridge also invented the term "psycho-analyze," but he did it in one of his notebooks which weren't published until, I think, the early twentieth century. As for Hazlitt, the interesting about him, to me, outside of a really excellent prose style — it reads as very contemporary, and sharp — is that he was a nasty little guy, who let loose on everybody, Coleridge especially (to the point of name calling), mostly venting on his older romantic peers whom he felt failed to follow through on their early, radical politics. He once had to take a continental vacation to cure himself of drinking too much tea. The landlady's daughter you mention below was 16.

is that it ain't Keats' idea! it's William Hazlitt's! the idea, if not the phrase, is embedded in his Treatise on Human Nature. it reads as if a Lockean tried to explain benevolence (18th c. altruism) instead of the state. item: he claims that we can be no more interested in our future self than another's future self. they are both equally fictional. from here, with a picquant turn of phrase and poetic embroidering, you might well get n.c. but perhaps without its fatal flaw. n.c. hides the subject as if it is

simply not a problem (and thus we get Bardolatry and still later Keatolatry: the fantasy of the poet as everyone), while this argument says the subject is the other in some sense. i (at least in the future) is another.

though i am not Hazlitt expert, it is about time for his revival. painter, biographer, critic, and, in his most peculiar moment, writer of a cringe inducing, thinly disguised dissection of his "crush" on and subsequent "crushing" by his landlady's daughter. and called it "Liber Amoris": that is, "free love."

Robert Corbett

— Robert Corbett *"I will discuss perfidy with scholars as*
rcor@u.washington.edu as if spurning kisses, I will sip Department of English
the marble marrow of empire. I want sugar University of Washington but I shall
never wear shame and if you call that sophistry then what is Love" - Lisa Robertson

Richard Taylor writes:

Probably the solution for a writer is to study and learn from the history of his craft, be as well informed (in all areas as well as current lit theory) as possible and then to let "instinct" take over - or "negative capability".

Hey, no common sense allowed! My hat is off to Mr. Taylor for his fearless appeal to about seven or eight volatile presumptions in one sentence, all of which I heartily embrace, with the exception of the limiting use of the masculine pronoun.

Negative capability is one of my favorite theoretical spooks. The term has been so roundly rejected & ridiculed, but I can't help feeling that there's a lot there that can still be teased out in terms of describing what happens in poetry, etc.

—Kasey

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Re: adventures in poultry

27 Sep 2000

Silliman had argued, in a post titled "adventures in poultry," that visual and sound poetry are essentially antiquarian — that most vizpo "would rather look adventurous rather than be adventurous" — and that he saw little real connection between post-structuralism and Language poetry beyond temporal proximity. Stefans answers with a list — McCaffery's Carnival, Finlay's Little Sparta, Cage's graphical pieces, Christian Bök's mouth-music — which is how he argued when he thought the other man was almost right.

Hi Ron,

Would you say, then, that Steve McCaffery's "Carnival," Ian Hamilton Finlay's Little Sparta, Juliet Ann Martin's "ooxxxxxxx", John Cage's graphical pieces, Wershler-Henry's "Grain: a Prairie Poem" (and translations of Appolinaire into Klingon) and, say, Charles Bernstein's "Veil" share the same "form"?

The problem with what you write below is that you early define form as something like a "haiku" or a "sonnet" — singular names that point to specific (either by syllable count, rhyme, meter) types of poems, and then say the forms become

antiquarian when the social forces that produced them have fallen away. But the sonnet as declaration of love went out in the (roughly) 18th century — Wordsworth, Coleridge and Shelley wrote political sonnets that appeared in the newspapers, and also wrote sonnets (like "Ozymindias," however it's spelled) that were pure imagism (of sorts). Now, it is used mostly, I feel, as a form of landscape painting (at least in the conservative tradition) or a record of "dailiness" (in the New York School vein) — the social forces that lead to the sonnet long having departed, but the sonnet itself having acquired some new sheen as a kind of clunky old thing, like an old chevy, that we are happy to keep around.

In any case, your sense of how a genre becomes "identified" (though a sonnet is hardly a "genre", or at least I think of "poetry" as a "genre") turns into "literary devices", which suggest a plurality of techniques that you are not naming. Would we name them, we would call B. Andrews' technique in *I Don't Have Any Paper* the "all-over prose two-pager," or Bernstein's technique in *Shade* the "skinny", Howe's technique the "melville" etc. etc. — defining a "form" in this sense is tricky. It seems to me that the innovative tradition in American poetry thrives on mixing these forms all the time, and so one would be more prone to describe this activity, this practice, along formal terms than the final products, which are usually rather heterodox. I suppose the "New Sentence" might be a "new form," but I have yet to see a significant critical discussion of all the people who wrote using this form and whether or not it was honored, successful, etc., which I think would be useful.

New sounds have been invented; Christian Bok, for example, pretty much uses every organ in his body — sound sounds are "liver sounds," some make you fear for his health — to make sounds, and creates a fine, overpower web of tonalities in his readings. I think you are right that there is an "antiquarian" aspect to lots of concrete and sound poetry, and that most people who do it lack anything resembling an openness to contemporary aesthetic or social values, but that's because very few practitioners take it very seriously as a discipline — part of the reason Duchamp didn't produce ready-mades every other day was because he wanted to stay in touch with that specific sensation that leads to the discovery of a ready-made, and Finlay's research into the English gardening tradition (and specific avoidance of the Japanese tradition) are what make his work so exceptional (not to mention the other researches). The Torontonians and Brazilians are unique today in really taking the idea of "concrete" poetry seriously, but nobody in the United States seems to take them seriously, so much of the content fails to get across.

I don't think there's a common enough discourse on concrete and sound poetry for anyone to jump in "become" a sound or concrete poet right away. It seems so easy; I actually think it's quite difficult. Because sound and concrete poetry are so expensive to reproduce, there is hardly a "canon" —ironically, all of our pomo arguments against canon formation find a counter-argument here, in that there is so much of this work out there, little significant (i.e. establishment of values) critical discourse about it, that all we see are xeroxed cut-ups from newspapers, weird line drawings, Ernst-like two-minute collages, etc., always being reproduced as "new."

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2001

Charles Borkhuis, *Alpha Ruins*

04 Jan 2001

The first of a January flurry of "Little Reviews," Stefans's capsule notices sent to the list like clockwork. Here he files Borkhuis under the permanent misfits — the earnest surrealists too "Jungian" for polite company — and then argues that cyber-culture has at last supplied their moment; the pivot from dismissal to rescue is the whole performance.

Charles Borkhuis

Alpha Ruins

Bucknell University Press, 2000

Borkhuis' poems pick up somewhere where the fifth section of the "Waste Land" left off, describing deserted contemporary landscapes in which the dead and living intermingle with a chilling ease: "details drain / little lights into people / now and at the hour of our recycling / rain grows upwards / in trails of transparent veins / that cool and cluster into floating cities / the earth shadowed by thoughts / thoughts shadowed by people / people shadowed by machines" ("Close Up and Far Away," 37) . With an even paced tone reminiscent of Robert Duncan or Michael Palmer, though without their formally variety, the poems of Alpha Ruins insinuate themselves into the breathy alleys of the city, the between moments of thinking, and the fissures of being: "(inside a sideways glance) / passage to the outside / as if this... / tunnel were a switch / drifting through matter / where the big thoughts roam" ("The Gaze," 31). The poems are most effective when the surreal tone is anchored by recognizable imagery from life and an occasional sense of humor, as in the dark but playful "Slice of Life": "to open the cover of a book to find / a miniature author inside / asleep in his coffin / dressed as a ghost / carries a rubber hatchet / [...] the cop teaches his club a new twist / the irate customer clicks his remote control / the doctor depresses your tongue with a stick / [...] you could have fooled / my camera" (60) Borkhuis seems outside any

recognizable American tradition, but like Charles Henri Ford could be considered a standard bearer for a type of surreal style that is often dismissed for being overly earnest, too "Jungian" or archetypal in its imagery, and generally "mystical" — the blueprint for a permanent misfit. Times have changed, though, with poets like Will Alexander and, occasionally, Palmer to recall those heady modernist times; indeed, with the rise of neo-noir stylistics and cyber-culture, along with "schizo" proliferation of images that digital technology has brought to the movie screen, poetry like Borkhuis' may have finally found its moment. At times, the poems move somewhat near William Gibson's hallucinogenic (or "virtual") melancholy style ("lost secrets live echoes / particle-currents in the veins / whispers while you write // moist earth buried in the body / of answers say circular ruins / peeling back the skin // or turning a page / landscape with friends standing / on a hill of yellow leaves", 61); at others it actively recalls high surreal tradition — it is drenched in urban phantasmagoria a la Breton's *Nadja*, not to mention a few direct references to "shooting into the crowd," (21, 35) Breton's infamous anarchistic trope for the cracking of the veils of reality — hence never becoming too slick or too antiquated. Though *Alpha Ruins* doesn't often escape its closed cycle of images and preoccupations, indulging in words like "infinity" and "monads" a bit recklessly, when it hones in on a resonant chain of images and a less "dreamlike" tone — as in "Close Up and Far Away" and Francis Bacon-like "The Surgeon's Glove" ("blaze of hair / SPLICED / into footage of a golden carp sliding / off the dissecting table") — it is beautiful in a distinctive, contemporary way.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Stephen Berg, *Halo & Porno Diva Numero Uno*

04 Jan 2001

Two Berg titles reviewed as one, and the rare Little Review that comes out net-negative: Stefans finds the run-on "white heat" neither beautiful nor suppressed by any society worth the name. The dismantling is patient and specific — he grants the Duchamp book more, which only sharpens the verdict on the rest.

Stephen Berg

Halo (Sheep Meadow Press, 2000)

Porno Diva Numero Uno (Lingo Books, 2000)

In these two books of prose poems, Berg strains for the visceral transcendence of the saints, a fairly anachronistic project considering how the Beats — by accessing such "cursed" moderns as Artaud and Rimbaud — have apparently exhausted the subject. He describes a sort of *ars poetica* in *Halo*, a series a short quasi-religious paragraphs: "Curtains she calls it 'curtain of the world' mercy behind it on the other side cruelty here in the God-world no-God, whenever I read to her —

'I have to know that as a thinking, finite being I am God crucified' — it shreds me, no-time which is God God everywhere everything we are, often in great heat I write to a friend say everything that shames batters inspires won't send it burn it on stove papery ash God's words, woke in the dark again clawed the unwall'd dark again." ("Simone," 19) Something seems either entirely naive or slightly forced about these poems, as their basic form — the run-on sentence that drops elements of normal syntax as it seems spoken in a "white heat" — is both not very beautiful to read, and not nearly as gregarious, image-laden or charming as his New American models — O'Hara in "Meditation In An Emergency" and Ginsberg in his major early works such as the confessional "Kaddish." Nor do they seem to have anything contained within them that society is necessarily suppressing (Berg is not being "suicided by society," and he has no counter-culture to expose) nor philosophically resonant, and so one wonders whether a craft-obsessed poet — whether Basho or Williams — would have been able to find profundity in the pseudo-profundity of "Of": "That death is what you cannot do that death is what you cannot be that death is not the opposite of nothing." (24) *Porno Diva Numero Uno* is more successful, as it takes as its central theme an imaginary relationship between the author and Marcel Duchamp around the time he was constructing his final work *Etant donnés* [1946-66] (housed in the Philadelphia Museum of Art, from which city Berg edits and publishes the *American Poetry Review*). But once again, Berg's form stumbles, as even interesting speech seem compromised by the poet _making excuses_ for the language by applying — even where a dialogic contrast seems necessary — elements of his "signature style," the run-on: "...I could name anything just by touching it but it was only after a period of disgust with visual art with the quality of distance it depends on that I decided — and this was the only reason for my decision — to do some of my things so the idea was touch not art how would you like to eat an apple drink a glass of wine if you didn't have hands anyhow put a bicycle wheel and a stool together black white and you've got the wildness of an impossible combination combined you almost don't know what to do with it touch look spin sit eat what? so I'm like a blind artist I _am_ a blind artist a man with no ideas only the memory of that early lesson'" (13) *Porno Diva* — as its flashy title suggests — seems framed as a deep, candid investigation of eroticism of the cheap suburban brand, but while Bataille is clearly the godfather, here, Berg doesn't make many of his own investigations — very few images, digressions, infatuations, etc. seem particularly inspired by Berg's sexual imagination. Though an interesting image may point one somewhere in that direction ("...in our age two removes from the viewer first the door then the wall then herholding the puny lamp of orgasm up there dream of faceless leather..." [66]), for the most part it seems Berg is undecided whether to be Duchamp's Boswell (though much of Duchamp's material seems taken from

common sources), the hectic but image-dry visionary of Halo, or a collagist of art-related non-sequiturs. Berg seems to get focused when he introduces genuinely odd unliterary matter that intrigues him, such as the long section on the mating habits of Rhinoceri, in which the sentences become suddenly rather narrative, not to mention sickly titillating. Perhaps that is a lesson, for though Berg calls himself an "apostle of the ordinary" (27), one wonders why he opts for the ecstatic, fireworks mode in his writing when the material is so plain.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Dominic Cheung, *Drifting*

04 Jan 2001

An unusually gentle notice — Stefans has a soft ear here for Cheung's off-rhymes and diasporic melancholy, and hears Eliot's Magi more than Pound's Cathay behind the tea rituals. Even the reservation, a "pile-up of loose sentiments," is offered as a lapse rather than a charge.

Dominic Cheung

Drifting

Green Integer (No. 79), 2000

As Cheung writes in the Forward to his first American collection, these poems ring with notes of "a sense of the diaspora, a misplacement of time and space, and a feeling of helplessness regarding fleeting life and love." (i) Living in the United States since 1967, the Taiwanese-born Cheung had already published two volumes of poetry and one volume of prose in his early twenties. He proves himself, in translating his own work into English (all from a 1986 collection called *Drifters*), to have a subtle and pleasant ear for off-rhymes and the effect of simple vocabulary and syntax, no doubt informed by the Western tradition of translations from Asian languages, but not anxious or ironic about it. The opening poem, "Fragrant Herbs by the Mountain Stream," effectively builds up the mythological tone centered around the history of a Tibetan knife he received as a gift, a history resonant of death and, perhaps, of cultural revenge against colonial China: "But the Han Chinese brough in liberation and suppression, / Modernization and pollution, / Recovery and hatred, / Tearing out the heart of the green, green plain. // Vaguely I hold this Tibetan knife in my palm, / No one knows of my martial skill." (16-17) "Love Poem of Tea" — a short poem that flirts with ballad meters while never straying from the softer tones of "Oriental" free verse — begins a series of poems centered around the tea ritual: "Let your dryness inside me / Softly uncoil and stretch; / Let me dissolve / Imperceptibly, your tension," (18) he writes, the masculine ending "stretch" and feminine "tension" creating a deft half-rhyme that suggests, as well, the subtle workings of gender in a poem in which the male protagonist imagines himself as a bowl of tea. Spring

and autumn seem, for Cheung, the seasons of the melancholic wanderer, as his most resonant moments come in describing them: "In the fiction and reality of flower seasons / To search for a good friend / Transcending language and age / Remains an heroic quest, and an illusion." (41) Cheung seems to resemble, in this way, the Eliot of "Journey of the Magi" more than the wintry, "Anglo-Saxon" Pound of Cathay, and at times Cheung's taste in abstractions also suggest Eliot, though his subtle ear is sometimes unable to completely salvage a pile-up of loose sentiments: "Though the same season and weather prevail / The country never ceases changing / There are themes of passion, and of indifference; / Though the same person and personality remain / Stars and events keep mutating / There are plots of joy, and of sadness. / Since departure and reunion remain unpredictable / Loneliness is conspicuous." (44) But Cheung is less a philosopher than a social and political exile, a wanderer on American shores who is unsure not only of his own identity but that of his home country, stuck in its own limbo. His melencholy, passion, and the complexity of his situation are finely expressed in this group of poems: "Endless drifting, wandering among time, / As it thickens with the midnight dew/ [...] Self, the self, to be identified! / Nation, the nation, to be recognized! / Life, a life to be realized! / Country, a country, to become strong!" (59)

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Clark Coolidge, *Alien Tatters*

09 Jan 2001

Stefans on Coolidge in full swoon, then catching himself: the prose falls "squarely into the lush language" before he notes it declines to follow Beckett-like on its own shady premises and settles into "stand-up-parataxis." Affection and diagnosis arrive in the same sentence, which is the house style.

Clark Coolidge

Alien Tatters

Atelos, 2000

Coolidge's latest collection of long poems — hot on the heels of his massive group of loopy lyrics from *The Figures*, *On The Nameways* — takes the reader to a delicately upsetting space which seems run by the evil twin of Descarte's god, replacing every object in the room by transgressing all of the general laws of physics until, like in a swoon, one must fall squarely into the lush language: "Just kind of a nice frying person. The rest was on the latch moved over. I could just see a foot or threat of one because my head was lying on my head. A bit. Then another weighted hand, sort of spoollike and in spots and dashes. Gaming room with a spread to it." (72) "Puzzle Faces" is framed like a discovery narrative, an air of mystery being created by the author's subjunctive sense of meaning and lack of

agency as he/she, in a partly lotus-eater state, tries to avoid panic and indecision: "There is something heavy being lifted like a blot from the paper. Are you all prepared? There will be little fun in thin rooms.... Where purest night is considered a sort of vitamin not just anyone should ingest. I watch the lights popping out all the way down the cabin. There must be creatures here who would overlead the populace, just a feeling." (140) However, like the other four long prose pieces in this book, it soon breaks down into his idiosyncratic stand-up-parataxis comedy mode, and so rather than follow though, Beckett-like, on the implications of its shady premises, the work becomes a play of surfaces on which anything can strike from a number of angles ("I can't believe the underwear that comes with America"), though always returning somehow to that discovering voice: "Lower on the block was half a chicken. There may be people here who roam, but they are not the semblables. They are mildly warm and senseless. I have to send away and enclose my vocabulary. I am small and that is my name, 'Small'" (145) As Coolidge writes in the Afterword, he was very attentive to reportings in the papers of UFO sightings and alien abductions, and had a "huge desire to participate somehow. If I couldn't go, then perhaps at least I might learn to speak the language, and use it to take myself further in, or out, to what?" (199) The long first poem, "Alien Tatters," takes up this theme most strongly, seeming to describe what happens among these creatures, though they never seem to escape his head: "At first there was so much light in the room with me that I thought it must be the dog. But no. Okay, but I will explain that the grass was green. They gave me the kind of Jello where it still came in a set. Then I got launched somehow and let's forget all about ceilings. When I couldn't see what was below the eyes I always breathed heavily in short pants. But I'm not even sure about the eyes. I can't even see the eats." (63) But speaking this language — as challenging and seemingly whimsical as trying to learn dolphin mating calls — seems to have been Coolidge's desire since his early minimal poems (in "Space" and "General Electric") through his bee-bop Kerouac prosody (in "Sound as Thought") and his other long prose works ("Book of During," etc.). That he decides on a quasi-science fiction theme for his latest book — though one thoroughly absent of technological fetishism and/or the humanist reclamation of weirdness and otherness (cf. Kinsella's *The Visitants*) — is not so unusual given the sheen of philosophical depth that popular culture and digital technology, not to mention the freakish alienation talk shows grant to panoptimized suburban life, have given the genre. While this book of Coolidge's may not be for everyone — it is not as various as the great 70's "prosoid" works like "Smithsonian Depositions," and one has to really be able to get over long works with no significant "themes," linear narrative or apparent correlation with social realities to read it — it is

really quite buoyant and sonically resonant, skitting skillfully among language and twisted, paranoiac visions.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

John Godfrey, *Push the Mule*

09 Jan 2001

A warm one — Godfrey, silent since 1988, returns and Stefans calls him one of the most observant urban poets going. The Arcimboldo comparison does real work, describing how these prose portraits accrete a subject only to dissolve her back into the grammar.

John Godfrey

Push the Mule

The Figures, 2001

In his first book of poetry since 1988's *Midnight on Your Left*, Godfrey — normally associated with a later incarnation of the New York School, though he might just as easily be linked to a sort of "post-punk" poetry scene — shows himself to be one of the most observant and imaginative urban poets today. These poems are all in prose, and while the pacing of the writing is not much different than one would read in fiction — this is not the Williams of *Kora in Hell* or Gertrude Stein, or the ecstatic fables and apostrophes of Rimbaud's *Iluminations* — the sentences combine to create swirls of meaning rather than stable narrative environments. "Accede in Kind" builds sentence by sentence into a troubled, at times darkly erotic portrait of a woman, known only as "she" throughout. The drama is in determining which participant — the perceived or the perceiver — should dominate the spotlight, such that the literary battle of formal perspective spills over into the content, which could very well be a battle among minor gods: "I have my hand over that part of her that readies for injury. It is stability that suffers solo. Should she die dreaming of a night passage the silky weathered sail will have her. She will be carried along on waves of heat from roots burning underground. She is not lacking in hatred; why, then, isn't she the one to decide the fate of creatures?" (18) Like in the Arcimboldo effect (named after the Italian painter, 1527-1593), in which the artist utilized different types of fruit to compose his portraits, this sort of accretion, at its best, is carefully tempered so as to trouble the relationship of poet to subject; even at the end of this poem, when things seem to clear up a bit, the subject disappears into maze of unyielding grammatical hallways: "Ancient dry voices of men come at her and address her as 'Mother.'" She exhales as deeply as possible and hugs herself in order to get both the original and the duplicates of her body out the door to the flatlands, where everything she will need for proof is ready." Other poems engage more freely with paratactic sentence structures, à la the "new sentence," or with classic surreal moments ("The whole hallway is ready to start rising, like

an elevator under leaves," [21]) or with Beat-inspired word twists that point, simultaneously, at beauty of the sublime sort and the grounded, earthy resplendence of trash: "Windshield spit allover by streetside trees breaks out the tunnel into a blinding halo Queens didn't earn. By seven-thirty morn, the LIE shines golden white while factories either side rend their fumes awry." (46) A beautiful elegy for the poet Jim Brodey uses this talking-around-the-subject technique, along with Godfrey's strong penchant for mating opposing ideas by putting unexpected conclusions to his sentences, to marvelous effect: "He fancied meat of dragon swans, as if the gods were always on his lips. You know how wet they look from the foam and under ground soak. I will raise this pitcher to the skeleton man in case he needs to look up on the light through waters. A longing comes over me to tell the abodes of my heart the great nerve sharp has eloped from exile... Without question he was a being struggling in the net, drowning in a dry mouth, weakened by exile into blathering purity." (43) Poems like "The Big Wingspread" take clear aim at political demagoguery, especially when it borders on the messianic; other poems, like "Same Feet," are reminiscent of Jim Carroll in their lighter touch, placing just the right of surreal weirdness over the interior fires that burn in love relationships: "Try no matter how many times, I still can't describe what I feel to see your hair catch fire. I am fond of your anger and proof of your pain." (51) Like with many books of prose poetry, it's not easy to read Push the Mule all the way through — sometimes one wishes for more variety in the meters, more discreteness in the individual poems, more torquing of the paragraph form, and maybe some wilder sense of humor to make it a bit less bleak — but the precision of these sentences, taken one by one, are often interesting enough and satisfy careful attention. Godfrey is never less than noble in the care he takes with his work.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Robert Fitterman, *Metropolis 1-15*

09 Jan 2001

Stefans is plainly enjoying himself here, cataloguing how Fitterman floats dead stock phrases — police-radio, interior-decorator — against the purely poetic without letting either curdle. Nadja and the fake dictionary of section 7 get equal billing; the pleasure of the review is watching him name the trick without spoiling it.

Robert Fitterman

Metropolis 1-15

Sun & Moon Press, 2000

Winner of the New American Poetry Competition 1997, chosen by Bruce Andrews

Fitterman mates a certain classic "Objectivist" style (in the manner of George Oppen and Louis Zukofsky) with a hip, contemporary sensibility which borders on

the techno-ambient, thus sacrificing some of the angstier concerns of his modernist predecessors for an interest in pure, accessible verbal pleasure. *Metropolis*, an on-going work which should reach 24 sections when completed, is very much a New York poem, filled with the chatter of that city's highly social scene with the everyday weirdness of an often nomadic life lived deep in the shadows of skyscrapers. The first section, despite its cross-cutting collage style, nearly recalls Breton's Surrealist masterpiece *Nadja* (itself an homage to a city, Paris) in its roving eye view and the heady, decentered feeling of its urban phantasmagoria: "But grander than that / L'Hotel actually happened / scaffolding in some circles / gone twilight & Lex essences / sipped down subdeveloper more (bestial, residual, / festive red clay livery / homespun depot some yellow western atmospheric glib hog / I was there / but there was no espresso bar / did you _time_ this? the connection / between us is sheerly residential / minus crossed our paths are starred / in an awkward upper west side hey-day" (10). Part of the beauty of Fitterman's style is that it lets him drop odd, potentially dull stock phrases that one remembers from somewhere ("we got / a situation here" from the police radio in a b-movie, or "lighting fixtures the last word in / chrome" from interior decorator parlance) and puts them in contact with more purely poetic ones ("a lay sky plurals dusk about us," or the last lines of section 1: "the dead lose / their defenses" followed by the zinger: "that's been my experience") hence creating a strange floating sensation that elevates the individual units of the cliché — the chrome, the situation — while not letting the classically poetic moments get precious or sententious. Section 7 is a sort of fake dictionary utilizing many of the formal devices — quotes from literature, dates, abbreviations, etymologies — to create a difficult but familiar surface in which the humor of not quite knowing what a word means combines with a quasi-expose on the mystical nature of words that dictionaries, with their lexical depth psychology, suggest. Like a series of brief portraits of the dreamlife of spoonerisms (later in *Metropolis* he writes "My favorite opera is *Il Trattoria*"), section 7 pushes the limit between poetry and goulash syntax: "Fade -[~]^ ^^ I. droop, whither, a company of hunters, any sawed-off weapon that has lost taste to corrupt, weaken. 1303 _Syn._ neuer gres, ne neuer sall, bot euermore be.. falow, and fade. 2. barber's term, Life began to vade. 3. shrink. Lit. and _Fig._ OE. _fadian_, Wger. ORG. *_fadia_. 4. v.3. _dial_. to dance around from town to country. 5. _Spec. Cornish_. A passel of maidens... begin'd for... to fade so friskis._" (60) Section 8 is a "libretto" in which several landmark buildings — the World Trade Center, the Flatiron, Rockefeller Center — take part in an orderly but disjunctive choral crown: "FLATIRON: Open up / your heart / and see it / the other way. / What makes / a hat felt?" (70) Other sections use odd word breaks ("loo / ming sud / den a mall / all ang / el & la // ttice at aw / ning's va / se & sparkl / es pill / ars lewd ac / cusa") to shimmy grammar back and

forth in a flotsam/jetsam manner, and reduced forms like the three word poem ("Life / long / fishcakes") or other manners of verbal dislocation to create stucco-like surfaces over which the eye roves for meaning, getting hooked there and being let loose elsewhere. It is perhaps useful to compare Fitterman's technique (which relies very much on arrangement on the page) to that of an abstract painter, like Robert Ryman or Cy Twombly, who deals with single colors (in this case, white) over long stretches of canvas to highlight sculptural surface play; in such works, the "white space" becomes more than a unit of composition and dominates the terms of engagement, such that attention is turned to the minor things — paint flecks, the chiaroscuro effects of small shadows — so that the art is both "busy" and calming, but in any case not making huge, impenetrable philosophical gestures. Fitterman's sensual relationship to words — in both sound and color — and his light touch makes reading Metropolis a uniquely satisfying aesthetic experience.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

:::Double Happiness Reading List for April / May 2001:::

26 Jan 2001

Stefans pre-empts the charge of name-dropping and then drops the names anyway — his curated spring series, staged below street level during a two-for-one happy hour.

I know I'll probably just be accused of "name-dropping" (eh-hem) but here's the reading list for the April/May series I've curated at Double Happiness. Chales Borkhuis and Sean Killian are doing February/March; I don't have their list here with me, otherwise I'd send it on. I'll send announcements weekly as reminders. Double Happiness is located at 173 Mott Street at Broome. It's located below street level; there are a set of stairs next to the aquarium on the corner. The readings are at 4, usually done by 6 or so. The readings are during happy hour, which at DH is a two-for-one deal.

I think it will be a great series, and hope many of you make it out there. I'm especially happy that Madeline Gins, who is better known as Arakawa's collaborator, agreed to read, and the combination of her and Christian Bok's sound poetry pyrotechnics should be lethal and memorable. Redell Olsen is, as I write below, a great young poet from England who gave her first New York reading at the Zinc bar last year. It was last minute and poorly attended but the few of us there felt quite lucky to know about it, and I think she will be a pleasant surprise for many.

Sally Silvers has, yes, published poetry and she works with text quite frequently in her dance pieces. With Mac Wellman, whom many of you know as a

playwright but who is a great poet, I think it will be a great, unpredictable afternoon.

I think most of the other names below are sort of known to y'all.

I'm bringing in special lights for the series, too, done by my sister who is a light-designer and artist (she recently did work for Frank Gehry and is always on to something new). So if anything it will be pretty there, and you plagiarists can bring your notebooks and index cards.

Memorize this! Hope to see you...

Brian

APRIL 7: BRUCE ANDREWS AND JACQUES DEBROT

Bruce Andrews is the author of several landmark books of poetry including *I Don't Have Any Paper So Shut Up (Or, Social Romanticism)* and *Paradise & Method* (Northwestern University Press). Forthcoming is *Lip Service*, the "Dante Paradiso dub," from Coach House Books, and the "Millennium Project," which will appear on the Eclipse website. Jacques Debrot is the author of *Confuzion Comix* (Second Story Books), and is the editor of the zine *9 to 0*. Known as one of the more challenging from-the-hip literary critics and provocateurs, he has published poems in *Combo* and at www.arras.net.

APRIL 14: ROD SMITH AND REDELL OLSEN

Rod Smith is the author of *In Memory Of My Theories* (O Books), *The Boy Poems*, *Protective Immediacy*, and with Lisa Jarnot and Bill Luoma, *New Mannerist Tricycle*. *The Good House* and *The Given* are forthcoming in 2001. He edits *Aerial* magazine, publishes *Edge Books*, and manages *Bridge Street Books* in Washington, DC. Redell Olsen is the author of *Book of the Insect* and *Book of the Fur* (rem press). One of a growing crop of exciting younger writers coming out of London, England, she has an MA in fine art and has worked in video, performance, and installation.

APRIL 21: SALLY SILVERS AND MAC WELLMAN

Sally Silvers is a NYC-based choreographer/performer whose theoretical writing, scores, and poetry have appeared in many journals including *The Drama Review* and *The Impercipient*. Her next dance performances are in NYC at *Construction Company*, May 5, 6, 7. Mac Wellman, one of the country's great innovative playwrights, has published several books including *A Shelf in Woop's Clothing* (poetry, Sun & Moon), *The Bad Infinity*, and *Crowtet I (A Murder of Crows & The*

Hyacinth Macaw). He was co-editor of *From the Other Side of the Century II: A New American Drama 1960-1995* (Sun & Moon).

APRIL 28: YEDDA MORRISON AND KIM ROSENFELD

Yedda Morrison lives in San Francisco where she co-edits *Tripwire*, a Journal of Experimental Poetics. Her chapbooks include *The Marriage of the Well Built Head*, *Shed*, and *Apostasy*, forthcoming from Melodeon Poetry Systems. Recent work has appeared in *Primary Writing*, *Kenning* and *Syllogism*. Kim Rosenfield is the author of several chapbooks including *Rx*, *cool clean chemistry*, and *A Self-Guided Walk*, and the book *Good Morning -Midnight -*. An internet chapbook, *Verballi*, is forthcoming on www.arras.net.

MAY 5: ALAN DAVIES AND NICOLE BROSSARD

Alan Davies is the intrepid author of several underground classics including *Name*, *Signage* (essays, Roof Books), *Candor* and a limited host of other titles bridging the traverses between poetry and theory and life. Nicole Brossard is one of New York's favorite Quebecers, and has published numerous books and essays of poetry, fiction and feminist criticism, including *These Our Mothers (Or: The Disintegrating Chapter)*, *Picture Theory*, *Surfaces of Sense*, and *Mauve Desert* (Arroyo Press).

MAY 12: DARREN WERSHLER-HENRY AND JUDITH GOLDMAN

Darren Wershler-Henry lives and works as a writer, critic, and the editor of *Coach House Books* in Toronto. His book of visual poetry, *NICHOLODEON: a book of lowerglyphs*, appeared in 1997, and the tapeworm foundry in 2000 (*Anansi*). He is the co-author of four nonfiction books on the internet, and his essays on pop culture and theory have appeared in numerous periodicals including *boundary 2*, *Open Letter*, *Sulfur*, and *Semiotext(e) Canada(s)*. Judith Goldman has published poems in several journals and zines including *Object*, *Arras*, *Aerial*, and *The Impercipient*. Her first book of poems, *Vocoder*, will be published in March 2001 by Roof Books.

MAY 19: CHRISTIAN BÖK AND MADELINE GINS

Christian Bök, besides being the author of *Crystallography* (Coach House) and the forthcoming *Eunoia* (parts of which can be read on www.arras.net), is the "noted linguist" (*Time Magazine*) who created the language for the Taelons on a recent Gene Roddenberry series. His book of essays on 'pataphysics and other subjects is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press, and work of his in print and on CD can be found in the new issue of *Cabinet*. Madeline Gins is the author/creator of *Word Rain*, *What the President Will Say and Do*, and the meta-somethingelse *Helen Keller* or *Arakawa*. She collaborated with Arawaka on the

seminal Mechanism of Meaning, and has been busy constructing several Reversible Destiny structures — cities, houses, installations — all over the world.

MAY 26: GARRETT CAPLES AND LEE ANN BROWN

Garrett Caples is the author of *The Garrett Caples Reader* (Black Square Editions). He is presently working on a prose book, the beginning of which appeared in *Faucheuse 3*, and working on a new collection tentatively titled *All Chemical*. He lives in Oakland, California. Lee Ann Brown's *Polyverse*, winner of the New American Poetry Series, appeared in 1999 (*Sun & Moon*). She is also a singer, filmmaker, the publisher/editor of Tender Buttons press, and has published several chapbooks including *The Voluptuary Lion Poems of Spring*.

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Pierre Joris, *Poasis: Selected Poems 1986-1999*

30 Jan 2001

The credentials come first — translator of Celan and Jabès, co-editor of Poems for the Millennium — before Stefans gets to the poems and their inheritance from Olson and the Pisan Pound. He lands on "old-fashioned," not quite a compliment and not quite not, the nomad's "pure line" held at arm's length.

Pierre Joris

Poasis: Selected Poems 1986-1999

Wesleyan University Press, 2001

For decades, Joris has been an important translator of important avant-garde authors such as Paul Celan, Edmond Jabès, and Maurice Blanchot, and editor (with Jerome Rothenberg) of such important volumes as the pppppp: *The Selected Writings of Kurt Schwitters* and the massive two volume anthology of international avant-garde poetry, *Poems for the Millennium*, from the University of California Press. Joris's first volume of selected poems, *Breccia*, appeared in 1987, and was jointly published in Luxembourg and by Station Hill Press (Barrytown, NY); *Poasis* is, outside of several chapbooks and magazine appearances, Joris's first major publication of his own writing in the United States. He has lived for several years in Great Britain, France, North Africa, and now the United States, and this "nomadic" existence — he has written a manifesto for a "nomadic community," part of which is included here — strongly informs the stylistics and content of his writing: "He decried the 'citoyen du / mond' as some Socratic / blunder — but it is not so, / Charley, the particular is / everywhere, is the cosmo- / politan exactly, the particular is / everywhere, the smallest / unit, the particle is / everything — & it moves, / it crosses bound- / aries, it moves / wherever [...]" (164). "Charley" in this quote is Charles Olson, one of the writers that hangs over his work strongly; another is Ezra Pound, and the sense of Europe's failing in the twentieth century, of the martyrdom and all-around shamanistic function of the

artist as vortex of meaning, the globalizing breadth that takes in all facts of history (personal and social) and contemporaneity in one rhetorical swoop not to mention the condemnation of a dispiritualized modern times — Pound's tone and method in the *Pisan Cantos* — runs through Poesis: "von Hollands Grachten bis tief ins Russische / Reich a Ganovenweise sung in Luxembourg anno domino 3 / post world war 2 all the way to Ancel in the Bukowina / & we still go at it turba scriptorum tralala trying / to wring something from this long night" (84) This gives the writing, even with its push into both language-centered and performative strategies, a bit of an old-fashioned feel, a sense of the "pure line" that one gets in poets like Robert Kelly and, earlier, Robert Duncan ("O that I had Duncan's eyes to see & hold both this America that Europe planisphere of my sense fine mercator mesh grid of this my prison earth" Joris writes), for whom the coherence of a strong European tradition, or of a visionary capacity in the poet that placed him among a constellation of dead authors, was of ethical concern, and for whom a loose, speech- or breath- based epic lyrical style was the best "American" way to express it. Tel Quel and the Language poets, not to mention the New York School and Breton's version of Surrealism, all of whom have a more mundane, anthropological and pragmatic appreciation of the poet's task, troubled the question of whether one can be both an intuitive medium of meaning and be a historical materialist, with its contract with objectivity, at the same time. Many of the poems struggle with this issue, and outside of a general teleological rush and longings for the visionary capacity, there isn't much touchdown, either into perfectly satisfying poetic form or a detailed, unique personal vision. The better parts of this book are when Joris is just writing in normal prose (or prose-ish poems), discussing why Americans can be so dogmatic in their religions, or in the selections from "h.j.r." describing his search for the "Nomad Hotel" somewhere in, one presumes, Africa: "Realizing that we were children of no Sheikh, wanderers from another direction that had no direction, they led us outside the city's perimeter to where the Japanese buses were waiting, drowning in dust and sun. A low building without a well offered itself to us. I overheard talk bout emigrate / immigrate, the different sides of the same coin. Koiné. Porous borders." (191) Here, one senses the complexities of being an interstitial writer, of existing somewhere on the edge of mediated, globalized culture, away from theories of being and economics, though all the pulp and paradoxes of these issues are delivered in the details. The super-national adventure of Joris' nomadic existence — through the walls of Europe and Africa and through the wilds of all of Modernism, which he knows better than anyone — might have been better displayed had he sacrificed his commitment to the tone of Olson and Pound, and written more freely of the contradictions of his "particular," therefore meaningful, life.

Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*

30 Jan 2001

The anthology review as connoisseur's sport: Stefans grants Caws her "breathless introduction" and "Manifesto Moment," then turns nitpicker with a list of the excluded — Rimbaud's Seer letter, the Brazilian "Pilot Plan," "Howl." The omissions are where he actually lives.

Mary Ann Caws, ed.

Manifesto: A Century of Isms

University of Nebraska Press, 2001

As Caws states in her breathless introduction, the arts manifesto, which first made its appearance in the late 19th century (about forty years after the Communist Manifesto) relies on an arrogant, overblown stance that was a "deliberate manipulation of the public view," as unquestioning about the value of the "new art" and as it was about the bankruptcy of the old. During what Caws calls the "Manifesto Moment," from about 1909 when the Futurists first broke out to 1919 when Lyubov Popova wrote her "statement" for non-objective Suprematist Art, the manifesto had a "madness about it," but always, even when positing an "us" against a "them," invited the reader to become one of the new breed, a whole new way of looking at things from just the other side of the paradigm-shift (a strategy and optimism that has since been taken over by the technology industry). The manifesto was not a symptom of a world "waiting to be born," but was at once a diagnosis the its narcolepsy and the crashing of speeding trains that would cure it forever. In this anthology, Caws expands the definition of "Manifesto" to include milder statements of principles (from the Language Poets), poems (parts of Whitmans' "Song of Myself"), fragments from the writings of Cage, Duchamp and others that are more seminal moments than statements, Oscar Wilde's Preface to Dorian Gray, Poe's The Philosophy of Furniture, one of the few writings of Jacques VachÈ (one of Breton's inspirations for Surrealism), Schwitters offbeat "Cow Manifesto" and more. Nitpickers, however, will note certain important exclusions: Rimbaud's proto-Symbolist "Letter of the Seer," in which many of the tenets of movements from Surrealism to Beat and Language poetry were to be first found; the Brazilian concrete poets' "Pilot Plan for Concrete Poetry," which was unique in mating a postcolonial agenda with an aesthetics program for "exportable" art and is probably the only South American manifesto that isn't either Symbolist or Surrealist in origin; and Allen Ginsberg's "Howl," which if anything was the most concise, most ecstatic and yet most complete expression of the mores and methods of the Beat Generation. Since the book contains visual as well as literary manifestos — writings from Odilon Redon and James Ensor, not to mention Salvador Dali's "Yellow Manifesto" — an excerpt from Jan Tschichold's

The New Typography, which outlines the relationship of type and paper-size to social consciousness, would have helped tie several strands together, such as the included manifestos for new architecture and new music (relying on experimental scores), not to mention the valuable, if not entirely satisfying, Lettrist manifestos. The Vorticism section is adequate, though one misses Gautier-Brzeska's fabulous letter from the front, in which he described carving a sculpture out of the butt of a gun, a more charismatic piece than the Vorticist manifestoes themselves authored by the noxious Richard Aldington (using Lewis and Pound's language; several of Lewis's "Blast" pages are included, typefaces intact). Readers of Language Poetry will wonder why none of Bruce Andrews' famously propulsive essays are included (recently collected in *Andrews Paradise & Method* from the University of Alabama) nor "The New Sentence" by Ron Silliman, which more than the writing of Nick Piombino and Michael Palmer satisfied several of the classic aims of the manifesto and was very influential. Since poetry has been included, a short poem like Ashbery's "And 'Ut Pictora Poesis' Is Her Name" would stand nicely beside O'Hara's "Personism" (which is included) as a brief, provocative statement of the New York School's aesthetic purposes that is both subverting of accepted literary values and — perhaps too warmly — inviting. Nonetheless, most of the classics are here, including Whistler's "The Ten O'Clock," several essays by Apollinaire and Marinetti, the Dada Manifestos by Tzara, the Russian Futurists' "Slap in the Face of Public Taste," Pound's "A Few Don'ts by an Imagist," South American manifestos by Borges and Huidibros, Olson's "Projective Verse," and manifestoes of Negritude by Césaire and others (yes, it's quite male heavy). This enormous book is the great companion to the Rothenberg/Joris two volume *Poems for the Millennium*, and in some ways a less fragmented portrait of world (though not Asian) modernism. Though the scholarship seems often rather sketchy and quickly written — Caws is like the Harold Bloom of this material and doesn't often stop for reflection — it is a challenging, comprehensive read.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Claudia Rankine, *Plot*

30 Jan 2001

Stefans situates Plot in a whole avant-garde genealogy — Wittig, Brooke-Rose, Hejinian, Cha — before the reservation lands: unlike The End of the Alphabet, the book-length form leaves it “particularly prone to run-on.” The “Not you” exchange he pulls out is the review’s best evidence, for and against.

Claudia Rankine

Plot

Grove Press, 2001

Like much recent writing from the avant-garde, *Plot* is a book-length poem/fiction sequence concerned with the issues of meaning, writing and being, utilizing autobiography but also clearly bizarre naming-conventions (a la Zarathustra and De Chirico's *Hebdomeros*) — to create an atmosphere of moderate crisis, philosophical overdetermination and, in any case, super-real dimensions. It immediately appears at the nexus of several different avant-garde projects, from the *nouveau roman* of Monique Wittig to the scholarly mind-blasts of Christine Brooke-Rose, from the epistemologically fraught spaces of Lyn Hejinian and Leslie Scalapino right on to last year's *The Words* by Carla Harryman (Theresa Hak Kyung Cha's *Dictee* also lurks in the background). *Plot*, which more or less spirals around the story of Liv and Erland and their future child Ersatz, is richly embedded in the sensations and anxieties of child-birth and -rearing: "Long after she grows tired in the night she hears only the child's cries. His cries, already recalling, and silence, / the dumbness she wedges herself into. Cowardly, and additionally compromised, she hears each cry, punctuating every space of exception, running through her, meaning to break, to interrupt each moment attempted. She hears and calls it silence." (20) The main issue seems to be whether this birth is wanted for an escape from self, and whether this second-self is indeed an "other"; Rankine writes: "Liv, answer me this: Is the female anatomically in need of a child as a life preserver, a hand, a hand up? And now, pap smeared, do you want harder the family you fear in fear of all those answers?" This question of self-othering, of viewing the child as "ersatz" meaning, is tied in with Rankine's sense of herself, and mostly remains interior, inside the language, and is not conveyed through anecdote or lyric, as if gestation itself were the *modus operandi* of the writing. Therefore, one of the more striking moments is when the three main figures conjoin, in the "real world" to render this interior/exterior situation clear: "That same night Erland pressed his ear to Liv's belly. / What do you hear? Liv asked. / Not you, Erland answered. Not you." (78) Unfortunately, unlike Rankine's last book *The End of Alphabet*, which was a set of discreet 6-8 page sequences, the book-length *Plot* is particularly prone to run-on, obfuscated formulations and indulgent — one presumes "experimental" and yet finally unnecessary — grammatical constructions: "the damaged image absorbed to appear, the exemplar seen and felt as one, having grown thick in the interior, opens on to surface and is the surface reflecting its source." (39) The Ashberian "taking out" — a mark, one supposes, of the "Ellipticist" school of writing — and the Steinian urge for recursive syntax, while occasionally quite beautiful and engaging, is often colorless and makes one self-conscious about wishing an end to all deconstructive tactics in poetry: "The interest is not with the dissolved, and yet dissolution surrounds, is a feeling in its duration. It observes its own density and is the constituted dissolved toward solidity. To this refuse, / casting its

shadow from flesh to canvas, she says, no. But see, the debris is the self within the trace, then the tide is the general condition implicated. She is afraid of herself." (67) As opposed to the writing of Theresa Hak Kyung Cha in her *Dictee*, to which Plot seems most indebted, or to Hejinian's carefully paced vocabulary and meta-fictional models (as in *Oxota*), these moments do not seem linked to any real intensity of vision, any thwarted desire to reveal or achieve form, but come off as stylistic devices of the Jorie Graham variety. Plot is interesting because it contains moments of normative fiction (such as the "Interlude") and a series of odd graphically charted pages, an effort, perhaps, to anchor this mass of issues and language but to maintain its centrifugal quality, but even these moments are unexciting — the dialogue is hackneyed, the graphics insincere. Rankine has tremendous talent as a poet, but one wonders if a better way of expressing the dilemmas of a fluid, ontologically flustered self would be a more concentrated, formally precise and imagistic writing, one that presented the precious rocks that one grasps at for stability rather than simply the grasping.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Susan Wheeler, *Source Codes*

15 Feb 2001

February's batch opens with Wheeler, and Stefans is at his most generous — "startling," he says, twice charmed by the alliterative crush-rhymes and the Benny-the-beaver fable read as a parable of art after aura. He files her between Bernstein's "Nude Formalist" and the Bishop-Lowell-Berryman line, which is his way of saying he can't quite place her, and likes that.

Susan Wheeler

Source Codes

Salt Publishing, 2001

Wheeler skirts along the troubled borders where virtual reality and Robert Lowell's Maine lobster town vie for our central geographic tropes, and where the "self" is variably a node in a cluster of rhizomic meanings or enmeshed in an aging, none-too-pretty (but lyrical) body. Each of the new poems in this startling collection leaps head-first into dizzying, often very formal, always wackily alliterative, language: "We reassert / the selves but the Seagrams of the earth they / sift us with silt no mind our gear in a wind that takes / _going off_ to heart, or what heart a silt self has / in the greater earth it constitutes." (1) As the fable of Benny, the beaver who only made a sound with his tail but did no work ("Benny slapped his tail to bang / A beat on hollow logs / Keen for external analogs / To the hums within his head."), Wheeler is obsessed (like Walter Benjamin, about whom this poem may be) with art in a time when the art object, in this case the poem, has lost its singularity and direct relationship to "work" and always echoes something else — a time when poems can literally be created by computers or be the product

of text dumps from the web. Despite these high-tech concerns, which place her within the interests of Charles Bernstein in his "Nude Formalist" mode (the wrong word used just wrongly in a formal/lyric style, floating high above the essentialism of common lyric conceptions), the technology of the poems, or Wheeler's "tradition," seems equally inspired by the allusive, symbolist-tinged, grand style of the Bishop/Lowell/Berryman line, and her talent for crushing rhymes that expose total disaffection, while owing something to the Artaudian school of pain as pleasure, take overblown advantage of what the often pessimistic "Age of Anxiety" strains of these poets had to offer: "You've been pure trouble since I thought you up, / Acie, hairnet, glass eye, wormy dick / through stretch pants across a girth so thick / even your dog don't jump." (18) Wheeler's pantheon of effects takes in everything from jingles ("Double bubble toil and trouble / Double, double, double your fun"), very tight syllabic stanzas, the odd mix of stentorian modes with cartoon-like plasticity that is familiar to readers of middle-period Ashbery, pseudo-wisdom literature modes ("The death of peace is no literature / Leisure is death without letters. / Death is without the leisure of letters. / A lettrist's death is without peace."), myths, fables, and Surrealist mantras, like this poem which, with a Swiftian turn right out of Gulliver's Travels, reverses the trajectory of Breton's famous paean to his wife with red hair: "lover admires his mistress, though she be very deformed of herself / a swollen juggler's platter face, or a thin / have clouds in her face, be crooked / mammis, her dugs like two double jugs / that other extreme, bloody-fallen fingers / she have filthy, long unpared nails [...] he loves her once, he admires her for all this" (12) Source Codes, whose poems are only titled by numbers but have, on the contents page, what appear to be one-line citations for each one ("Text: Robert Burton, Anatomy of Melancholy," for example), is punctuated by a series of interesting, if not as technically dazzling, collages that place figures in rooms and landscapes so that their Cartesian coordinates are possible, but socially they are quite out of place — a couple necking in a cathedral, for instance. At the end of the book appear three Appendices, each suggesting, in their own way, how the presence of the poem as a series of singular marks of ink on a page is undermined by its "source," hence banishing forever the image of Coleridge merely transcribing Kubla Khan from his repressed, universal memory: first, a series of scribbled-over drafts of the poems in the book; second, a splash of HTML that (as any programmer could see) wouldn't work; and last, a series of what could be drafts for poems in a new book. This remarkably subversive book — in which Frost's "Provide, provide" becomes the great capitalist mantra "Produce, produce," and the singing Nightingale "nests in its noose" — is at once an homage and an evisceration of what might call the main line of American poetry, not unlike Lowell's own evisceration of his aristocratic lineage in his early poems. In any case, Source Codes is one of the few

books of poetry that truly synthesizes, even exhausts, the range of techniques that the 20th century provided for American lyric verse.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Renee Gladman, *Juice*

15 Feb 2001

A notably attentive reading of Gladman's first book, paired with Pamela Lu as fellow San Franciscan of the post-indentarian selfhood problem. Stefans lets the archaeology metaphor run — putting her sentences together becomes "an archeological feat in itself" — enacting the difficulty he's praising.

Renee Gladman

Juice

Kelsey Street Press, 2000

"About the body I know very little, though I am steadily trying to improve myself, in the way animals improve themselves by licking," starts Gladman in this philosophical but warmly personal first collection of fictional prose poems. Like her fellow San Franciscan, the young writer Pamela Lu (in her book *Pamela: A Novel*) Gladman is focused on describing an individual/collective identity and the strange dilemma of selfhood in a post-indentarian, self-conscious age in which all sorts of structuralist analyses — psychological, sociological, ideological — threaten basic ontological certainties. "Translation," only 12 pages long, adopts a "tale of the tribe" breadth to describe a people who "migrated off the 'declining' coast" intent on discovering, via archeology and some odd logistical gestures, the secrets of its occluded past. The sentences themselves, shooting off into several directions, don't respect the norms of a leading-sentence paragraph, so putting things together becomes an archeological feat in itself — is she alone remembering? has the community really abandoned her? But pushed to the task of native informant by the act of recounting itself, she struggles to explain: "Bear in mind, this is a land without normal science. The Floyds' oldest boy was the only one to decipher that science, but he was sick. I'm trying to tell you how I knew we were a tribe. It was not by the length of our feet or color of skin on the inner sides of our hands that I knew it. We were tribal in our language, in the way ideas came to us." Having surfaced from this nearly cultish communality into individuality, she is at a loss about how to provide her own "feedback," what scales of meaning to use to describe herself: "You can't just walk up to someone, or in my case a plant, and say, 'Hey, look at how I've grown'," and earlier: "There are games one plays while one is waiting for a mass return; they are mostly sexual. I cannot help but be sexual before these mountains, their flirtish behavior and exquisite face. I find that I am moved to ecstasy — ecstasy being my most treasured activity. I would rather have the town, but will miss the nakedness of these years." In

"Proportion Surviving," the "juice" of the book's title is revealed to be an aspect of an identity that has been, at least temporarily, othered, only so that at a later time it can be re-imbibed and returned to a unitary subject — a search for balance when there is nothing "out there" to weigh against. The narrator becomes obsessed with juice — fresh juice only, but also to the point of stalking the juice aisles at grocery stores: "When my friends came by — they liked to suddenly show up with all kinds of breads in their hands, thinking they knew what I needed and planning on forcing it on me — I had to tell them I was busy with my juice." (22) A crisis involving a lover gets her off the juice, and though now she is a "weaker character," she writes: "Today all my ideas are liquid." In "No Through Street," the narrator's sister, who seems some sort of figment of the "evil God" in Descartes's imagination, acquires great fame in constructing useful, if puzzling, signs that have a meaning in their intended geographical locales but don't make sense in a museum context (where the artist has found fame as a "directionalist"), whereas in "First Sleep," the most fragmented but evocative text, a search for a "Mrs. Gladman" is being carried out amidst a series of "sleeps," as if identity itself can only be discerned in the synthetic, but punctuated, moments of the subconscious. Gladman writes as if in a post-apocalyptic world, like a Crusoe on a desert island that is actually populated, but with linguistic signs instead of people. Though one wishes at times for a more vividly descriptive language and perhaps more elaboration of the ideas, this is a rich and unusual collection, like an alien codex from a culture in one's backyard.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Noelle Kocot, 4

15 Feb 2001

The batch closes on an outright rave: a debut Stefans finds "startling" and "highly technical," free-verse sestinas without the pastiche tax. He reaches for Koch, Rimbaud's night in hell, and Ashbery's Prospero to place her — a lot of pantheon for a first book, offered without the usual hedging.

Noelle Kocot

4

Four Way Books, 2001

A startling debut from this New York-based poet, 4 is a highly technical accomplishment — free-verse sestinas, rhyming quatrains and other verse forms seem to roll from her pen effortlessly — and yet it manages to do without the pastiche or irony-drunk qualities of other contemporary quasi-formal versifiers. Her knotty, provocative turn of mind — part maudit/flaneur, part Kenneth Koch — mixes darker, often Biblical imagery with a quirky humor, as in these lines from "The Traffic Cop": "I don't know how to say what I'm becoming / But it seems that

every time / I consider lolling on the banks of the lake / Of infernal fire, the ice-cream truck / Toddles along, hauling its song." (16) Casting herself as the renegade, even the vagabond, but with benign intentions peeking through, this poem concludes on a defiant absurdist note: "Your brand of peace disgusts me, do you hear? / I am the fugitive who drives the stampede / Of aardvarks across your lawns. / I have come to tip your cows." Swift, intense, image-laden poems like "Ontology Train" are like modern pop versions of Rimbaud's "night in hell": "The night offers no apology / For its marvelous moody technique bathed in the venom / Of so many charged similes that conjure the hagiography / Of man as a vessel caught in a maelstrom / Which is its own blustery hubris pulsing / Through his homesick blood..." (22) But her poems are usually about relationships, about the heavy burden of love and poetic thought that she shares with her interlocutor, a nameless, mystical (because "non-I") "you": "Yet you are concrete / Somehow; I know, I've heard your bee-like buzzing / In all the tiny leaves bursting from their sacs to greet / A magical universe..." (43) Her sestinas offer a lighter view, and probably sway closest to the ironic tones of someone like an Anthony Hecht (in the "Sestina Inverno") if only because the necessary play of the form, as in this brief (fictional?) recounting of a failed affair: "But in all the San Franciscos / We could conjure in our souls, / Always there was the debris left perhaps by the quake of chiding souls / In the intermediate world, or by some ironic / Sandman reminding us that we were still asleep. San Francisco / Fantasy aside, you have to admit we sucked / As a couple..." (48). "Le Marteau sans maitre," dedicated to Pierre Boulez, has some of the qualities of Ashbery's Prospero-like narrator revealing the codes that lie under reality's deceptive surfaces: "In this way, our reactions to the written word / Open an angle of view increasingly peopled / By our club-shaped shadows, / And by our footprints on the road which lie / In an allegorically restrained / Framework of geometric shapes, as elegantly austere / As the simple arrangement of vessels on a table, " and concludes: "So you see, the scene / Is quite human after all, a liquid legend / Passing through crystalline sunlight / And flooding our well-supported interiors / With an atmospheric clarity emblematic / Of the essential questions blowing here and there / Like remnants of a foreign language..." Kocot's images flow freely, perhaps too rhapsodically for some people's tastes, and one senses that her own style lies ahead of her. She writes unrestrained, and almost approaches a "naive" quality except that her obvious spiritual maturity, not to mention her lexical flexing and formal skill, deflects this impression. Like other young poets, such as Jennifer Moxley and Chris Stoffolino, Kocot has found a language for her emotions that pulls into her universe an abundance of memories, metaphors, and verbal twists, but she is unique in having found a way to mate an urban "post-punk" sensibility —images of youthful rebellion, cultural disgust, hyperreal love and visceral superworldly

elements abound in passionate bursts — with a highly controlled, even learned form that makes reading her poems both an energizing yet cerebral experience.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Angel of Soliloquy

27 Feb 2001

Addressed to Patrick Herron (patrick@proximate.org), on the broken promises of cyberpoetry and who exactly made them — Stefans defending a medium against both its hucksters and its cynics at once.

Hi Patrick,

Great post. You write: "Frankly stated, uninformed or poorly informed people invented these promises you name out of thin air without heed to the medium and its ontogeny."

I think there were some better informed people out there, notably George Landow, but that being informed didn't necessarily help. In any case, I thought I'd paste in below the footnote from my essay of footnotes, "Stops and Rebels: a critique of hypertext" which is at ubu.com but which nobody ever read (which was sort of the point — too many links!) [it could just be stinky, of course] which deals with Landow. For some reason the spacing between some of the words got deleted when it went live, but it's readable (some spelling errors). It's a big stream of nay-saying, doesn't suggest positive qualities, but this was 1995 and at that time I hadn't even seen the internet (though I had been programming computers). I'd write more about your own post but I'm at work, hence the pre-chewed slab.

Brian

George P. Landow, in his book *Hypertext* (Maryland: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1992), describes, in a thorough and "theoretical" though mostly uncritical fashion, the role that interlinked texts in computers can play, and are playing, in ways that have changed the general understanding of the autonomy of texts and the closed linearity of the narrative universe, along with the role that the visual image adopted presented with text. He links these various new concepts to much theory by such writers as Derrida and Bakhtin, thus demonstrating that computers have fulfilled many "prophecies" by theorists, offering, thus, the hard evidence of the efficacy of the ideas themselves. His book, much of which is based on his own actual experience with hypertext, is interesting but highly problematic, and finally adds up, in my opinion, to many non-conclusions, Landow having built them upon some poor rationalization. While I can't, here, reiterate all of the arguments in his book, a few are worth investigating. Landow's conception

ofhypertext, for example, seems to equate the mere juxtaposition of two texts as an act ofcollaboration between the respective authors, something which he feels can only occur in"cyberspace" and not in, say, the well-stocked library of an academician or bibliophile. Hewrites: "By emphasizingthe presence of other texts and their cooperative interaction, networkedhypertext makes all additions to a system simultaneously a matter of versioning and of theassembly-line model. Once ensconced within a network of electronic links, a document nolonger exists by itself. It always exists in relation to other documents in a way that a book orprinted document never does and never can. From this crucial shift in the way texts exist inrelation to others derive two principles that, in turn, produce this fourth form of collaboration:first, any document placed on any networked system that supports electronically linked materials potentially exists in collaboration with any and all other documents on that system; second, anydocument electronically linked to any other document collaborates with it." (p.88, italics mine) One is unclear, reading this, of the exact difference between, say, copying several paragraphsfrom a book in a library and taking them home, and cut-and-pasting them from an intermediasystem; he assumes a metaphysic that grants some sort of ubiquity to a computerized text that hedoesn't believe occurs with books, and that texts, once they have entered cyberspace, partake ofthis ubiquity, so that once they meet in an interlinked situation, they have already "scoped eachother out" and need no further introduction. It is worth noting that he switches from terms like"emphasize" (comparative) and "potentially" to terms that suggest total (superlative) andinevitable transformations of understanding. With such logic, a visit to the zoo, with itsjuxtapositions that cannot and never can occur in "nature," permenantly, completely, andinevitably impresses upon the mind the interconnectivity (and chaos) of all animal and vegatablelife, which is usually not the case - one discovers, rather, the sad logic of cages and feedingschedules, not to mention budgets and the fickleness of idle curiosity. Landow also ignores, orfails to bemoan, the decontextualization that occurs when an excerpt is ripped from its originalbinding, as if reading were merely (as many academicians believe) the accumulation of catchphrases and marketable concepts, without the totality of a unifying, signature scheme to resistsuch poor digestion. There may be relevance in Landow's arguments in terms of the use ofvisual images, but photography and film, and before that printing, were the real revolutionaryforces in the use of images to support texts (though I do, myself, plan on using images,photographic and kinetic, in computerized poems, and possibly on the Internet). The field, orlocus, of intermedia, as Landow notes here but often forgets, is only one of potential; it is not aplace where connections are automatically made (such automation requires biases, anyway, andis not worth lauding), and will not make individuals any better at synthesizinginformation

and drawing conclusions. In fact, it may make them worse, since information is invariably leveled when appropriated for the computer, such that a video description of a waterfall, or a walk down John Rechy's Broadway, or the sound of William Carlos Williams' voice, are put on an equal plain, with an equal degree of accessibility (to two senses, with a limited range of height and volume) and vulnerability (the same that any textual sign can suffer, that of disbelief), such that accidents of perception will occur less frequently than "in the field." In this way, users of hypertext interlinks may come to not know their own ignorance - the age-old problem of bookworms. There is also the assumption that anyone, of any type of psychology and background, can understand and appreciate this information, as if the addition of sound and color - but with the notable absence of a director/ editor, an organizing sensibility - will make the Korean War, or a cholera plague, a more "lived" and academically useful category of information. This sort of leveling could not, for example, lead to a multi-dimensional poetics of understanding like that of Blake's (to use an odd, but "charged," example), for it short-circuits, in obvious ways, the sort of corporeal, visceral understanding necessary for the prophetic works and the fluid psychological dynamics inscribed in them. Consequently, hypertext only serves to reinscribe (Lockean) binaries - or a primary binary - that Landow professes to have been dissolved, for the experience of this information is always along the same axis of I/computer (however fluid this one exchange is), never exploding into "sensurround" atomization that involves different trajectories of perceptions (smells, touch, etc.), time, narrative contexts, and psychology (sexuality, for instance, which is reduced to a voyeurism). In the same way, "collaboration" must be defined in two different ways, perhaps by the use of two words, rather than by stretching a single definition to include both the "potential" that is involved in the mere juxtaposition of texts, and the actual day-to-day work in which directors and scientists in a laboratory engage to reach very specific ends - the same problem, as noted earlier on anthropology, of the "soiled hands." Though this is a cursory treatment of the contexts of Hypertext, I think it points to the main conceptual flaw, which is the failure to define the new metaphysics in a way that theorists have not already done for non-computerized texts, and to demonstrate how the physical presence of the technology and its operations (beyond the obvious arguments for speed of access) produce manifest alterations in the nature of human understanding that make it markedly different from that reliant on book libraries.

T.S. Eliot, in "The Function of Criticism," describes the misgivings that one might have to hypertext as a tool for collecting information (it doesn't, indeed, produce information - there is no field work in hypertext that is not already-covered ground), and its need for sensibility: "Comparison and analysis need only the cadavers on the table; but interpretation is always producing parts of the body

from its pockets, and fixing them in place. And any book, any essay, any note in Notes and Queries, which produces a fact even of the lowest order about a work of art is a better piece of work than nine-tenths of the most pretentious critical journalism, in journals or books. We assume, of course, that we are masters and not servants of facts, and that we know that the discovery of Shakespeare's laundry bills would not be of much use to us; but we must always reserve final judgment as to the futility of such research which has discovered them, in the possibility that some genius will appear who will know of a use to which to put them. Scholarship, even in its humblest forms, has its rights; we assume that we know how to use it, and how to neglect it. Of course the multiplication of critical books and essays may create, and I have seen it create, a vicious taste for reading about works of art instead of reading the works themselves, it may supply opinion instead of educating taste." (Selected Prose [New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1975] pp. 75-76) Hypertext puts the laundry bill up front with the information on demographics and the reign of Queen Elizabeth, and is not very useful to someone who wants to meet with a stable, interesting intellect in an informed - but not informationally saturated - discussion of Shakespeare; in this way, it is useful for one who has a taste for organizing stray facts, but not for one interested in discourse about those facts, which is unfortunate when the facts themselves cease to be provocative, and when they lose the sheen of being secret, a unique possession. Finally, hypertext may have a negative effect on prose style itself, which, when its good, is usually polyphonous and resonant, always pointing to an understanding that outside itself. A centripetal prose style is fine when the tensions that exist between the outward motion of the information is held in a dramatic, tenuous check by the draw toward a "conclusion". However, the model of the "wheel of information" that Landow draws for hypertext does not quite embody this, but is, rather, a simple creation of minor lineations that revolve around an axis that, itself, offers no synthesis, since that axis that is the site of the origin of the several lineations is the work of literature itself, the as-yet-undisclosed "orphic" utterance. It would be as if In Memoriam were required to explain the information that hypertext had assembled around it, when the exact opposite was intended. (Landow's book, which he says would have been more suitable for hypertext, is itself highly repetitive, having reached most of its conclusions in the first twenty or so pages. One grows suspicious that his failure to delve deeper into his topic, rather than the skating through citations, each of which is treated rather uncritically, were not the result of some misgivings he himself felt.)

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Angel of Soliloquy

05 Mar 2001

The shorter companion under this title — a scattering of links to work Stefans found "interesting and highly unusual," the magpie habit of the impresario on open display.

Here are some URLs for things that I've found interesting and highly unusual over the past few months. The first is from William Poundstone, who, like Finlay, has taken a deep interest in the neo-classical emblem as a way of extending "concrete" or visual poetries boundaries beyond some sort of one-liner. He is, to me, very interesting because he has none of the trappings of the "postmodern", and yet has a very contemporary, not to mention strange, sensibility:

At [ubu](http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_poundstone.html) (these are not the "emblems"):
http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_poundstone.html

His own site: <http://www.williampoundstone.net/>

And for something completely different, here is a the rapidly getting very famous "All Your Base Belong To Us," which is not in itself really "poetry" but is, in fact, collaborative and text-based, and the sensibility is very youthful — aggressive, anarchic, expansive (whatever you might mean by "youthful") — not to mention techno-savvy. When you get to this site, click "Video 1" in the left frame, then choose which server you want to use:

<http://www.planetstarseige.com/allyourbase/>

Here's a very funny, and quite sophisticated in terms of timing (as Brendan wrote earlier, timing/time is one of the things you can control quite well with Flash), one that is also a quick download. This may actually be from Korea! (It's in English, don't worry.)

<http://www.yhchang.com/struggle.html>

This one's not exactly a classic, but it's a fairly accurate translation of classic "concrete" (specifically South American) aesthetics into Flash animation. Much more successful than, say, August de Campos's attempts to translate his print work into Flash. It's not quite working correctly now on my Mac — I'll have to write to Kenny G about it — but here's the URL:

http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_strano.html

I don't know if you've all seen "Basho's Frogger," but it's a very very deep philosophical metaphor based on the video game, and I think a bpNichol translation of Basho. It was programmed in Java by Neil Hennessey, who does a lot of work with linguistics and a sort of "artificial life" for word creation (some principle called a "Markov" generator). Again, perhaps not "poetry," but a highly conceptual art form using language, though I'm not sure if the implications of his

work (or of "Closed") are fully realized in the Jabber piece, but it's useful for text generation.

http://www.ubu.com/feature/contemp/feature_hennessy.html

Here are two I've posted before which don't use language but use "signs" in a syntactical way — classic sites:

<http://www.thesquarerootof-1.com/> <http://www.turux.org>

Here's an oldie that I still think quite interesting if not as fresh as it once seemed, from Juliet Ann Martin (other stuff at her site also worth looking into):

<http://www.julietmartin.com/ooxxxooo/Answer.html>

And I'm sure you've checked out Kenny Goldsmith's Fidget. This one is beautiful to have running in the background, perhaps on a large screen on one of your dining room walls (for those of you with dining rooms). I get antsy watching it for too long behind my desk (the book form is a great read), but it's technically quite marvellous:

<http://www.chbooks.com/online/fidget/applet.html>

By the way, does anyone have a really good collection of Matthew Kirschenbaum URLs? I used to be able to find his essays, but they've either been taken down or I'm just going a little wonkers. He's written some of the best stuff on net poetry, I feel, though I'm no authority.

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The Inkblot Record / Eunoia / BKS Homepage

04 Apr 2001

A triple bill of digital housekeeping — a Coach House commission, a Flash setting of Bok's vowel-starved "Eunoia," and, at last, a homepage built lazily from the EPC template.

I've just finished a commission to put Dan Farrell's The Inkblot Record online for Coach House Books. In case you haven't checked it out, Coach House has a really excellent site with their entire catalogue of poetry and prose available for web reading, including the complete Carnival series (1 & 2, and "outtakes") by Steve McCaffery, a sort of gesamtkunstwerk of concrete poetry (no sound).

About the online version of The Inkblot Record:

Dan Farrell's second volume of poetry is an examination of a discourse that everyone knows about but few people have examined in detail: the response of people to Rorschach inkblot patterns. By turns profound and hilarious, this book is an insightful statement about the relentless drive to make meaning out of

nothing. The online version features a dynamic inkblot, designed by Brian Kim Stefans, to test your own poetic/psychological state of being.

<http://www.chbooks.com>

(Shockwave required)

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Also, new at Arras, a Flash setting of a chapter of Christian Bok's Eunoia, a long prose-poem many years in the making. This is chapter "e", which excludes all other vowels but "e." This is not the final version of the piece, but thought to run it by you.

<http://www.arras.net>

(Flash required)

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Finally, I've put up a homepage. It includes all of my reviews, pet projects, Flash and Director pieces, etc. I used the EPC template since I'm too lazy right now to design something from the ground up.

<http://www.arras.net/stefans.html>

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Brian Kim Stefans "talk" about cyberpoetry, etc.

24 Apr 2001

The talk-and-reading circuit continues, projections and all, at the last installment of a series with the unimprovable name PRINTONOMY: POET-PUBLISHERS.

I'm sure many of you received this already. Just wanted to mention that I'll be giving a version of my talk and reading up at Buffalo for the E-poetry conference at this reading, projections and all. Hope you can make it.

Please join us next monday for the last reading of the PRINTONOMY: POET-PUBLISHERS Reading Series featuring Brian Kim Stefans (Arras) and David Buuck (Tripwire). The new TRIPWIRE issue will be available at the reading.

Date: April 30, 2001 Time: 6:30 PM Place: The Fales Library, Bobst Library 3rd Floor, NYU 70 Washington Sq South (@ LaGuardia Pl.) Free Admission

Brian Kim Stefans' books of poetry include Free Space Comix, Angry Penguins, and Gulf. He is the editor of Arras literary journal which has recently moved on-line as both a literary magazine and chapbook series (www.arras.com). Earlier issues of Arras offered an important opportunity for younger innovative poets to publish their poetry.

David Buuck, poet and cultural critic, is the author of *up the flagpole*. He co-edits *Tripwire* from San Francisco. *Tripwire* combines new innovative writing with critical writing on culture, politics and poetics.

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Proverbs of Hell

01 May 2001

Not an argument but a performance: Blake's proverbs rewritten for an age of "original action scripts" and "scanned photos of found images." The critic's idea of a holiday.

PROVERBS OF HELL

Bring out number, weight and measure in a year of dearth. Bring out more numbers, some original action scripts, and a few scanned photos of some found images in a year of not having many good ideas for poems.

Drive your cart and your plow over the bones of the dead. Drive your program through a cartload of images, and you may chance upon the gold filling of a retired army general in your "ox tail" soup. Drive your viewer through too many random assortments of texts, and ye shall find a reader with a bad hair life.

The road of excess leads to the palace of wisdom. The road of greater flexibility leads to the simplicity of the book. The road of suggestive variability is the road to beauty; the road of arbitrary variability is the road to boredom. Give the user what she seeks, in curious doses, and ye shall taste the wine of attention. A little bit of "fort da" never hurt anyone.

Sooner murder an infant in its cradle than nurse unacted desires. A cyberpoem that is merely a milk fed, commodified unacted desire will kill the infant in its cradle before it has learned how to read.

The bird a nest, the spider a web, man friendship.

Prudence is a rich, ugly old maid courted by Incapacity. But more users have visited Prudence's web page than Exhibitionist's because capacity has become the mantra of corporate culture. It is the Artist that can make abundance out of Incapacity, and it is the Artist who will not be burned by dot com meltdown.

The cut worm forgives the plow. The cut internet connection is unforgivable, but is always a possibility. Go in fear of exact timing in a web project, since time/timing depends on CPU speed and the capacity of the viewer to take it all in at a fairly regular rate of attention.

The most sublime act is to set another before you. The most sublime cyberpoem is an electronic object with the plasticity of a solid object. An electronic object

should be an ordered arrangement of surfaces and angles, just like a Vorticist sculpture.

Think in the morning. Act in the noon. Eat in the evening. Sleep in the night. The virtual body is always idle; the living body is always at play. There is more data in the body of a brainless corpuscle than there is in your philosophy, Horatio.

Eternity is in love with the productions of time. The productions of our time are able to be dated by model and serial number, and version of the application or language.

Every thing possible to be believ'd is an image of truth. An everything that is possibly an image of truth is also the truth. Web imagery is more powerful and linguistic when it approaches the powers of the icon, or the emblem; what is merely "eye candy" jams the transmission of syntactic meaning. A good if uninterpretable icon is worth more than a thousand words. What one thinks one has said and what another thinks one has said are both of equal importance.

Shame is Pride's cloke. Shit is Pride's cake.

Dip him in the river who loves water. Find the well of electronic water, and dip him in. The well is called scandal, and the chemical equation: those you know, squared. Web space must be a Rabelasian space or it will not be at all. Dip him in the streaming well of living (not "virtual") subjectivities, and ye shall have a better informed viewer of the MacNeil/Lehrer news hour.

What is now proved was once only imagin'd. But to prove a theorem with a piece of art proves nothing. The good cyberpoem is like a bad mailman; the magazine never arrives if the subscription has already been paid for. But letters from far-away sailors and stewardesses intended for the person next door are always on time. A cyberpoem should never prove a theory; it should prove several theories simultaneously, such as the theories of love, hate, boredom, attention and distraction.

He whose face gives no light, shall never become a star. Randomized text has never been as enjoyable as randomized sound. To be a star, use what words have which neither sound nor image have: suggestive meanings that are nearly as powerful, or moreso, than the obvious meanings. To lie is not to deceive; to tell the truth is not entirely reasonable when the truth is for sale, even if this truth is randomized.

All wholesome food is caught without a net or a trap. To overload a web project with trickery scares the wholesome away, back to the sandboxes and safe havens of childhood.

Prisons are built with stones of law, brothels with bricks of religion. The truly Rabelasian web-project is built with the objects of previous programming ventures, previous engagements with Adobe Photoshop, previous attempts at writing stand-alone cross-platform lyric poems. Neither law nor religion, this non-prison is built with the bricks of radical democracy.

The nakedness of woman is the work of God. There are lots of naked women on the internet. The cyberpoem that does not satisfy the need for taboo vision can stay at home and watch the grass grow.

Excess of sorrow laughs. Excess of joy weeps. Excess of vision is bound to cross over into territories that mom and dad will write to the school principle about. The good cyberpoem is like a nutritional toxin; let them have their cake and hate it too.

The fox condemns the trap, not himself. Don't be afraid to use Flash because it is slick; there is nothing primitive and back-to-earth about a Pentium I chip.

The wrath of the lion is the wisdom of God. The rest of the lion is pretty good, too. The best web art will be carnivalesque, dialogic, Rabelaisian. There is no reason to be a moralist, and even less to be anti-authoritarian, when multiple subjectivities are possible in a single electronic object.

The cistern contains: the fountain overflows. The book is beautiful to the degree that it fools you with the sense of the totality of its system. The cyberpoem is beautiful to the degree that it convinces you of the contingency of its system, though it freely inflict its system on you.

The tygers of wrath are wiser than the horses of instruction.

The weak in courage is strong in cunning. The prospect of a web avatar does not satisfy the failures in one's life as an artist. Abuse not the powers thine anonymity grants thee, lest thine anonymity become permanent.

The rat, the mouse, the fox, the rabbit watch the roots; the lion, the tyger, the horse, the elephant watch the fruits. The cyberpoet is the mouse, the fox, the rabbit; the viewer is the lion, the tyger, the horse. The cyberpoet starts by desiring the creation of the perfect soybean meat substitute, and ends by creating the perfect meat.

A fool sees not the same tree that a wise man sees. So paint a different tree for the wise man, a different tree for the fool. The art of the electronic object is expanded tenfold when the same electronic object can be approached three different ways and yet provide a completely different experience. Enter the car from the left side, and you are the driver; enter it from, the right, and you are a passenger.

The busy bee has no time for sorrow. But the internet poet should have time for others. The internet poem that doesn't "stare back" the more it is stared at is not a very good text, not a very good application, and not very polite.

The head Sublime, the heart Pathos, the genitals Beauty, the hands and feet Proportion. To create a cyberpoem with the ethical complexity of the body, with the machine age planned-obsolescence of an Asimov robot mated with the fleshy, warm substance of Blake's innocent Babe is the highest goal a cyberpoet can achieve. The working parts of the body are the working parts of language when it is in dialogue with itself and other language objects on the web. One must be a language-object to be in dialogue with a language object.

One thought fills immensity. One well conceived cyberpoem, as simple as a bobsled, can be linked to from a thousand sites, a thousand eyes. Server space does not equal head space. One poorly constructed thought, like one poorly constructed cyberpoem, can destroy a lifetime of good programming.

Exuberance is Beauty. But so is a narrow waist. Waste not thine electronic filing system and thine low-bandwidth on high-res Photoshop images when a well-tempered interface will do fine.

The eagle never lost so much time as when he submitted to learn of the crow. The page-based who was not first an eagle should be wary of learning of the ways of the web, which is the way of the scavenging crow becoming an avenging eagle. A cyberpoem need not start with text, but with the pleasure of creating a text, not with the pleasure of programming, which is the pleasure of death.

To be continued...

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E-Poetry Conference: correspondence

02 May 2001

What survives here is Stefans's own contribution: a long, point-by-point reply he had posted to the E-Poetry-2001 conference listserv, reproduced as if it had run on Poetics. John Cayley's original "brief remarks" — the admiring festival summary that prompted the exchange — are omitted, though Stefans quotes enough of them, line by line, that his side reads on its own.

I know some of you are interested in what happened in Buffalo a week ago at the E-Poetry conference. I haven't read any real summaries, but John Cayley posted the following on the E-poetry chat list that runs through a lot of it, and I had a fairly lengthy response to it, which follows. Some of this might seem a little technical or just insider talk, but it's easy to hum along... if anything else comes down the pipe I'll try to post it.

Great post, John. Quick responses (apologies if the main parts of this are directed toward my own work, but it's what I know best). we still don't have a history of animated text written by a poet or critic of poetry. The use of "history" here is a bit troubling — I'm happy to pretend for a moment that there is none, though as you know I'm kind of obsessed with the idea of a "tradition" that sort of hinders or troubles any sort of easy engagement with the medium, not to mention provides a more incoate "history of forms" against with to play. These wouldn't be agreed-upon standards, but would give those of us interested in such practices as Debordian detournement (though we are short of "masterpieces," we still have some pieties) some sort of wall against which to bounce things — hence my occupation of Brazilian concrete for Dreamlife, not to mention occupation of Flash to bring Brazilian concrete into the art historical vocabulary in the States. (I think the style of Brazilian concrete is still closely linked with their own sense of style in things like advertisements; here, I think that style is somewhat alien.) This history of forms would include, as you mention, cinematic titling (I used Godard in my essay, also because of his use of music and sound, which I find troubling in digital art because I think of it as a difficult to do well, hence the silence in my pieces rather than the easy ambient drone), but also the way any sort of text is used in a public space, such as on the sides of buses, banners or on post offices. I would also include the history of abstract movement such as in dance; I think it was from looking at a lot of dance and thinking of collaborating with people such as Sally Silvers — we may work on a project soon — that influenced some of the fluidity of Dreamlife (I hadn't seen the Merce Cunningham "Bipeds" at the time but had it described to me — I was a bit disappointed when I saw it, but amazed at parts). Debord et. al.'s essay: <http://library.nothingness.org/articles/SI/en/display/3> — how can we create an art with any sort of socially transformative possibilities without having a set of social pieties to corrupt — how do you let them know that this sort of action is occurring without a set of forms (read: values) operating in the same dynamic field? I guess my fear in a "history" of this work so far is that there hasn't been so much done that has been completely successful as art, and that we risk merely fetishizing our own little corner of the world and elevating it before others when there are plenty of other things to look at. A timeline would have to include several minor moments — interesting moments, of course, in the way that the Vic 20 was interesting in the history of computing — but in the end a matter for specialists, and I don't think this should be a field for specialists. Who needs a canon? But on the other hand, I'm all for a very significant discourse on the subject, and I'm more excited about what has been done in this field than in most of what's out there in painting, sculpture, etc — my bias. I think the first step, in fact, might be a comprehensive bibliography — my experience at the conference

was discovering that there was so much interesting work out there, such as yours and Wilton's (I missed Lucio's presentation) and some of the stuff on Alire that I wouldn't have experienced had I stayed on the web. (I do think, however, that I prefer the web since, like Debord again, my hope that is that my poems would be viewed during the 9-5 drudgery of the workplace, and contaminate it — it's supposed to operate against what's on the web as we know it.) a tour de force; even a little depressing, since its going to be hard to think of 2D text-and-graphic figures which Brian hasn't done. Perhaps that's the point. We begin to stop trying to think of new things to do and start trying to sort out which of the figures might be regularly useful for our own practices and projects. (Maybe Brian could suggest some that he particularly likes and maybe even give them names?) That's interesting — don't know if I'd come up with vocabularies for the individual moments, but certain techniques I've somewhat theorized to myself and will probably re-use, hoping to flesh-out their implications. The recent discussions on this list about Plato and the use of light, for example, or obviously germane to the use of letters that blur and fade as you are reading them, which I found, after several bleary-eyed months of programming the thing, to be somewhat emotional. What you are suggesting reminds me of what Kenner wrote about T.S. Eliot and the Waste Land — that he wrote the Four Quartets to sort of justify the Waste Land as a reusable "form." I showed the piece on Monday to some people in NY, and one of them happen to have been a student of Mary Ellen Solt's and spotted the allusion to her work right away (the flower like structures coming out of the word "enterprise") — my point being, perhaps, that some of the stuff in Dreamlife is already reused material. The circles, for instance, almost all allude to Finlay's circus poster. we are still far from having these facilities built into our word processors (whereas graphic and sound artists do have the equivalent filters and modulators built into their tools). It does seem pretty true that graphic and music programs have a series of "filters" with which to manipulate their "materials," but there is a small range of interesting tools in Word, such as sorting, tables, a range of typefaces and -sizes, and the invaluable macros — the action scripts of Word, I guess — that encourage the sort of play the graphics programs use. I've written poems in Word where I determine the line breaks by resetting the margins — it usually started as a prose poem, and then I put hard returns where the line broke on the screen. It's also worth mentioning that the range of tools offered in a program like Flash — such as morphing, tweening, etc. — are often quite lame when used "out of the box," which is to say straight, with no tweaking — ditto for such tools in Photoshop such as "gaussian blur," which you end up getting weary seeing on so many bad web pages. My guess is that art historian's of the future will begin to discuss "Photoshop technique" in the way they discuss brush handling now — John, you would know if they are already

doing this. a quotation from Roger Pellet: "The greatest cyberpoem would be an online application that provided you with an interesting text and a robust interface with which to manipulate it. In other words, a word-processor." Roger was joking, of course. And BBEdit is superior, I and Roger agree. Under this thread, its also necessary to mention one of the best critical contributions to the conference, by Katherine Parrish, who provided excellent materials for and analysis of precisely the history and contextualization of writing in NPM, while heading for the further textonomic quadrant of live collaborative writing (mixed with programmatological intervention by e.g. MooLiBots) in MOOSpace. I've taken a little tour of Moolipo but nobody was there to talk to me... perhaps we can throw a party sometime soon. I agree Katherine' paper was very interesting to me — I've not pursued (after a few years of C++ programming, much lower grade than anything Neil's doing) any experiments in the sort of Markov-inspired programming such that of Neil's since I haven't found a way to link it to the "social" except as a sort of pure sphere that is obviously tied to the formulations that could be derived from the gene-pool of the social world — i.e. the generator is dependent on the likelihood of certain word combinations in language as it is constructed in "daily life" and hence is both recognizable but completely alien (except when words like "king" appear, as I noticed once during Neil's paper). This is a form of the negative that is also an advancement on pure Dadaism because of its reverence for scientific technique — it's scary in that way, asking that we both value statistical likelihood as not only a vehicle for making the future more predictable, but also as a sort of "wisdom literature" that one carries around in case of troubling emergent situations — and I've grown to think the projects very beautiful, so I guess I'm congratulating Neil for finding light in what I thought was darkness. Katherine's Moolipo space develops in a different fashion; in the collaborative space she described — in which you might, for some reason, want to convey something of emotional or other-sort of import — to have the Oulipo tactics subvert or pervert this meaning is interesting to me, perhaps even as a model of how the "game" can break into normal social relations (again, Debord). I'm just sure how much meaningful language can be channeled into such a place — I don't plan on falling in love over the internet — and so how much attachment could I possibly have to anything that goes into the thing unless it be from a purely clinical standpoint — i.e. what would happen if I plugged in "F*ck you, you little sh*t" into the thing, how would people respond? which strikes me as psychopathic (this has been written about, in fact, in that anthology "Flame Wars" a number of years back). For some reason these types of interventions — which is the equivalent of driving a loud motorcycle through a small-town midwestern town to scare the elderly — continues to be of interest to people, as if there were a normative web space to corrupt with "situations" — no, it is more

interesting to do that in the mall, at least that's where I am now. Kisses to you too, Wilton (just got that...) How dangerous can the sort of hypertextual space be — is exposure possible there? 'rule modification is inherently social' (based on the speaker's remarks during a paper by Jesper Juul at the later DAC conference). It's hard to make a playable, configurable avant-garde game or social intertext because the avant-gardist tends to change the rules without telling anyone, or only telling 'his' (invidiously/historically) friends, or with the intention of concealing the rule changes (so that they are more disruptive?!?) or in the hope that later (after-the-avant) critics will work out the clever changes that 'he' (invidiously/historically) has made so that said avant-gardist gets to retire to Olympus or the Academy. This seems a little unclear to me, only in the sense that I don't know what you mean by "rules" in your response to Juul's statement. Do you mean the rules of a particular piece of digital art — how the interface works, the sort of "contract" with the user that the programmer creates — or do you mean the "rules" of normative engagement with a piece of "art" — i.e. Duchamp's urinal was not a piece of art until he changed the rules. I think it's quite possible to change the rules in the first fashion and not be "avant-garde," though as it's not often enough done it seems rather avant-garde, but needn't leave anyone in the dust. The first rule of internet art — as Kenny G will tell you — is that it's got to be interesting right away, pretty much within the first minute or so of viewing — otherwise the viewer/browser will beam off to another location. One way to do this is to present the rules of the interface rather quickly, without too much grief, and yet I think it is the most troubling interfaces that provide the most pleasure. (It's been amusing to me lately that I've received emails about two of my more recent internet pieces that included the phrase "Marjorie [Perloff] said she couldn't..." etc., meaning she didn't understand the interface — is it possible she didn't understand the rules? Is it possible I didn't intend her to understand the rules?) I'd like this rule to change myself — slowness and quietness should be cherished on the web — but how? Also: how does one conceal the rule changes so that they are more disruptive — I think it is the changing of the rules themselves that are disruptive, which is how detournement works (pardon the lack of accents, etc.) One can make up one's own rules — suggest a contract — and then pervert it, introducing the viewer to the concept of the variable contract, the transformation through time of types of engagement — hence avoiding the Olympus complex, where truths are considered of quasi-eternal import. This is, perhaps, a good personal strategy, but in this media it ain't going nowhere, since, it seems, in practice, many aspects of the media are inherently social. For me, this raises the happy prospect of no-compromise poetics which play out in the social and therefore escape the seductions of avant-garde elitism. Ububoy beware. You are great forces, and the Torontonians amongst you also come from an

important contextualized and localized tradition, but you've got to go opensource and join the f***ing community. Does this mean I have to wear my panties on the outside (just joking). I would note, though, that nearly everything the uboids presented was collaborative — Darren's and Bill's piece, for instance, was a collaboration and relied entirely on texts written by the netizens of the world; Neils' Frogger piece as inspired by a conversation with Darren (though I didn't mention it), while Jabber was hardly "individual expression" — it relied on the collaborative efforts of English speakers world-wide (another piece that Neil was working on, a hypercube Java rendering of a Rubik's cube piece that Christian Bok created, was also collaborative but I think it's not ready yet); Christian's Eunoia is not collaborative yet relies on reading through the dictionary several times, word for word (the author of that dictionary determined the limits of his vocabulary, in a way, though he added the French, etc.) and of course I presented my digital rendering of it; my Dreamlife uses text that I lifted from Rachel Blau Duplessis, and it purposely attempted to assimilate itself in a culture that was, in a sense, pre-net or anti-net (concretism and lettrism) [by the way, I read Kenny's "Day" piece during my performance of Dreamlife); and most of Kenny G's work — for example Fidget — has been manifested in a variety of different collaborative forms, such as a Java applet and a performance at the Whitney Phillip Morris museum. My own sense, actually, is that the "no compromise" aspect of what the uboids were doing (not including myself, who prefer a certain fuzziness to my theory) is that they are very conceptually clear about what they are doing, not to mention determined to follow-through on a concept until it either dies on the table or results in an art work. While I agree entirely that digital art, especially web-art, is inherently social — I think Darren, for one, would also agree — I think it's also inherently conceptual. There probably wasn't a person who presented there who couldn't reel off a series of theses about what they thought their work was "doing" — which accounts, I think, for the "non-retinal" and even "non-semiotic" aspect of some the more interesting work — and it's the only field of "visual art" perhaps where a good-looking piece of work could fall under the criticism of being too "slick" perhaps because of its (partly conceptual) relationship to the net economy. So I agree with Christian, in a sense, when he says that literary critics of the future will admire a poet for his/her programming techniques over the actual text produced, though I wouldn't say they would all do that (I'm a moderate, and a "humanist," as the Torontonians like to remind me). My point being: in this type of art that is inherently conceptual, the concepts really have to be interesting — not entirely theoretical or clinical, or if so, a linkage of theoretical enterprises that produce a sort of giddy laughter in the end — always trying to mate a fish with a swan. I'd like to write about this sometime. Laughter... net/web art connections: Another major Brazilian contribution came

from Giselle Beiguelman, linking from the practices I've already mentioned, this work was - with that of Alan Sonzheim - also 'our' chief connection to the world of 'net art' or 'web art'. [...] We definitely need more cross-over here, and Giselle was our link at this festival. Follow it. Nothing to add here — I agree. The kinds of things that jodi.org or that appear at Rhizome (not even worth starting a list of names), or whatever, are a huge rich field to steal ideas from. This raises the issue of the possibility of the coherence of a field that could be called "e-poetry" — will this term just seem ridiculous 2 years from now, when the next great leap is supposed to happen? It seems a lot of the more interesting work presented there, such as the hypercube poem, were not coming out of strictly literary concerns at all, but I could see a great programmer or artists with an excellent skill at words (Kenny G, not a programmer, never studied literature, and was a graduate of RISDY; another example is Tom Phillips, author of the Humument) simply stumbling (I use this as a term of praise) into types of language production/presentation that are simply more interesting than what us handcuffed, self-styled "poets" would ever dream of. Though I have to say a lot of the art I see coming out of designers — yes, those slick Flash folks — has some of the drippiest language I'd ever hope to not read. It is for this reason I propose that we not join the EU. I like our currency. Let's stick to our small island off the coast of the net continent. For some practitioners the playing, the playing-well will be the goal of engagement with such objects. For these people the instrumental practice becomes more like a game. For others the playing, the configuration will be done for the sake of achieving an interpretable moment or series of moments. The play or configuration will resolve a time-based performance to a literal object of critical interpretation. I'd like to see this paper on gaming, actually — this last paragraph of yours was rich but I'd like to refrain from comment until later. Of course, I've suggested my own vocabulary for the "game" which is the "contract" — I think teasing out the social implications of time-based art in which the rules of engagement are variable depending on user interaction would take a little while. I also have this idea of beautiful movement, which is tied somewhat with the idea of "drift," which is to say, how to turn the motion of the mouse into more than just a practical exigency — can one be invited to partake in beautiful movements without necessarily having any skill? Can this movement have semiotic, rather than purely visual, meaning [e.i. my "electric_wall" piece — does this piece suggest a more readerly interaction, along the lines of post-semiotic poems, rather than painting/viewer type interaction]? I've always been a crappy dancer, but I somehow think that net art could be created to make anyone a legitimate painter, poet, dancer, etc. — perhaps all at the same time. Well, don't know what I mean here... Of course John, being more modest than most of us (or at least _me_) didn't write about himself in his post, but I wanted to note my appreciation of his

presence and work at the conference. In terms of discourse, he was the model of engagement (though he didn't take up my question about Moos, shucks). I think the work he presented on the last evening suggested most strongly — in a line with Barrett's paper — the issue of cultural specificity and translation as it operates in digital arts (which I won't say is synonymous with web art but in a way cuts close) in this world of increased globalization and "equivalence", the sort of entropic reduction of the local to the bitstreamed, infinite cross-platform interpretability that digital processing seems to promote. His provocative statement — this is not "concrete" in any way — prefacing the piece was interesting to me — why not "concrete"? I agree that the work wasn't concrete, but I'd be interesting in knowing exactly what he meant. I also think there's an interesting component to his work in terms of 1) how the "material world" relates to the digital world, in the sense that he introduced sounds of running water, and calligraphic images (ink) etc. in a way that struck me as nostalgic or longing for, say, a zen stone garden (one I'm thinking of, very famous, but can't find it — funny that typing in "zen stone garden" in a search engine brings up tons of dot com stores that actually sell them). I don't consider this "nostalgia" in a pejorative sense — John's obviously quite devoted to digital art, and other work of his has nothing to do with Chinese calligraphy, etc. — but more trying to skirt in some sort of between-place, between digital art and that that which relies on material. I tend to think his relationship to hypercard as a programming language suggests this sort of closeness to material (I've decided, for myself, to take on as many new technologies as possible with the hope of never getting too "close" to a particular digital medium as it all changes so quickly, but Cayley and folks like Jim Rosenberg make good arguments for the opposite tact). His clock-poem piece, which constructs poems based on the time, date, year, etc., also suggests a relationship of digital technology to the seasons, etc. — it reminds me a bit of Robert Smithson's work that figures itself in a geographical timeline rather than a human-historical one, not to mention Finlay's work (again) which just isn't "there" until spring. And 2) is the relationship of digital imagery to the work of the hand, which is mostly in the careful morphs involving the calligraphic images, which alluded to work done by Xu Bing. I think the slowness of the work suggested the sort of thinking that one occupies when performing some sort of meditative act, usually a repetitive act that is nonetheless meaningful and requires concentration. This ties in with his sense of poetry itself — the texts, when they were legible, seemed to be of the late projective, somewhat zen Phillip Whalen school of work, which is to say it relied on the line-by-breath a bit, so obviously again a relationship to the body, in this case the lungs. This seems counter to the natural tendency in digital poetics toward texts that are language-inspired, or formalistic and/or programmatic and counter to any use of the body

as a vehicle for determinining the measure of a piece. I don't have much time to tease out the implications of all of this, but I thought it quite interesting and as far as I can tell no one's doing work like this.

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Checking In

12 Sep 2001

September 2001. Stefans, who worked at the base of the Empire State Building, writes two lists to say he is alive; the sequel finds him biking below 14th Street through a Manhattan the news had declared closed. For a few days the list is just people telling each other they are all right.

Hi folks,

Just a short email to two lists to say hello and give you a little news.

I work at the base of the Empire State Building (not the World Trade Center, as some of my Toronto friends thought). My office is windowless, and I have little rapport with my coworkers as I am the entire web department at the CUNY Grad Center. If no one wants to see me, I can be alone all day.

Yesterday, I showed up early to work, at 8:30, which is very rare for me. I had planned to spend some of the day tinkering with some essays, working on a collaborative play that I am writing, and putting the new Student Handbook online. So I stayed in my office from about 8:45 to 9:45 or so without seeing anyone, or hearing of anything. I was listening to WFMU on the internet — the dj for some reason made no mention of what was happening outside, or if he did I missed it — and though I thought it was curious that the New York Times website was down, it wasn't unprecedented.

They were playing Xenakis on WFMU, but the dj cut it off claiming he wasn't in the mood to listen to longer pieces. He did mention things about traffic flow in and out of New York, but I wasn't paying attention, didn't know the context. I decided to just go say hello to some of my coworkers, perhaps influenced by the desultory tone of the dj.

I went into the office area (my office is down a separate hallway) and noticed that Elizabeth, one of the administrative assistants, had what I thought was a cool tiny television set on her desk. It was on very loud, and I just thought that it was Elizabeth (who, like me, likes to have some media on while she works) being rebellious as she can be.

I picked up, said what a neat television set. I noticed the image on the screen, but didn't make any sense of it and decided not to bother, just put it down and asked her when she got it. I realize now that the image was of the burning buildings, but

it's just not something you see on television, and this one was incredibly tiny though in color.

Then I started hearing phrases like "another plane is heading toward the Empire State Building" etc. Of course I eventually found out what was happening — maybe a few seconds disbelief, but it sunk in fast. It struck me as absurd that my coworkers would be so "calm" in such a situation; now it even strikes me as irresponsible, as no one thought to knock on my door and tell me what was happening. In any case they were quite nervous.

I got on the elevator and went outside. Down Fifth Avenue, there it was. It was the last time I saw the building. It's difficult for me to even think about it. I think it is especially difficult now since, terrible as that sight seemed at the time, it was still a moment when there was some hope that the building, and the people still in it, could survive.

The first tower had already collapsed, so I was looking at the second tower. As everyone knows in Manhattan, the towers are what orients us when we are confused as which way is uptown and which down — you can see them everywhere. On a clear day, I can see them from my apartment in Brooklyn. To see them on fire is just indescribable — somehow sublime, unlike anything like a fire as the flames themselves, halfway up the building, are hundreds of feet off the ground.

Like most people at the time, I felt that the thing to deal with was not "escape" so much as "what to do"? It seemed like the time for intelligent action, but what was that? All bridges and tunnels were cut off, no subways, rumors of more planes heading to New York, and no orders being given. All I could think of was to get away from the Empire State Building, and thought to go uptown. Of course, uptown from there is everything from Times Square to the UN building. As I left my office I told everyone to get the hell out of here, since people seemed pretty confused and were even trying to work through it.

I decided instead to look for my sister, who lives in the Lower East Side. Occasionally I stopped to look at a television that was on in a bar, and it was on one of these sets that I first saw the building collapse (I was inside when it happened).

I don't intend to run through the whole thing, and I'm not a gifted journalist. I just want to give some people an idea of how one person first discovered that the city he lives in, which he had known all his life, first came under attack. The last moments before I actually found out seem somehow precious to me. This was a terribly thorough and wounding attack that cut at the heart of what most people felt was "New York" at least since the buildings went up, but certainly longer as the sense of hope and optimism has been part of this place for decades. Read

those poems of O'Hara's, or the Schuyler poem about looking at the UN, and you realize how much the buildings and streets are just a part of everyone here.

At one time you could walk all the way downtown, stand next to the fountain in between the two buildings and look straight up, and wonder what would happen should these buildings fall. But you felt so safe doing so.

Anyway, I couldn't find my sister as she had moved recently and I didn't know exactly where she lived. The phones were down. I went to Tim Davis's apartment, and luckily he was there with his girlfriend Lisa. We watched television for several hours, and then spent the rest of the day walking the streets and visiting friends as we chanced upon their buildings. I finally got a call through to my mother and father, as well as my sisters. I spent the evening with Alissa Quart and some of her friends in a bar watching television, and then in a community garden in the Lower East side talking through this thing. The garden seemed incredibly important to me at the time.

I really felt like a different city. In a sense, I felt like the city, which we used to jokingly referred to as "an island of the coast of America," was somehow closer to the world because of this, as New York has never been the victim of anything to the proportion that so many European, Middle Eastern, Central and South American and Asian cities have been —bombings, attacks, natural disasters, etc. The city was now on the ground, and not orbiting the earth. It seemed incredibly significant to be together and share our ideas with each other, because we were preparing ourselves for the potential of things falling away entirely, or at least more than we were prepared for now.

I had all sorts of fine philosophical points to make (a "coda for Modernism" was one phrase I was using; the image of the "fortress city" and the idea that we may never build things like this again, also recurred), but I think I'll just end it here. My family's ok, I've heard word that Kenny Goldsmith is fine, obviously Tim is, Jackson Mac Low, Charles Bernstein. I haven't made many calls myself but may try to get some people together for dinner tonight.

I wish I had more news of specific people, but I'm sure that will come in in bits. I'm going to make some phone calls. Thanks again from all of you who wrote emails to check up on me and others.

Please provide news as you get it. Thanks.

love
Brian

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Checking In Again

14 Sep 2001

Three days after the towers, Stefans bicycles as far downtown as the checkpoints allow and files what he saw: the pungent air past Allen Street, the crowds cheering the workers, a "Thank You!" sign lifted from an Evian box and pocketed. He reaches, characteristically, for a Canadian reference — bpNichol's Stoned Gloves in the trampled face-masks — and for the dead glucose meter that grounds catastrophe in the body's smaller emergencies. The reviewer is entirely off duty.

Hi folks,

I spent most of yesterday biking through Manhattan. Managed to get below 14th street, which the news said was off-limits to non-residents. This didn't turn out to be true — subway stations were open on 8th and Bleecker, and they weren't checking IDs up on Avenue C. Couldn't get past Houston though, and there was another series of checkpoints at Canal — below Canal is all relief workers, some military, etc.

Houston St: almost no traffic, of course, yellow police tape everywhere —in one park, I had seen a free dance performance on the basketball courts only last weekend — trucks of all sorts parked up and down the street. I didn't smell anything until I got to Allen St, still several blocks east of Broadway. It was quite pungent, and burned the eyes a bit — I can't imagine what it's like further South.

Getting down west, near the river, where much of the traffic into and out of "ground zero" is, and I saw small groups of people cheering on the workers as they left and arrived. It's the kind of thing I never would have thought to do myself, but I appreciated their efforts (got a bit teary-eyed, which is standard for me these days), as any sort of distraction, any sort of even absurd gesture of love and respect, is valuable for these people. I wanted to mention, for my Canadian friends, a certain "Stoned Gloves" moment as I rode around and saw discarded face-masks on the ground, trampled over, collecting dust. I picked up a sign that said "Thank You!" on it, written in magic marker on an Evian bottled water box, and put it in my bag.

I left the area, was thinking of going by the Javits center but thought instead of lunch to regroup, watch some tv, and get over this nauseous feeling I had. Also, my glucose meter had died the day before, so I hadn't been able to test my blood sugars for over a day — wanted to relax a bit and see if I could suss it out myself (diabetics do that, or think they do).

(Later, I called the company that makes the meter to have them send me another one, and stupidly got upset when they said it wouldn't arrive for a week — duh, no airplanes.)

Went by my office at CUNY, discovered to my shock that everyone there waited until they "got the email at 2:30" before leaving. I know we weren't in any danger on 34th Street, but nonetheless I don't know how people just go back to their jobs when something like this happens. All the more, it reminded me of those people in the buildings that were told to go back up to their offices after the first plane hit — I'm sure this is a moment that's run through everyone's mind.

Spent the afternoon with my sisters in Brooklyn. My sister's boyfriend, bright as he is, is a bit flaky (don't tell her I said that) so I watched him playing with a toy helicopter for a few moments with a rather innocent glee until I had to leave. My sister's pregnant — she's due in December.

Made several phone calls. Heard the news that Kevin Davies, who works about a block from where the towers were, was close enough to feel the shocks of the second plane, and was walking across the Brooklyn Bridge when the first tower collapsed. Was heartened to hear that several of the folks he was with on the bridge were from the first tower — I just hope the final number of people "missing" is far lower than the estimated number of people in the building.

Met up with Alan Gilbert and Kristin Prevallet at a bar. Our thoughts can't get away from what we've seen — Alan relating to me that they played the national anthem in Britain during the changing of the guard, that it was the second time he cried watching tv (the first being when he saw the first tower fall) — both of us speculating why this seems so meaningful to us now even as we discuss (I didn't know this) that Bin Laden himself was trained by Americans to fight the Soviets. One in a long list of American "allies" turned enemies.

And the shock of seeing lightning in the sky at about 1 am, not believing that the weather, after so many days of just utter clarity, could turn to rain. Remembering that what they are asking for most for the workers, just hours earlier, was for donations of socks and underwear. It really started pouring in about a half hour. There seems some additional cruelty to this choreography of the weather.

I suppose, after being in Manhattan again, the strangeness of it all is leaving. Stores are opening up, and up by 34th it almost seemed like just another day. (That is, except for the police directing traffic on every corner, and nearly getting run over periodically by trucks or police cars that seem to come from nowhere.) I saw one young woman walking around 23rd street crying, still walking with some sort of determination to get where she's going but still looking lost. Remarked also to myself "well, they didn't get the Flat Iron" — a building that, though it is not tall, cuts a sharp figure against the sky. But everybody's rattled — once you start talking, reflecting, it all comes back quite strongly.

So now thinking of what comes next. It seems we all need our "foundations" — whatever set of beliefs they are — to act responsibly in the future. Hard to believe that this is just a prelude to what will be a terrible time for everyone around the world, and to consider that this "day of remembrance" is something of a luxury that the Americans have always had not having hostile borders. Not that I'm complaining, but (for example) when the Korean War first started when my mother was six, there was no such thing. She and her family just started walking — couldn't even go to her room.

I hope, as poets, that we find a way to participate in some way in using the things we have been thinking about — on this list, in the poems, concerning community, justice, globalization, etc. — in a good way.

Kristin told me that she had just returned from an Eileen Myles reading at Pratt. Eileen didn't read poems, but talked off the top of her about things — the symbol of the flag, what her day might have been like, strangeness of the clear weather etc. — which Kristin said was incredible. I speculated that a good "New York School" poet — in the best "meditations in an emergency" tradition — are always keeping some record of the minor events of their days, somehow finding value and beauty in even the most trivial aspects of life, holding them against the hugeness of historical (often bad) events. It's a strength and a weakness, but nonetheless much more a strength in these times.

I left my bicycle out in the rain last night — I usually bring it in but got lazy. This morning, I discovered someone tried to steal it — the rubber around the chain was cut through. Someone spent a lot of time doing this — who knows, might have just stopped hearing the door on my building open. In a bizarre way it's comforting to think people still have ambitions, but I'm very happy they didn't get it.

Thanks again for emails you have sent. Just wanted to give you something to read, hope you don't mind.

love
Brian

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Re: What is to be done

20 Sep 2001

"Read the last paragraph or so if you're bored" — Stefans's own instructions for a long post to Ron Silliman and the voluminous debate around it. He rarely trusted the room to reach the end, and rarely stopped short of one.

[Pardon for the length — just read the last paragraph or so if you're bored...]

Hi Ron and others,

Not sure what I can add to the voluminous debate, and pardon if I repeat some points made earlier.

I attended an anti-war meeting yesterday in the penthouse of a building on 42nd Street. I don't actually know who the organizers were, but representatives of several New York coalitions were present.

I was disappointed by the apparent lack of "withness" by many of the attendees — "habits" of thinking, many of which seemed rooted in quite ingrained attitudes that hadn't seen the light of day for decades — were everywhere, with many grabbing the mike simply to state positions that were already long agreed upon.

An hour and a half was spent just getting the 4 or 5 points of agreement hacked out, some of which were as basic (but linguistically challenged) as "Peace through justice."

Nonetheless, I was impressed with the organization, and the hundreds there gave me confidence that, when the time comes, those hundreds could become thousands, and thousands millions. Most people of my generation who have remained somewhat on the margins of political activity would not have thought such a thing possible so easily.

With this in mind (since public opinion plays such a large role in Ron's post) I'd like to argue a few points: RS writes: "Everyone has had the opportunity to see over 5,000 people, most of them the most ordinary folks in the world, die very horrible deaths. This total is more than the attack on Pearl Harbor and the sinking of the Titanic combined - this is a visceral shock to the system that we will all be suffering effects from for years."

I would add that several million New Yorkers and New Jerseyans saw this event happen right in front of their faces, not on television — I'd say only a handful of the many I've talked to didn't see it happen first-hand. Nonetheless, I'm convinced that the choreographing of the attack was intended to bring people out of their homes and onto their rooftops — to demoralize, to anchor our thoughts in grief, to shock us and make us afraid, and to leave behind a lingering depression. And so, on some level, I would like to reject this shock and not use it as a strong reference point in my thinking in terms of personal emotion. This seems to be the intention of the terrorists, and a first step might be to reject it.

As well, I agree with those who think comparisons to Pearl Harbor and the Titanic are not relevant — the only similarities there are speed (in the first case) and structural inadequacies of a machine (in the second). I think it is because these events have taken on mythic proportions in the public's eye (each having a movie

in the past 5 years) and are thereby even celebrated as cathartic that they are recalled, whereas I see this event as the first in a chain of events, and that most Americans without this sort of (perhaps depressing) imagination will see it this way, too, quite soon. I'm not sure we'll be able, a few years from now, to distinguish this shock to the system from the ones that are ahead of us.

RS writes: What would happen to any government that did NOT respond militarily to such an attack on civilians on its soil? Frankly, it would collapse. Bush would be impeached or worse. Politicians are for the most part followers, craven followers at that, and the reaction by the professional pols has been completely predictable.

This, I think, is a highly arguable point. But what I find most bothersome about it is that it suggests an argument for symbolic militaristic action for the sake of domestic concerns and stability, and that strikes me as exactly the wrong way to go. The United States is a little too handy at making symbolic retaliatory strikes when far less than domestic stability is at stake, actions that, consequently, kill thousands more than died in the towers, and of reporting it as they see fit. I'm not being "anti-American" here, and I am certainly in favor of some significant action, but we must avoid anything that is purely (or even remotely) of symbolic value. RS writes: Does anybody anywhere honestly think that this network, whether or not we inscribe bin Laden's name in as the CEO, will not, at some future moment, do something as bad or worse if it is not broken up? Do we not think that it would use a nuclear weapon if it had a chance? Anthrax?

This network has survived an incredible amount of poverty, bad reputation, closed borders, etc.etc., not to mention US and other gunships. A network is not like a state — we've heard it over and over again. And this culture of martyrdom seems able to rejuvenate itself from, literally, out of the ground — who is to say that even the distant myth of the martyr against America would not inspire someone several generations from now from taking up the old cause?

Yes, greater attacks could happen, but I'm more interested now in whether there is any sort of logic to these activities — who is supposed to gain were there to be a nuclear bomb attack against the U.S.? If we can deduce this logic, could it lead us to a sense of security again? (More on this "logic" below.) RS writes: Does anybody honestly think that if America were to somehow "improve its behavior" toward people of the Third World, that this would eliminate the impetus behind these attacks? That it could do so quickly enough to forestall future assaults?

One thing worth mentioning in this context (and I'm certainly no Middle East expert) is that prior to the Persian Gulf war a jihad had never been declared on the United States. Jihads were declared on Israel and the Soviet Union, but not this country, though now we are positioning ourselves as the polar opposites of

radical Muslims in terms of "values". According to John Miller (and I confess that I got this info from David Letterman last night — remember, I only have one tv channel!), bin Laden himself (at least in 98) had three specific points of contention with the United States: support of Israel, the air-bases in Saudi Arabia and the sanctions/no fly zone against Iraq. This is not to say that he's not an egotistical violent maniac, but that I'm less sure than I was maybe a week ago that something like a fundamentalist Islamic attitude toward the American way of life (gay marriages, Coca Cola or "bare midriffs" as Marjorie Perloff mentioned) is somewhere near the heart of this. I could be fooling myself, but there could be a logic (i.e. consistency) to this — the Taliban's request that bin Laden leave the country, for instance, suggests a sort of foreign policy move that is not off the radar, and was probably unthinkable three or so days ago. And even if it seems a distant memory, there was a fairly long cease-fire in Israel until Sharon moved in with his (again, symbolic) act. I'm certainly not suggesting that there be diplomacy here — it would be kind of laughable, and if the Afghanis learned anything from, say, North Korea, it could go on for a while — but the steps that have to be taken, should they be militaristic, would have to be so careful as to not create a "new world order" that would just leave the old antipathies in place.

In fact, shaking things up too much right now might cut off certain supplies of information — imagine what a few months looking through the vaults of Pakistan's government files on terrorism would show us now? RS writes: Does anybody honestly think that the U.S. could do # 3 without literally abandoning Israel?

I assume you mean #4 here, since #3 doesn't have the U.S. doing anything? Anyway, putting "improve its behavior" in double quotes may not give enough detail to that particular issue. Certainly "abandoning Israel" is not an answer, but nonetheless some change in this policy strikes me as necessary, since it is what supplies the fuel for the sort of coalition that people like Hussein or bin Laden want in the Middle East. Again, I'm no expert, but the recent history of the moves the U.S. has made in support of Israel — the racism conference is obviously a touchstone — WITHOUT anything like public debate is troublesome. There's something automatic about it that I don't understand and we have been far too passive about. I think, in this time of crisis, that it is legitimate to rethink this policy in a way that doesn't "abandon" Israel but put some serious pressure for changes. RS writes: Can anybody here imagine a U.S. electoral politician advocating some version of #4? See that last comment under #1 again.

Don't know. I do remember Clinton in occasional speeches talking about "that great culture of Islam" and things like that, and though it might not have had anything to do with policy, there could have been the attempt to change to tone of

one's approach to Islam, as less the "other" and more the partner in civilization. But I can't comment here — I just hope anything's possible. Certainly, right now, this seems impossible, but think of how demonized the Japanese and Asians were even before WWII. RS writes: Even if those last three points were politically doable in the near future, is there anybody who cannot imagine what THAT ensuing war would look like?

You lose me here. What ensuing war — the blueprints for war are always there (again, think North Korea). We can only do our best to move in a direction we think is safe. In any case, don't quite follow you here.

My sense, in terms of the "popular will" of the people, is that it will change dramatically once the first bombs drop, and so will the opinion of our European allies. It strikes me as quite easily possible that we become isolated if the attacks that we are sure to make do not have anything suggesting results in the first weeks. If this is to be a long-term version of the lingering sanctions/war with Iraq, then I don't see memories of the WTC attacks being enough to maintain support around the globe. The United States will look like the dominant force again, and hence unsympathetic (of course, Russia and France will have their own reasons for continuing — but if there are no visible results? If you can't even name the terrorists you are supposedly killing, how can you deduce progress?)

There's also the issue of Pakistan — there is already sizable bin Laden support there, and their undemocratically elected general, for whom I feel some sympathy, could be sitting on top of a volcano. Bin Laden is like a folk hero in some areas there.

Is it possible (re: that the leadership now is totally inadequate) that Powell is aware of all of this? I'm amazed that the media is not reporting his comments more — what he has said concerning this campaign is the only thing that strikes me as revealing about what is about to happen, and if the Times is reliable on this, he is at least being cautious, and may be trying to reason out what, indeed, kind of "war" this is supposed to be. I don't get the sense that he has any love of war, despite his being a soldier, but that's just my impression. I'm almost tired of knocking on Bush — he's clearly an idiot with a stupid grin — so where is the reporting on Powell's statements (URLs please).

RS writes: It's a rhizome, almost like the point-to-point computing model one associates with post-Napster MP3 ripping, while the U.S. military's experience is telling it to hunt for a mainframe somewhere.

We've had no success with post-Napster ripping. But hackers always rise up again. The only way to get rid of them is to bribe them, hire them, or find people who are smarter that render their activities irrelevant. In any case, along the

lines of this analogy, certainly a total transformation of the nature of army intelligence is necessary — perhaps a little time to figure out what these transformations would be might help. Didn't we wait 6 months before entering the war after Pearl Harbor? Consequently, I'm not sure whom you could target in Afghanistan that is not a "civilian," since there are enough rebel forces there to start up the civil war again, and though I have no love for the Taliban, knocking them out wholesale at a time like this would be sending the whole region into such a state of instability that I don't see any good being done. There are just too many variables right now, and if there's one thing that the terrorists have proved, it's that our looking toward the "macro" too much —thinking we have the smarts to take in such a wide range of facts, and that we can stay at an arm's length from any violence that ensues — just leaves the "micro" open for anyone, especially trained bandits. Anyway, to bring this to a close, I'm wondering if there is something that is peculiar to poets use of language — the language of fact — in a poetic or emotional fashion that might be useful here. It's one thing to deconstruct or approve/disapprove of symbols, but I think it's quite another to convince a populace that is gorged on symbols and emotionalism to somehow find security in what might seem bureaucratic methods in a time a crisis. To go back to Guiliani again, it's amazing what he's been able to do in talking to New York without recourse to anything like symbolic language —most of what he's done, outside of some prepared speeches (like at the ceremony for the promotion of the firemen) was to present the goings-on of the day and to answer questions when posed. We simply do not have any national-level politicians that are able to do anything like this, or to see three years ahead and wonder what the world might be like after this campaign is over, if indeed it is over then. Public debate and speculation — from the right and left (yes, both are needed) — would be the healthiest thing right now if we don't want the president simply responding to polls and his stupid cabinet.

I wish I had a grand conclusion for those of you who followed through this email. Don't have one.

Take care,
Brian

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Christian Bök, *Eunoia**05 Nov 2001*

A book built to be reviewed as a stunt, and Stefans obliges the stunt only to overshoot it — he tallies the constraints (one vowel per chapter, seven years, the banquet and the debauch and the voyage on order) and then insists the machine produces something “heroic” and “epic” rather than merely clever. The rare notice that quotes enough of the thing to let the reader decide the argument for himself.

Christian Bök

Eunoia

Coach House Books, 2001

"Writing is inhibiting. Sighing, I sit, scribbling in ink this pidgin script. I sing with nihilistic witticism, disciplining signs with trifling gimmicks — impish hijinks which highlight stick sigils. Isn't it glib? Isn't it chic?" Besides being glib and chic, Bok's new book strikes one with the force of being the most incredible literary curio — each of its chapters is only allowed to use one vowel, out-gunning the Oulipian Perec by four — and yet a sort of heroic, epic undertaking. Taking seven years to write (the time it took Joyce to write *Ulysses*) "*Eunoia*" — which means "beautiful thinking" and is the shortest word in the English language to employ all the vowels — uses other constraints, including the same length for each paragraph, parallel sentence structures and tons of internal rhyme; furthermore, each of its chapters must "allude to the art of writing [and] must describe a culinary banquet, a prurient debauch, a pastoral tableau, and a nautical voyage." This hyper-mechanization of the writer's craft sets the stage for a welter of eccentric, yet universally appealing, tours-de-force, such as Chapter E's retelling of the *Odyssey* from the viewpoint of Helen: "Whenever Helen seeks these perverse excesses, her regretted deeds depress her; hence, Helen beseeches Ceres (the blessed Demeter): 'let sweet Lethe bless me, lest these recent events be rememberd' — then the empress feeds herself fermented hempseed, her preferred nepenthe." Each vowel infects the writing with its specific tone and content: the "a" chapter, the tale of Hassan "an Agha Khan", is the most mellifluous, an Orientalist playground of Arabs and naphtha lamps, while the "u" chapter presents the most intense vision of lustful excess under the stress of arbitrary restraints, in which "Dutch smut churns up blushful succubus lusts," and Ubu and Lulu burp, hump and bump for five delirious pages, exhausting, in the meantime, the entire range of English words that only contain the vowel "u." "Oiseau," the second half of this book, is a collection of shorter works such as his homage to the "w," a poem that uses no vowels but the letter "y" (more than you'd think), and his phonetic translation of Rimbaud's sonnet "Voyelle," thus cementing Bok's allegiance to a language that literally seems to write itself, provided it find the perfect — both obsessive and linguistically adept — host.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

ICON! at Remote! (bks et al et "dreamlife" et dale sherrard at remote, nov. 18...

12 Nov 2001

A listings notice for a new-media lounge night, wherein "The Dreamlife of Letters" will play on personal monitors between cocktails. The third-person bio — three books, the Boston Review, a forthcoming Fashionable Noise — is Stefans introducing Stefans with a straight face.

ICON! at Remote!

Sunday, November 18th from 6-11! Come! Experience new media art in a relaxed lounge setting! Featured artists for November 18th are:

Dale Sherrard, presenting the sound piece "Telephonia Opus 1: Neuterama!" which can be intimately experienced through your own personal receiver at any station in the lounge as well interspersed through the lounge sound system.

Brian Kim Stefans, presenting the animated poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" which can be enjoyed at your own personal monitor at any station in the lounge and at monitors throughout the lounge.

The November 18th installment of ICON! at Remote is curated by Kimberly Bunch. ICON! at Remote is a weekly curated rotation of new media art in a lounge setting. Remote Lounge welcomes video and new media submissions. For information, call [REDACTED].

Dale Sherrard studied painting at the Columbus College of Art and Design. In the late eighties and early nineties he founded the Groupe Des Artiste in Liege, Belgium. His drawings have appeared in Lungfull, poetry project newsletter and for Ethan Cohen Fine Arts. He has exhibited at the Couleur Gallery, Belgium and Emergence Gallery in Antwerp, and his body of work includes painting and drawing, as well as video and sound pieces. His recent work will be featured in the February 2002 exhibition "Magnitude" at the Educational Alliance. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of three books of poetry: Free Space Comix, Gulf and Angry Penguins. His internet works include "The Naif and the Bluebells" (ubu.com) and "The Truth Interview," a collaboration with the poet Kim Rosenfield (www.arras.net/truth_interview/). He is a frequent contributor to the Boston Review and other periodicals, and is presently completing a book of essays titled "Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics." A homepage appears at www.arras.net/stefans.html. He also lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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ICON @ Remote Lounge (address, bks event, etc... addendum, of course

12 Nov 2001

Not a reading but a lounge — "The Dreamlife of Letters" flickering on every seat's private TV while cameras shaped like tiny cannons let patrons spy on one another.

THE ADDRESS:

327 Bowery, near 2nd St New York City, USA 01. [REDACTED]

THE URL:

<http://www.remotelounge.com/>

THE EVENT (in the words of "them"):

ICON! at Remote!

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Brian Kim Stefans, presenting the animated poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" which can be enjoyed at your own personal monitor at any station in the lounge and at monitors throughout the lounge.

The November 18th installment of ICON! at Remote is curated by Kimberly Bunch. ICON! at Remote is a weekly curated rotation of new media art in a lounge setting. Remote Lounge welcomes video and new media submissions. For information, call [REDACTED].

Dale Sherrard studied painting at the Columbus College of Art and Design. In the late eighties and early nineties he founded the Groupe Des Artiste in Liege, Belgium. His drawings have appeared in Lungfull, poetry project newsletter and for Ethan Cohen Fine Arts. He has exhibited at the Couleur Gallery, Belgium and Emergence Gallery in Antwerp, and his body of work includes painting and drawing, as well as video and sound pieces. His recent work will be featured in the February 2002 exhibition "Magnitude" at the Educational Alliance. He lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of three books of poetry: Free Space Comix, Gulf and Angry Penguins. His internet works include "The Naif and the Bluebells" (ubu.com) and "The Truth Interview," a collaboration with the poet Kim Rosenfield (www.arras.net/truth_interview/). He is a frequent contributor to the Boston Review and other periodicals, and is presently completing a book of

essays titled "Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics." A homepage appears at www.arras.net/stefans.html. He also lives and works in Brooklyn, New York.

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ICON! REMOTE! (ps andor note from bks re: just stopping by...

15 Nov 2001

Stefans clarifies his own gig: he won't turn up till eight, it isn't a reading, and you'll mostly be standing around drinking and watching a poem on a bar TV.

I probably won't be at this, my own gig, until about 8 or so, so if you are stopping by to say hello, don't come until then.

Also, this is NOT a reading — it's just standing around, listening to tunes, drinking, looking at a tv set that has a poem playing on it — every seat in this lounge has its own tv and a controller so you can spy on other people in the bar. The cameras look like tiny cannons. It's really fun.

I know some of you will be at the Zinc — wish I could be there myself, hope it goes well.

bks

THE ADDRESS:

327 Bowery, near 2nd St New York City, USA 01. [REDACTED]

THE URL:

<http://www.remotelounge.com/>

THE EVENT (in the words of "them"):

ICON! at Remote!

Sunday, November 18th from 6-11! Come! Experience new media art in a relaxed lounge setting! Featured artists for November 18th are:

Dale Sherrard, presenting the sound piece "Telephonia Opus 1: Neuterama!" which can be intimately experienced through your own personal receiver at any station in the lounge as well interspersed through the lounge sound system.

Brian Kim Stefans, presenting the animated poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" which can be enjoyed at your own personal monitor at any station in the lounge and at monitors throughout the lounge.

"Dreamlife" at www.ubu.com

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this is just to say: THE TRUTH INTERVIEW is live...

06 Dec 2001

The launch of the Rosenfield collaboration announced as a mock AP wire dispatch, complete with dateline and the twin forces of LOVE and INSURRECTION. Beneath the parody the blurbs are real and the pitch is sincere; the press release is itself the first exhibit of the aesthetic it advertises.

ATTENZIONE!

EXPERIMENTAL MOOD-ALTERING INTERVIEW REACHES MARKET

NEW YORK, Dec. 5 2001. (AP)

The "Two Kims" announce their latest invention: a low-orbiting digital way-station for disconsolate malchicks and ruby-toed cowgirls.

Begun as a small project for the How2 website (www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler_center/how2/), a journal of feminist poetics, the interview took on a life of its own as the twin forces of LOVE (amore) and INSURRECTION (pensare) mingled to elaborate an entire alternative metaphysics for viewing the web.

Part portal, part interview, part settings of Rosenfield's sequence "Verballi," part curry video-kabob but 100% pure poem, "The Truth Interview" will make you never read "cyberpoetry" (and certainly not "hypertext" poetry) the same way again. It will convince you that wisdom comes in small, well-aerated aromatic packages with peel-off labels.

The poet/therapist Kim Rosenfield and the poet/web artist Brian Kim Stefans are now live. And so is "The Truth Interview."

This project can be seen at several places:

www.arras.net/truth_interview/

www.departments.bucknell.edu/stadler_center/how2/current/workbook/index.html www.ubu.com (forthcoming)

On Kim Rosenfield's Poetry

Kim Rosenfield's long-awaited Good Morning Midnight is a rollicking expose of twenty-first century custom, superstition, procedure . . . in what's known as fashion or culture or any such "industry." This monument is an archeologically detailed excavation of logic's museum-quality levity. Rosenfield's swift new evidence of the desperateness of all belief systems except the most glossy, manages to mock sociology and ritual in the same well-placed, tender, haute

couture blow. You'll find timeless scientific proverbs, sing-a-long singsongs, practical lists, style pointers, drastically accurate translations, perfect solutions of all necessarily fleeting sorts, 3-D reveries, and more, in living, better than Walt Disney Sensurround. An olfactory must for all time capsules and poetry shoppers alike. —Stacy Doris, *Paramour*

On The Truth Interview

This is not a site... The "Truth Interview" is a metasite, but not one more site about websites. It's something in between the voice and the text, the author and the reader, poetry and advertisement. It talks about creation and it is made of creation. The symbiosis between Kim Rosenfeld, the poet and the website "voice", and Brian Stefans, the e-poet, who played here the role of Editor and Interface Designer, is amazing. Some poems seem to have been conceived for "the truth interview" structure and the interface, seem to have been designed "on demand". We will never know... But who cares? This is not a site. It's e-reading. So, pipe and play. — Giselle Beiguelman, "The Book after the Book" (www.desvirtual.com)

I can't think of two people I'd rather go through the looking-glass with than Brian Kim Stefans and Kim Rosenfeld. Long on content and even longer on style, 'The Truth' is a vast improvement over most interviews because both parties know from the outset that it's not so much about where you're going as how good you look along the way. — Darren Wershler-Henry, the tapeworm foundry and alienated.net

KIM ROSENFELD is the author of three previous collections of poetry: *A Self-Guided Walk*, *Rx* and *Cool Clean Chemistry*, and *Some of Us*—which was published when she was 15. She lives in New York City with poet Robert Fitterman and their three-year old daughter, Coco. She works as a psychotherapist in private practice and possesses an uncanny sense of smell which may or may not affect future career paths.

BRIAN KIM STEFANS is the author of three books of poetry, *Free Space Comix*, *Gulf*, and *Angry Penguins*. Several of his web poems, such as "The Dreamlife of Letters," appear at www.ubu.com. He has also collaborated with poets Christian Bok and Dan Farrell on web poems, and edits the site of new media poetry and poetics, www.arras.net. He possesses no sense of smell whatsoever.

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2002

**CRAIG DWORKIN "Against Meaning" @ WHITE BOX ::
WEDNESDAY JANUARY 16 at 8PM**

15 Jan 2002

Stefans introduces Dworkin's manifesto for reading without regard to meaning — a talk best appreciated, presumably, by not paying attention to what it says.

WHITE BOX presents... TEXTUAL OPERATIONS organized by A.S. BESSA
WEDNESDAY JANUARY 16 at 8PM

CRAIG DWORKIN "Against Meaning"

Introduced by Brian Stefans

In "Against Meaning", Craig Dworkin proposes a radically new way of reading—one that proceeds without regard to theme or content or referential meaning, and yet still retains the explanatory powers and pleasures we associate with reading. With examples from both experimental and conventional writing—from George Oppen and Guillaume Apollinaire to Robert Frost and Elizabeth Bishop—this talk will illustrate what we might call an 'applied paragrammatics': how to engage texts on their own terms while sidestepping the familiar lull of their normative grammars. Craig Dworkin is a writer and professor at Princeton University. He has recently published in *October* and *Sagetrieb*, and "Reading the Illegible", a critical study of artistic appropriation and misuse is forthcoming from Northwestern University Press.

WHITE BOX 525 WEST 26TH
STREET (between 10th & 11th avenues) NEW YORK, NEW YORK 10001 ph
██████████ WWW.WHITEBOXNY.ORG

(to be deleted from WHITE BOX's e-mail address book, please reply with "delete me")

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The Poetry Project's President's Day 24-Hour Play Festival

14 Feb 2002

"Some goofy thing I'm involved in" — Stefans among five writers conscripted to compose a ten-minute play overnight and watch it staged with the ink barely dry.

[Some goofy thing I'm involved in...]

February 18 8:00 pm

The Poetry Project's President's Day 24-Hour Play Festival

Plays by: Jeffery McDaniel, Rachel Levitsky, Brian Kim Stefans, Sharon Mesmer, Jordan Davis The process begins at 10 pm the night before the show, when a group of about fifty writers, directors, actors and designers gather at a theater for

the latest round of the unpredictable. After everyone has been briefed (and Polaroided), the writers are left alone to each compose a ten-minute play. At 7 am, the directors return, read the plays, make their bids for a play, and begin casting. The actors arrive at 8 am, meet with their respective writer/director teams; rehearsals start promptly at 9 am. Tech rehearsal runs from 5 to 7:30 pm—doors open at 7:45. At 8 pm, ink barely dry, the new plays are performed for a live audience. Since its inception in 1995, The 24-Hour Plays have produced well over 200 new short plays in this manner. This is the first time the event has taken place at the Poetry Project. Admission: \$9 general, \$6 students & seniors, \$5 members
St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003

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Moriarty/Stefans @ St. Mark's, Wednesday, May 1

29 Apr 2002

A St. Mark's reading at which Stefans, never one to just read, drafts guitarist Alan Licht to accompany his half.

[Guitarist Alan Licht will be performing with me for some of my half —bks.]

May 1st, 8 pm

Laura Moriarty and Brian Kim Stefans

Laura Moriarty is the author of *Two Cross Seizings* (Sombre Reptiles), *Persia* (Chance Additions), *Duse* (Coincidence Press), *like roads* (Kelsey St. Press), *Rondeaux* (Roof Books) and *L'Archiviste* (Zasterle Press). She is the Director of the American Poetry Archives at The Poetry Center at San Francisco State University.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of *Angry Penguins*, *Gulf and Free Space Comix* (Roof). His book of essays and poems, *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics*, is forthcoming from Atelos Books. Visual poetry, including a Flash poem "The Dreamlife of Letters," can be found at www.ubu.com. He is the editor of *Arras*, devoted to electronic poetries: www.arras.net.

St. Mark's Church, 131 E. 10th St., New York, NY 10003

<http://www.poetryproject.com/calendar.html>

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Raw Impressions

06 Jun 2002

A come-see-my-show notice for a four-day dance-theatre scramble, forwarded with unusual candor — "I can't vouch for the quality of the evening and it's a bit pricey." Stefans buried among the Writers in the credits, selling tickets he half-apologizes for.

Dear concert goers...

I'm part of this dance event that will premiere this Monday at 7 and 9 (see details below). We put together our act over the weekend in Purchase and perform it "raw" that evening. I can't vouch for the quality of the evening and it's a bit pricey, but thought I'd let ya know...

Cheers,
Brian

Raw Impressions, Inc. Presents Raw Impressions Dance Theatre (RIDT) Event #1
Monday, June 10, 2002 7PM & 9PM University Settlement 184 Eldridge (NY, NY)
(directions below)

\$12 Admission go to <http://www.smarttix.com> to buy tickets online or call [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

Instructions to make a successful RIDT:

Find 6 teams including a Writer, Choreographer, Director and Composer with extremely diverse backgrounds

Put them in a room with a group of equally diverse Performers...

Give them an abstract, but exciting assignment.

Let boil for a few days in a bucolic retreat at Manhattanville College (not in Manhattan) Take the lid off to see what they've made.

You will have enough to serve 6 New Dance Theatre Pieces made in just 4 Days.

Now that's cookin'.

Serve to a large crowd with much fanfare.

CHOREOGRAPHERS Ruth Barnes, Ara Fitzgerald, Julia Gleich, Matt Keefe, Rebecca Lazier, Jessica Wallenfels

COMPOSERS Jody Elff, Amanda Harberg, John Morton, Peter Muller, Gene Pritzker, Kevin Quigly

WRITERS Sean Barry, Clay McLeod Chapman, Kim Gittens, David Rodwin, Brian Kim Stefans, Allison Eve Zell

DIRECTORS Ellen Beckerman, William Lipscomb, Amy Sevick, Jules Taylor, Allison Eve Zell

PERFORMERS Jason Andrew, Brittany Fridenstine, Jack Kirven, Tom Kovak, Lynn Mancanelli, Marta Miller, Kristen Miller, Tchera Niyego, Genvieve Perrier, Julie Troost, TBA

PRODUCERS Julia Gleich, Rebecca Lazier, David Rodwin, Rebecca Wallenfels

RIDT Mission Statement: We are committed to artists being prolific with excellence. We are also committed to dance theatre being an immediate community experience and a reflection of what's going on around us right now - not filtered by anyone and not hampered in a lengthy process before the audience receives it. Finally, we're committed to bringing together our artistic community through creating an opportunity for artists to take risks and work with new collaborators.

DIRECTIONS to University Settlement By subway: F to 2nd Avenue (Allen Street exit). Walk 2 blocks south to Rivington Street, one block west to Eldridge. B, D, Q to Grand Street. Walk 2 blocks East to Eldridge Street, three blocks north to Rivington. N, R to Prince Street Walk east to Bowery, cross the street and proceed three blocks on Rivington Street to Eldridge Street.

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more spam from Brian...

23 Aug 2002

Billed as spam by its own sender — Stefans plugs his poems in a Williamsburg culture zine, free and available wherever you buy your tobacco accessories.

I don't usually send out announcements about things I've published, but this is free and easy to get...

Poems by: Alan Gilbert Rodrigo Toscano Maria Baranda Noelle Kocot & me
as well as a funny short story by John Yau
are in the new issue of

BROOKLYN RAIL

a tabloid size culture zine about the navel gazers of Williamsburg
their pirate radio stations
their taste in skin maintenance products
their trust funds
their tattoos

which can be acquired at various sites around New Yawk (Tonic has them, so does Reel Life) — wherever you buy your tobacco accessories.

xo

Brian

[IF YOU WANT TO BE TAKEN OFF MY LIST PLEASE TELL ME — nicely]

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Free Spax Comix: The Blog

27 Sep 2002

The obligatory blog announcement, complete with a definition of "blog" for the uninitiated and a dream, unrealized, of an HBO movie starring Michael Douglas as a Korean deli owner.

A blog is a "weblog" — basically a place where people publish their thoughts, their favorite things on the web, stray this or that.

Free Space Comix: The Blog will have poems, what I'm reading, my latest articles, etc.

Free Space Comix was the name of my first book. I've always wanted it to be made into a made-for-HBO movie starring Michael Douglas as the Korean deli store owner, but it never happened.

So I've made it into a blog:

www.arras.net/weblog/

It doesn't let you send in comments yet, but that future is a feature forthcoming.

— cheers — sorry to spam you again — I've been busy!

Brian

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Raoul Unplugged

29 Oct 2002

Served a cease-and-desist by the Times for dressing its front page in the prose of Raoul Vaneigem, Stefans complies with five days to spare and offers the contraband to the list for "private viewing." The defense — that he wrote not one word of the altered articles — is both legally true and beside the point he actually wants to make, which he makes anyway in the soapbox postscript about turning newsprint into transubstantiation.

I've been given a cease and desist from the New York Times regarding the use of their images and homepage design and the use of their advertiser's images in my Raoul Vaneigem Meets the Talking Spiderheads from Mars series.

I knew this would happen eventually, and don't see any real need to argue with them as I didn't intend these detournements to be anything more than graffiti on

a wall, subject to the elements. I'm taking them down in 5 days — they requested they come down in 10 days, but I'm being a nice guy.

However, I'd like to give folks the chance to download the page for their own private viewing (not to be put on their website). Your very own piece of illegal net art! (No one will ever know you have it, shhh.)

The cease and desist letter states: "Most significantly, you have substantially changed the lead article to include long and rambling made-up quotes from British Prime Minister Tony Blair regarding the need to act against Iraq, under the byline of Raoul Vaneigem."

Of course, I didn't actually write any of the text that appears in these pieces. Anything that was not part of the original NY Times article was taken from the writings of Raoul Vaneigem, the French Situationist —considered a great prose stylist — either from *The Revolution of Everyday Life* or from *Contributions to The Revolutionary Struggle, Intended To Be Discussed, Corrected, And Principally, Put Into Practice Without Delay*. Both of these texts can be found at www.nothingness.org.

Here are the links to the three pages:

Blair Presents Dossier on Iraq's Biological Weapons
http://www.arras.net/blair_presents_dossier.htm

Daschle Denounces Bush Remarks on Iraq as Partisan
http://www.arras.net/daschle_denounces_bush.htm

Clinton Says He Backs Tough U.N. Resolution on Iraq Inspections
http://www.arras.net/clinton_backs_resolution.html

Get your kicks quick!

cheers

Brian

PS I wrote these lovely words to a friend this afternoon about the pages — obviously I was on my soap box:

The point, as I see it, was to turn the mundane materials of the New York Times into poetry by juxtaposing the page — ads, logos, links, etc. — with revolutionary rantings by a type of person we probably won't see for some time, i.e. Vaneigem.

If Vaneigem's writings are able to make this transformation — a Catholic sensibility like his might even suggest something like transubstantiation, which of course doesn't sound so radical when it's digital materials we are talking about — then it opens up a window of possibility for social/aesthetic activity.

The logical next step would be to take a city, fill it with Situationist graffiti, etc. etc. or with young Situationist recruits acting on Vaneigem's precepts — not likely.

The target was not the New York Times — it's easy enough to make fun of a newspaper — but to take the reality of the Times, all of its mundane details, and somehow suggest that this reality is a form of social control that can be evaded by simple but artful acts of detournement, tiny gestures that don't even rely on wit, puns, knowledge etc., but are simple collages that punch holes in the spectacle.

But added to that, throw a critique back at Vaneigem suggesting that revolutionary rhetoric is always outpaced by the course of events, especially when the course is determined by spineless world leaders with their fingers on the red buttons.

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Re: Raoul Unplugged

30 Oct 2002

Replying to Lewis, Stephen and Tom, Stefans refuses the word "collage" for the Times piece — collage announces itself with glue and tearing, whereas he "impersonated an officer," wearing the whole uniform of authority. A genuinely sharp distinction, wrapped around the cheerful worry that Tom Daschle might sue and the suspicion that his own antagonist could really just be Jeffrey Jullich.

Hi Lewis, Stephen, Tom, etc. — thanks for the comments.

Re: collage, I'm not familiar with the laws of collage, but it seems to me what I did with the Times is very different from collage. It's more like impersonating an officer — I lifted the entire "uniform" if you will, the recognizable skin of authority, and kind of paraded around in it without really explaining to anyone what I was doing. Collage as we know it is pretty obviously collage — there is glue involved, some sort of frame, a little tearing, etc. But my page, outside of the URL, was pretty much the entire Times page with the alteration of the quotes.

This also leaves me open to slander — or something like that — since it's been generally perceived that I "made up" quotes for Tony Blair, etc., even though I didn't "write" a single word of the article. Tom Daschle, for instance, even though I think his words are quite amazing in my version of the story, would probably not be too happy with them, even though they would make him the Jim Morrison of South Dakota — and from there, the presidency!

I'd be suprised to discover that the mere act of collage puts something in the public domain — does that mean that were I to add "found" pictures, or add sentences from Moby Dick, to a new Stephen King novel, then the King novel

becomes part of the public domain? That would be remarkable and of course I'd prefer it that way, but I don't think the argument holds water.

The URL that Lewis forwarded re: the Getty argument is very interesting, but as you can see, unless one is going to devote a portion of one's life to building a case against a large corporation, what you get is a lot of e-mails flying back and forth, though I haven't yet heard again from the Times — I'm not even sure this person exists (it could just be Jeffrey Jullich). I have found other cease and desist letters by Nancy Richman online, though.

Here's Lewis's link again: <http://www.playdamage.org/getty/15.html> Re: Raoul being complicit with my actions — if any of you out there know Raoul Vaneigem's email address, please pass it on! I like Stephen's musings re: the cartoon animal in the chase scene, and proliferating detournements — it's funny that you read the theory of detournement coming back in everyone from Hakim Bey and the Critical Arts Ensemble (you can find out about them at the Autonomedia website), but it's not been picked up all that much by web artists, and certainly not by poets.

Here's the letter, by the way. I've deleted the phone number because I don't want anyone playing games here!

I am counsel to The New York Times Company, the owner of The New York Times on the Web at <http://www.nytimes.com>.

It has come to our attention that you have posted an altered version of the home page of the September 24, 2002 edition of nytimes.com at http://www.arras.net/blair_present-dossier.htm. While the page reproduces the nytimes.com template, including the day's advertisements, it replaces selected bylines and other features with content you have supplied. Most significantly, you have substantially changed the lead article to include long and rambling made-up quotes from British Prime Minister Tony Blair regarding the need to act against Iraq, under the byline of Raoul Vaneigem.

The editors at the Times appreciate a good parody and would not take action against it. However, the subject matter of this particular page appears to be more serious in nature. Therefore, even though we are sure that your intent was non-malicious, we must inform you that your use of the Times's name, logos and home page design and layout constitutes trademark and copyright infringement.

While we respect your efforts to make a statement, we must ask that you do so in a manner that does not violate our proprietary rights, or the rights of our advertisers. Please remove the page from public display and confirm to us in writing within the next ten days that you will not use our home page in the future

in this same way. If you would like to discuss this matter, please give me a call at 212- xxx xxxx. Thank you for your cooperation.

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SEGUE READING: Mini-Festival of Digital Poetry (and hideous poster)

15 Nov 2002

The Segue series goes digital for an afternoon — Stefans convening a mini-festival of screen poetry, which is to say convening his own future.

THE MOST HIDEOUS POSTER YOU HAVE EVER SEEN
http://www.arras.net/mini_digi_fest.htm

was created to announce:

THE SEGUE READING SERIES AT THE BOWERY POETRY CLUB

Mini-Festival of (so-called*) Digital Poetry

:::featuring performances and presentations by

Angela Rawlings (Toronto): <http://www.commutiny.net/>

Patrick Herron (Chapel Hill): <http://www.proximate.org>

Noah Wardrip-Fruin (New York): <http://www.impermanenceagent.com>

Paul Chan (New York): <http://nationalphilistine.com/alternumerics/>

Aya Karpinska (New York):

<http://www.nomadnet.org/audiophfile4/Aya/aya.htm>

Loss Pequeno Glazier (Buffalo): <http://epc.buffalo.edu/authors/glazier/>

The Prize Budget for Boys (Toronto) who are:

Neil Hennessy (The Jabber Engine and Basho's Frogger, at
<http://www.ubu.com>), Jason Le Heup & Ian Hooper

:::and?

AND there will be a panel discussion afterwards immoderated by Brian Kim

Stefans (curator and organizer)

AND it's 2-fer-1 drinks and it's not shameful to start at 4pm for a poet/poetry goer

AND you may know what they've done online but we guarantee that the presence/performance/presentation will be entirely new (to you)

AND there's a rumor the legendary Toronto sound poetry group The Four Horsemen may perform!

(http://svt.se/hogafflahage/hogafflaHage_site/Kor/hestekor.swf)

:::where?

308 BOWERY, JUST NORTH OF HOUSTON

:::when?

SATURDAY FROM 4 - 7 PM

:::and what, pray tell, does it cost?

\$5 admission goes to support the readers

all of this information is repeated on the

THE MOST HIDEOUS POSTER YOU HAVE EVER SEEN
http://www.arras.net/mini_digi_fest.htm

I hope you can make it — should be fun, an eye opener, and bring your questions!

* The use of the phrase "so-called" prior to an aesthetic categorization is an old experimental poetry tradition; please disregard if it causes you unusual discomfort.

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Re: SEGUE READING: Mini-Festival of Digital Poetry (forgot the date)

17 Nov 2002

The inevitable correction to the flyer above; on this list, no reading notice went out right the first time.

[I forgot the date: it's Nov. 23rd, Saturday, from 4-7, 308 Bowery, NY NY]

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::: friendly reminder ::: ==> Mini-Festival of Digital Poetry

21 Nov 2002

A third pass at the same festival, this time to confess that the rumored sound-poetry legends were a joke and the real attraction was a Danish children's cartoon.

(sorry to spam again)

(just wanted to mention that the Four Horseman line in the earlier invite was facetious — I just wanted you to check out this great Flash piece from a Danish children's site:

http://svt.se/hogafflahage/hogafflaHage_site/Kor/hestekor.swf)

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Stefans (curator and organizer)

AND it's 2-fer-1 drinks and it's not shameful to start at 4pm for a poet/poetry goer

AND you may know what they've done online but we guarantee that the presence/performance/presentation will be entirely new (to you)

AND there's a rumor the legendary Toronto sound poetry group The Four Horsemen may perform!

(http://svt.se/hogafflahage/hogafflaHage_site/Kor/hestekor.swf)

:::where?

308 BOWERY, JUST NORTH OF HOUSTON — NEW YORK CITY, NY, USA

:::when?

SATURDAY, NOV 23rd, FROM 4 - 7 PM

:::and what, pray tell, does it cost?

\$5 admission goes to support the readers

all of this information is repeated on the

THE MOST HIDEOUS POSTER YOU HAVE EVER SEEN
http://www.arras.net/mini_digi_fest.htm

I hope you can make it — should be fun, an eye opener, and bring your questions!

* The use of the phrase "so-called" prior to an aesthetic categorization is an old experimental poetry tradition; please disregard if it causes you unusual discomfort.

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MLA reading

27 Nov 2002

Stefans books a reading, then announces he is too broke, burnt out, and family-obligated to run it — an invitation and a resignation letter in one.

Helloooo...

I've arranged a time and place for the "MLA reading" — Dec. 28th, from 6-11, at the Bowery Poetry Club. It's a free event, Bob Holman's psyched about it, and all it seems to be is a matter of getting the poets there and getting the word out.

BUUUTTTT...

I've got way too much going on this month to organize this event. Both of my sisters are moving out of NY to CA in December — one to SF to follow a job, the other to LA to follow a lover — and I really want to have some good family time with them before they leave. This was all very sudden.

I also have a dance/poetry performance on Dec. 15th that I'm rehearsing, am still dealing with Segue aftermath (checks, plain old burnout), a .pdf series for the ubu site (12 titles!), a job search (-\$33 in the bank account yesterday), etc. - the full plate!

I hate to be a jerk, but I'm just going to drop this entirely, cancel at the BPC, unless someone just takes over, because I'm at the end of my rope. Anyone you know who might be interested in arranging this reading? It should be pretty easy.

Do it for the Gipper! Forward this email to your friends if you don't see them in the cc line. It should be a great event! There's also an honorarium for the MC/organizer from the BPC!

Email me if you're interested...

love and love Brian

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Bruce Andrews' Vietnam

10 Dec 2002

Stefans takes up a real question — whether Bruce Andrews's dissertation truly argues that the antiwar movement had little to do with ending the war — and treats a Language poet's political science with the same attention he gave the line breaks. The collection he mentions here as forthcoming did in fact appear, among the Arras publications at arras.net/arras-publications/.

re:

Has anybody here ever read Bruce Andrews' dissertation book? If so, would it be a mis-characterization of it to claim that the main argument, or thesis, of this book is that the anti-war protests had little, or nothing, to do with the eventual cessation of that war by the U.S. Gov't.?

Chris

I'm actually publishing a to-be-titled .pdf of Bruce's collected political writings on Arras soon, kind of like the one I did for Steve Evans Notes to Poetry. I have all of the corrected manuscripts from BA, just waiting for a free week or to to format it, get an intro, etc. It's a lot of material, a bit dry here and there but he does manage to incorporate his poetry into some of these essays — I don't have any paper appears as intertitles in one conference essay.

I haven't read his dissertation unless it is the pamphlet called "Public Constraint and American Policy in Vietnam", but that was published in 1976 when he was already at Fordham. I've only read parts of this book but it had little to do with the protests directly and more to do with how the war was being portrayed in the left and right-wing political organs of the time. The idea is that war policy may have been more guided by domestic concerns than global concerns about security, that the state was a "social actor" in determining what these domestic concerns were, etc., which seems to be one of the main theses of BA's poli-sci writings in general (another essay is titled "Social Rules and the State as a Social Actor").

I wouldn't be surprised if he did in fact contend that the protests had little to do with the cessation of war — I'm not too sure they did either, but I'm not a scholar on the era. It seems to me that the protests started years before the war ended, and so even if they were effective they were probably only indirectly so.

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2003

Blogs, by Marianne Moore

26 Feb 2003

Marianne Moore's "Poetry" — "I, too, dislike it" — rewritten for the blog age. Stefans could not announce a genre without also parodying it in the same breath.

Blogs

I too, dislike them: there are things that are important beyond all this
fiddle.
Reading them, however, with a perfect contempt for them, one
discovers that there is in
 them after all, a place for the maudlin.
Minds that can't grasp an imaginary turd, findings
 that make the eyes dilate, hair
 on neglected parts of the body, these things
 are important not because a
blogger's high sounding "interpretation" can be put upon them, but because
they are
free. When they become so mundane as to become *_ad hominem_*
 well, the same thing may be said for
 — well, *_some_* of us, that we
 "do not criticize what we
 don't understand": the bat held upside down in quest of
 some balls, the balls
eating elephants, elephants pushing, a wild horse taking a
 a tireless wolf under a tree (now *_that's_*
unusual, yet the immovable critic twitching his skin like a horse
 that takes a flea under a tree is a base-
 ball fan, a statistician — oops, I thought I was blogging...
again)
 — nor is it valid to discriminate against
 "business documents and
school-books": all these "phenomena" are important (if secondary). One
must make
 a distinction: when dragged into prominence by half bloggers,
 the result is not blogging, but "writing" — nor till
the bloggers among us, "hyperventilators of
 criticism" — above insolence and triviality and
 a loyal fan base can
present for public indigestion, revolutionary values with
 real poets in them, shall we have
um, them. In the meantime, if you demand on one hand,
 the raw material of blogs in all their obtuse, necrophilic,
pretentious
 grace, and that which is on the other hand
genuine, then you are interested in blogging.
I suggest you try www.blogspot.com.

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Circulars — new stories, links, etc. (and apologies for spamming)

12 Mar 2003

Stefans reports that his war-news blog draws thousands of hits a day, then apologizes for the handful of emails it took to tell you so.

There were some glitches in the notifications sent from the blog so some of you were receiving tons of repetitive emails from us... sorry. New policy: no emails from Circulars unless it's cumulative accounts like the following list of new stories (or if the house is on fire).

News: the site has been averaging about 2,000 hits a day, sometimes peaking at 3,000+. It also has a search engine. I'll be rearranging the categories and such things to make it more cogent.

Thanks to all of you who have appreciative emails about the site, and apologies if some of the links and stories sent in have not made it up in a timely fashion.

Please try to pass this email on to friends of yours who want to test our eclectic mix of plagiarized news stories, tasteless political humor, the most obtuse (but best) political poetry out there and a really, really lively comments section — I highly recommend perusing through it.

Following is a list of some of the items from the present homepage. I'm too tired right now to write anything more than this bland preamble but so be it. Take care.

Letter of Resignation by John H. Brown, Foreign Service Officer
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000314.html#000314> To: Secretary of State Colin Powell March 10, 2003 Dear Mr. Secretary: I am joining my colleague John Brady Kiesling in submitting my resignation from the Foreign Service (effective immediately) because I cannot in good conscience support President Bush's war plans against Iraq.

BAGHDAD SNAPSHOT ACTION: Court Appearance
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000313.html#000313> So, Emilie and Lytle, who were arrested for posting pictures of Iraqis in Soho, will have their day in court tomorrow morning at the Criminal Court of Manhattan. The Baghdad Snapshot Action Crew will be their to support them. You should show up with your friends and support them too. Info below...

Charles Bernstein: Enough!
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000312.html#000312> In these difficult times, let us not draw away from our poetics in an attempt to redress the ominous possibilities of future U.S. government policies or the onerous effects of current government policies. As poets, we need to pursue our own forms of ethical and

aesthetic response rather than engage in the sort of pronouncement by fiat and moral presumption of President Bush and his partisans.

UPI: Pentagon Papers Leaker Seeks Leaks on Iraq
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000311.html#000311> WASHINGTON — Daniel Ellsberg, who in 1971 leaked the Pentagon Papers, on Tuesday called on government officials to leak documents to Congress and the press showing the Bush administration is lying in building its case against Saddam Hussein.

Gothic News: New Bush Portrait Found Hanging Upside Down from Mount Rushmore <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000307.html#000307> (Gothic News Service, 3/10/03) Early Sunday morning visitors to Mount Rushmore reported that they were astonished to find they could not look up the 5,725-foot mountain and see the 60-foot high carved stone heads of U.S Presidents George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Theodore Roosevelt, and Abraham Lincoln. Instead, they found themselves looking at a large painted portrait of President Bush hanging upside down on a cable stretched several hundred feet between the barely exposed foreheads of Lincoln and Washington.

Salt Publishing: 100 Poets Against The War
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000301.html#000301> The most talked-about and successful ebook of recent years is published here for the first time in paperback. "100 Poets Against The War," a trilogy of downloadable electronic chapbooks was first published online on January 27, 2003 and has since made world-wide news from the LA Times to the Moscow dailies. This book holds the record for the fastest poetry anthology ever assembled and disseminated; first planned on January 20, 2003 and published in this form on March 3, 2003.

Russell Mokhiber: Ari & I
<http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000288.html#000288> [One of the nice features of comondreams.org are the postings by Russell Mokhiber of his unedited interactions with White House Press Secretary Ari Fleischer during the daily press briefings. Here's the latest one.]

Doug Rokke: Depleted Uranium, the War Against Ourselves (interview) Traprock Peace Center <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000286.html#000286>

QUESTION: Any viewer who saw the war on television had the impression this was an easy war, fought from a distance and soldiers coming back relatively unharmed. Is this an accurate picture? ROKKE: At the completion of the Gulf War, when we came back to the United States in the fall of 1991, we had a total casualty count of 760: 294 dead, a little over 400 wounded or ill. But the casualty rate now for Gulf War veterans is approximately 30 percent. Of those stationed in

the theater, including after the conflict, 221,000 have been awarded disability, according to a Veterans Affairs (VA) report issued September 10, 2002.

Gothic News: Burning Man Festival Site in Protest Ritual <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000291.html#000291> (Gothic News Service, 3/9/03) Two Rangers at Black Rock Desert - the annual site in Nevada for the Burning Man Festival - were greeted by a strange vision this morning. Talking to a Reno newspaperman, one of the Rangers reported, "It was sunrise across the playa and we were on our first patrol. When we looked down from the perimeter ridge, we initially saw an astonishingly large grid of either body or garbage bags. Through our binoculars, against the rising sun, we could still see that they were definitely filled - it could have been potatoes or anything big and lumpy. Each bag was spaced about 30 feet away from the next one - about 50 parallel lines going north and south, and about 40 going east and west. The whole thing made a large rectangular space, about a mile long and a kilometer wide. Frankly I can't say if was just spooky, or both spooky and spectacular, to see all those black bags begin to get the first rays of the sun."

rabble.ca: A Better Idea http://rabble.ca/everyones_a_critic.shtml?sh_itm=593a76151ffe0657cbe5860c119 a8079&r=1 [Excerpted from an article by Judy Rebick recently posted on rabble.ca, a Canadian alternative online media source. rabble.ca has a special anti-war coverage section as well, featuring great articles, columnists, and events around Canada.] from A Better Idea by Judy Rebick: The Lysistrata Project, one of the many anti-war actions sweeping the globe, reminds us that women's opposition to war goes back a long way in human history. While I am glad to see a revival of the ancient comedy of women refusing sex to men if they go off to war, I would prefer a more modern version of women's resistance. How about a story where women form a global non-violent army and rise up against the men in power?

USA Today's Tips for American Tourists <http://www.arras.net/circulars/> A survey in the February issue of Conde Nast Traveler states that according to a recent Gallup poll, a declining number of Americans (54% today vs. 79% a year ago) believes that the USA enjoys a favorable image abroad. Further, a majority of Americans (64%) cite a fear of unfriendliness as the top concern of traveling abroad during wartime.

Currency War <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000261.html> Many analysts believe that the real reason for the upcoming US war on Iraq is the Bush administration's goal of preventing further Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) movement toward the euro as an oil transaction currency standard (Iraq has already made the switch). As long as oil is traded predominantly in US dollars, it's easier for the US to maintain economic control

over world oil reserves. Following are links to a number of stories on this subject...

Joshua Clover: What Is Called Violence <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000260.html#000260> [This is largely in response to Keston's Short Critique of Pacifism. I am making a new post rather than a comment since in part I hope to use this as a sort of informal poll on a specific question (at the end of this post). All links open new window] Keston's critique is a concise and articulate distillation of a long and long-elaborated debate. I admire it for that, and I should say that I also agree with its central beliefs. It has two lacunae worth talking about, which I hope will lead from its abstract clarity to a pragmatic discussion of direct action tactics.

Ron Silliman: On The Social Mark Symposium <http://ronsilliman.blogspot.com/> [I'd like to reproduce Ron Silliman's recent post on The Social Mark symposium on Circulars but it's proving to hard to format, so I advise going to his blog to read the post — which goes on to consider Ginsberg and various aspects of affect and content in "political" poetry — in its entirety.] "Like its cousin ambiguity, empathy is something that is exceptionally difficult to communicate in any function of life, let alone a poem. It is absolutely not possible in a text that seeks agreement, or which seeks to demonize anyone..."

The Observer: Revealed: US dirty tricks to win vote on Iraq war Secret document details American plan to bug phones and emails of key Security Council members <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000254.html#000254> [A useful reminder, perhaps, that the new possibilities for organized resistance presented by better communications technology are at the same time new possibilities for the defense of imperialism. — Keston Sutherland] The United States is conducting a secret 'dirty tricks' campaign against UN Security Council delegations in New York as part of its battle to win votes in favour of war against Iraq. Details of the aggressive surveillance operation, which involves interception of the home and office telephones and the emails of UN delegates in New York, are revealed in a document leaked to The Observer.

A Mini-Anthology of Anti-War Poems [Taken from Enough! from O Books] <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000253.html#000253> Rod Smith TED'S HEAD So there's this episode of Mary Tyler Moore where Ted's trying to get a raise & after finagling and shenaniganizing he puts one over on Lou & gets his contract changed to non-exclusive so he can do commercials which is not cool WI Lou & the gang because Ted's just a brainless gimp & it hurts the image of the news to have the anchorman selling tomato slicers & dogfood so Lou gets despondent because the contract can't be rescinded but then he gets mad & calls Ted into his office & says, you know his voice, "You're going to stop doing com-

mercials, Ted” & Ted says “why would I do that Lou?” & Lou says ‘Because if you don’t I’ll punch your face out” & Ted says “I’ll have you arrested” & Lou says “It’ll be too late, your face will be broken, you’ re not gonna get too many commercials with a broken face now are you Ted?” & Ted buckles under to force & everybody loves it that Lou’s not despondent anymore he’s back to his brustling chubby loud loveable whiskey-drinking football-loving ways. Now imagine if Ted were Lou, if Ted were the boss. You know how incredibly fucking brainless Ted is, but let’s imagine he understands & is willing to use force. That’s the situation we’re now in as Americans.

U.S. Diplomat John Brady Kiesling: Letter of Resignation <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000245.html#000245> [The following is the text of John Brady Kiesling's letter of resignation to Secretary of State Colin L. Powell. Mr. Kiesling is a career diplomat who has served in United States embassies from Tel Aviv to Casablanca to Yerevan.] Dear Mr. Secretary: I am writing you to submit my resignation from the Foreign Service of the United States and from my position as Political Counselor in U.S. Embassy Athens, effective March 7. I do so with a heavy heart. The baggage of my upbringing included a felt obligation to give something back to my country. Service as a U.S. diplomat was a dream job. I was paid to understand foreign languages and cultures, to seek out diplomats, politicians, scholars and journalists, and to persuade them that U.S. interests and theirs fundamentally coincided. My faith in my country and its values was the most powerful weapon in my diplomatic arsenal.

Scott Pound: The Other War That's in the Works <http://www.arras.net/circulars/archives/000238.html#000238> [Scott Pound has been posting to the Buffalo Poetics List a running diary of his time in Turkey which I will start posting here also. If I get inspired I'll go back and pick up some of the prior ones.] 2.27.03, 13:00, Bilkent University, Ankara, Turkey A former student of mine who recently graduated came back to campus to see me the other day. He was making the rounds announcing his impending marriage. Delighted for him, I said, “Congratulations! When?” He looked down at his feet for a few seconds and when he looked back up at me all the happiness had left his face. “I don’t know,” he said. “We will wait.” Standing between him and married life is 8-16 months of compulsory military service, and potentially an extended period of conflict in the region, conflict in which he may be personally involved. He thinks a U.S. invasion of Iraq would just be the beginning. He’s probably right.

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Disquiet on the Electronic Front

04 Apr 2003

His column for the Poetry Project Newsletter, printed here in the "director's cut" that ran before the editors trimmed it: a wry census of the poetry blogosphere circa 2003 — Chaxblog, Equanimity, HG Poetics, Lester's Flogspot — as blogaholism claimed its first avant-garde victims. He is one of them, and knows it.

[My latest column for the Poetry Project Newsletter... it was edited quite a bit for print, so this is the director's cut. The full graphic version can be found here <http://www.arras.net/weblog/>.]

Blogaholism continues to claim victims among the unwitting poetry community, with the roster – international, avant-garde, new formalist, new vineyardist, skanky, Spanish and English – ever growing for the fashionable poetaster's blogroll. Keep one eye on your prose as you dawdle among: Chaxblog (Charles Alexander), For the Health of It (Tom Bell), Equanimity and Million Poems (Jordan Davis), Overlap (Drew Gardner), Ululate (Nada Gordon), HG Poetics (Henry Gould), Lester's Flogspot (Patrick Herron), Pantaloons (Jack Kimball), Ineluctable Maps (Anastasios Kozaitis), Jonathan Mayhew's Blog, Ich Bin Ein Iraqi (Camille Roy), Possum Pouch (Dale Smith), Mike Snider's Formal Blog, Elsewhere (Gary Sullivan), WinePoetics (Eileen Tabios), Laurable Dot Com, The Tijuana Bible of Poetics (Heriberto Yopez), SpokenWORD (Komninos Zervos).

A few of these predated Silliman's Blog, one or two even Katherine "the blog queen" Parrish's squish, but several are mere pups. I will spare you the URLs, but a clickable, up-to-date list can be found at Kasey's limetree (limetree.blogspot.com). Soon, no poet will be able to read holding a piece of paper because of the stealthily deleterious effects of carpal tunnel syndrome, a brand of disease leading to crooked, John Merrick-esque postures that – like a model's slumped shoulders in the more swish NYC bars or Orson Welles' citizen's paunch that seems to have taken hold of the UK's sound poetry community – will be imitated by any sensible poseur desirous of seeming of the crowd that "took down Language writing" (Vendler).

Like shrooms after April's swich licour, metablogs – blogs that respond to the phenomenon of blogs like Spinal Tap to heavy metal – are beginning to sprout. Contact the folks at mainstreampoetry.blogspot.com to partake in the literary sensation that's sweeping the world: Mainstream Poetry. (So that Fence thing was smoke and mirrors?) Be one of the grant-funded freshwater bass who write: "Once, on a gusty day, they fell in quatrains, / as unbelievable as dandelion seed's cosmic pendulum." On a different front is the mischievous (= Canadian) web program that's taken on a life, and a bit of cultural capital, of its own, called the "Sillibot." Using the Tjanting author's daily posts as seeds, this artificial intelligence generates Flarfish text based on a markov chain algorithm (look it

up) which it posts, with nonchalant hysteria, to its blog. Unfortunately, the Sil-libot's creator does not want to publicize the URL just yet as it's still being tweaked – the paradigm shift awaits — but in the meantime, you can mess yourself creating automatic sestinas, sonnets pantoums and canzones at Finnish Leevi Lehto's de rigeur "Google Poem" (www.leevilehto.net/google/patterns.asp).

With some trepidation I hope to further the trend with the introduction of another multi-author blog Circulars (arras.net/circulars), which has a mandate to register in persuasive but concise prose the poetry community's opposition to the US government's war policy. As the propaganda states:

"CIRCULARS intends to focus some of the disparate energy by poets and literary critics to enunciate a response to U.S. foreign policy, most significantly the move to war with Iraq. CIRCULARS intends to critique and/or augment some conventional modes of expressing political views that are either entirely analytical, ironic or humanistic. These are all valuable approaches, of course, and not unwelcome on CIRCULARS, but our hope is to create a dynamic, persuasive idiom that can work in a public sphere, mingling elements of rhetoric and stylistics associated with the aforementioned modes — analytical, ironic or humanistic. CIRCULARS is, in this sense, a workshop — a place to explore strategies."

By the time you read this, the war may be several weeks old, and my guess is that the site – the joint creation of several authors acting both as editors and writers – will reflect, for now and for the record, changes in the poetry community's political priorities, sentiments and activities as they occur.

Beehive (beehive.temporalimage.com), edited by Talan Memmott, has just put up their fifth issue, featuring work by Bill Marsh, Juliet Ann Martin, Marianne Shaneen, Millie Niss, Alan Sondheim and others. Good to see names not previously associated with digipo in the mix – Marianne was lugging around a gaffer-taped Bolex on Roebling St. when last I saw her — but I'm also pleased to see Juliet Ann-Martin, whose "ooxxxxooo" (julietmartin.com) was revelatory for its time, grabbing some spotlight. The Iowa Review Web (www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/mainpages/tirwebhome.htm) also has a new issue, featuring a new piece by William Poundstone, "3 Proposals for Bottle Imps," an interview with Motomichi Nakamura by Yang-Hae Chang Heavy Industries, and my interview with John Cayley, suggestively titled "From Byte to Inscription" (kind of a like a James Bond film, or maybe Justin Bond).

Free stuff? Well, you can try the new /ubu ("slash ubu," found at ubu.com/ubu) series of e-books, featuring titles by Kevin Davies, Deanna Ferguson, Richard

Foreman, Madeline Gins, Jessica Grim, Peter Manson, Michael Scharf, Ron Silman, Juliana Spahr, Hannah Weiner, Mac Wellman, and Darren Wershler-Henry (sorry, a touch of Lisztmania there...). Go to the recently revamped Duration Press (durationpress.com) for even more free e-books by the likes of Patrick Durgin, Rachel Levitsky, Brian Strang, Elizabeth Treadwell, Rick Snyder and Marcella Durand – really just the tip of the rapidly deepening iceberg (er...), countering the forces of ecological entropy that's rendering even Antarctica's historical Borchgrevink's hut a pile of stinking guano. Kudos to Jerrold Shiroma for putting together such an amazing site.

For those who don't go much for reading, there are the digital anti-war bumper stickers at Masturbate for Peace (masturbateforpeace.com), with minimalist offerings such as "Touch Your Sack, Not Iraq," and "My Bush Doesn't Declare War!" And if that's too much for your impoverished lexicalism, then it doesn't get much lighter than this page of Japanese Emoticons (club.pep.ne.jp/~hiroette/en/facemarks/index.html), including such classics of the industry as:

[see site for graphic: <http://www.arras.net/weblog/>]

"Here you are, the tea."

and

[ditto...]

"He sends you a kiss with a sound effect."

Ok, it's not the Cantos, or even Eistenstein's Film Sense, but it's an easy in for those of you who are responding to Eliot Weinberger's call (arras.net/circulars/archives/000130.html) to learn the names of more Asian poets – I think this one's called Hiroette.

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Book Launch: Fashionable Noise (Stefans) & Platform (Toscano)

19 May 2003

A book launch pitched chiefly on the promise of cheap wine and a cheaper cover price — the reading itself, Stefans doubts, will occur.

Please join Rodrigo and I in lifting a glass of... something to, uh... ourselves, Tuesday, May 27th, to celebrate the launch of his excellent book of poems, Platform, and my curious book of essays and poems, Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics, both just out from Atelos Press.

Where: Spoonbill and Sugartown bookstore, in the charming, little celebrated gated community of Williamsburg, Brooklyn, on 218 Bedford Avenue. It's the L

train, stupide! (as zee French might say) — zee Bedford stop, head south a few blocks.

What time: 7-9 (hours of the "magic light").

There will be wine, cheese, olives and depending on our attitudes toward formalities a brief reading, but I doubt it. I'm planning on selling my book on at a slight discount — \$10 (\$3 off) — don't know what Rodrigo's plans are but he might do the same. Get it while it's cheap. Tell friends to get it while it's cheap. Tell everyone.

Please read (but don't believe) the promo info below to be further persuaded of the necessity of your presence at this event. And there's nothing better than a Tuesday night of loitering on the streets of Wburg!

Cheers,
Brian

Rodrigo Toscano's Platform is a political one; his writings are predicated on the political conditions of contemporary life. But his work is not (and will never be) predicted by those conditions; indeed, outwitting, unnerving, and outspeaking the forces and figures clinging to control is one of his signal artistic strategies. It would be correct to read Platform as a triumphant product of precise and complex labor (thus adding to the tradition set by of Louis Zukofsky). But where the spirit of Johann Sebastian Bach informed Zukofsky's work, we would suggest that it is the spirit of the Teatro Campesino that informs Toscano's his poems carry out brilliantly creative interventions. The works is bitingly inventive and yet delicately meticulous; outrageous, funny, anti-hypocritical, and "unfuckingrightgaggable," Platform is victory for the political intelligence whose exercise is now, more than ever, a human necessity.

Rodrigo Toscano grew up in San Diego. After a few years in the San Francisco Bay Area working as a social worker and an activist within the labor movement, he moved to New York, where he continues this work. He is a nationally influential writer, whose work along the intersections of social and aesthetic activism is adding new dimensions to contemporary poetics.

Platform is Rodrigo Toscano's third book. His first book, The Disparities, was published jointly by Green Integer and O Books in 2002. His second book, Partisans (which, due to a variety of circumstances, came out before his first), was published in 1999 by O Books.

<http://www.atelos.org/platform.htm>

Brian Kim Stefans' *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics* eludes any singular description — it is too various. At once, *Fashionable Noise* explodes with ingredients of essay, games, and poetry, and it is always engaging, always thought provoking. How does limitless replication and change affect a dialogue one might try to have with another poet's words? What's so interesting about the hidden code behind the link Walt Disney that misdirects you, takes you to the wrong site? Stefans confronts these questions, and the ease with which he simultaneously discusses, investigates, and incorporates those elements that might make up a digital poetics is astounding. Generating poetry with a computer program, synthesizing Scots by using an algorithm accompanied by dictionaries, employing an ICQ chat transcript as the conduit for delivering a significant discussion on digital poetics: these are just a few examples of what readers will find in this book. Although "the webwork, unlike the earthwork, can never be photographed from a satellite perspective," *Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics* is on the forefront of mapping out a rapidly emerging, constantly morphing, virtual terrain.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of *Free Space Comix* (1998), *Gulf* (1998/2000), and *Angry Penguins* (2000). He has been an active presence on the internet for several years, editing *arras.net* — a ceaselessly original site devoted to new media poetry and poetics — and creating works such as the acclaimed Flash poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" and a setting of the "e" chapter of Christian Bök's *Christian Bök's Eunoia*. He is an active literary and cultural critic, publishing frequently in the *Boston Review*, *Jacket*, and elsewhere. He lives in New York City.

<http://www.atelos.org/fashionable.htm>

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Stefans / Toscano book launch this tuesday (reprise)

25 May 2003

The same Williamsburg launch, re-sent with the hype trimmed and the L-train directions sharpened — repetition being the impresario's native tongue.

Please join Rodrigo and I in lifting a glass of... something to, uh... ourselves...

Tuesday, May 27th...

to celebrate the launch of our books just out from Atelos Press.

Where: Spoonbill and Sugartown bookstore...

it's the L train, Bedford stop, head south a few blocks to "mini mall" (just after Earwax records).

<http://www.spoonbillbooks.com/>

What time: 7-9.

There will be wine, cheese, olives, maybe a reading.

Both books will be on sale at discount.

Some of us will go out for dinner afterwards somewhere near and cheap.

Please read (but don't believe) the hype below:

Rodrigo Toscano's Platform is a political one; his writings are predicated on the political conditions of contemporary life. But his work is not (and will never be) predicted by those conditions; indeed, outwitting, unnerving, and outspeaking the forces and figures clinging to control is one of his signal artistic strategies. It would be correct to read Platform as a triumphant product of precise and complex labor (thus adding to the tradition set by of Louis Zukofsky). But where the spirit of Johann Sebastian Bach informed Zukofsky's work, we would suggest that it is the spirit of the Teatro Campesino that informs Toscano's his poems carry out brilliantly creative interventions. The works is bitinglly inventive and yet delicately meticulous; outrageous, funny, anti-hypocritical, and "unfuckingrightgaggable," Platform is victory for the political intelligence whose exercise is now, more than ever, a human necessity.

Rodrigo Toscano grew up in San Diego. After a few years in the San Francisco Bay Area working as a social worker and an activist within the labor movement, he moved to New York, where he continues this work. He is a nationally influential writer, whose work along the intersections of social and aesthetic activism is adding new dimensions to contemporary poetics.

Platform is Rodrigo Toscano's third book. His first book, The Disparities, was published jointly by Green Integer and O Books in 2002. His second book, Partisans (which, due to a variety of circumstances, came out before his first), was published in 1999 by O Books.

<http://www.atelos.org/platform.htm>

Brian Kim Stefans' Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics eludes any singular description it is too various. At once, Fashionable Noise explodes with ingredients of essay, games, and poetry, and it is always engaging, always thought provoking. How does limitless replication and change affect a dialogue one might try to have with another poet's words? What's so interesting about the hidden code behind the link Walt Disney that misdirects you, takes you to the wrong site? Stefans confronts these questions, and the ease with which he

simultaneously discusses, investigates, and incorporates those elements that might make up a digital poetics is astounding. Generating poetry with a computer program, synthesizing Scots by using an algorithm accompanied by dictionaries, employing an ICQ chat transcript as the conduit for delivering a significant discussion on digital poetics: these are just a few examples of what readers will find in this book. Although "the webwork, unlike the earthwork, can never be photographed from a satellite perspective," Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics is on the forefront of mapping out a rapidly emerging, constantly morphing, virtual terrain.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of Free Space Comix (1998), Gulf (1998/2000), and Angry Penguins (2000). He has been an active presence on the internet for several years, editing arras.net a ceaselessly original site devoted to new media poetry and poetics and creating works such as the acclaimed Flash poem "The Dreamlife of Letters" and a setting of the "e" chapter of Christian Bök's Christian Bök's Eunoia. He is an active literary and cultural critic, publishing frequently in the Boston Review, Jacket, and elsewhere. He lives in New York City.

<http://www.atelos.org/fashionable.htm>

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Silliman on Lowell

05 Jul 2003

By 2003 the arguments had moved off-list to arras.net; here Stefans points the room back toward his own blog, where the Silliman-on-Lowell business was being conducted at a length the listserv could no longer hold.

I've been writing up a storm of sorts on my blog of late — hence my lack of contribution to the listservs. It's probably all nonsense anyway but I invite you to check it out:

Silliman on Lowell

<http://www.arras.net/weblog/000694.html>

The "Third Way", etc.

<http://www.arras.net/weblog/000700.html>

The "Third Way," etc.

This is in response to something Kasey wrote on his blog, which includes at the moment writing by both him and Michael Magee that is worth reading if you have any interest in this debate:

My sense is: so much as you permit there being "two ways," there will have to — especially for a good Hegelian — be a third way. But if one lives in a universe of heterogenous (however provisional) wholes coming in conflict with each other at all points, none with compelling claims to be more ascendant than others (this is, of course, possible), then these "thirds" will always themselves be provisional, and are if anything aids to thinking. (If these "claims" are compelling, then the "third ways" tend to have a revolutionary aspect to them — as it might have in England when Pound was there — performing what might be the function of a "second" or "other" way. It's obviously most salient when a language — such as Italian — is being used for the first time to perform in fashions usually reserved for other languages, in this example, Latin. We have no such divide right now unless someone were to attempt a poem or novel in Black American English — far as I know.)

If one were to put on a small books shelf Pierre Guyotat's *Eden Eden Eden*, Gertrude Stein's *Tender Buttons* and William Burrough's *Naked Lunch*, then put — on the other side of the bookshelf — Robert Lowell's *Life Studies*, Edgar Lee Master's *Spoon River Anthology* and even — for kicks — the collected Robert Frost or the Amy Lowell of *"Patterns"* — her exploitation of the idea of "imagism" — you could probably place most Language poetry somewhere in between. Language poetry often has the reproducibility of form that one associates with the latter writers — one hits upon something and is able to exploit it for an impressive duration — with the modernist charge of the former — desperate acts of creation often involving ephemerality and "failure" — but in neither case entirely sacrifices a claim to "realism" entirely (at least among the Americans, who can often recuperate their work into a philosophy of pragmatism), nor to a secure position in relation to national norms of discourse (i.e. what is not allowed to be said). I.e. the very functionality of the method seems to preclude there being as negative a charge as might occur in a neo-romantic vein (whether our neo-romantic be Rimbaud, Kafka or Beckett — and these are hardly Romantics!).

I'm being schematic here (and maybe confusing), but certainly, much of RS's writing will tend toward the side of autobiographical, and more or less dispassionate, social realists than it will on the side of the fiery or oddball, truly "negative" writing of the formal innovators. This doesn't make it "bad" writing — I'm a fan of much of his work, obviously, just look at */ubu* — but because a formal technique is being employed (in his case the "new sentence," which never, frankly, struck me as radical) hardly spares a poem (such as his tiring, distracted *Roof* book *"N/O"*) from being branded as passive — about language, about society, about issues of epistemology and genre. What can be more "quietudinous" than a passivity regarding these issues? In comparison, the

tortured, jagged, compressed rhythms of Lowell's "The Skunk Hour" come off as punk rock.

I don't think any Language poet with the exception of Bruce Andrews (and maybe Bernstein and Watten) has taken the project of the evisceration of national social (or linguistic) mores to the same extremes than the great French tradition (or anti-tradition) of Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Lautreamont, Jarry, the Situationists (Guyotat is often identified as one of them), etc. — not to mention predecessors Rousseau or de Sade. Most Language writing looks quite polite and "healthy" in comparison, at least from this perspective — the Protestant ethic of the good work done daily in order to "make it new" appears as a subprogram of much of this writing. This is not a statement about American poetry as a whole — that's more complex — or all of Language poetry — the fragmentary nature of Bernstein's early and middle-period writing seems to me attentive to this ethics of failure, of anti-systemicity, in "hot" modernism — but oddly, someone like Plath occupies a more critical space — there with Ginsberg and Burroughs — than one would think. There is an "out on a limb" aspect to what she was trying to do that is impressive to me, and her later method doesn't strike me as less "radical" than that of, say, Rae Armantrout — quite the contrary, in fact.

When I hear about a truly national debate (or maybe a good essay by Christopher Hitchens) about the unquietudinous-ness of Language poetry then I will be impressed — so far, it has not happened. There's nothing wrong with this, of course, I just don't understand how one can point to a "lineage" in one's writing as somehow conferring a badge on a writer as being on the good side of a — presumed, but in my mind quite "imaginary" — literary divide. To suggest Language poets as somehow sweating in the trenches and other poets not — categorically — strikes me as nonsense. And it always seems to involve the rather limited purview of "American" writing — observing how the two principled, dueling Scots, MacDiarmid and Finlay, came to a rapprochement at the end of the former's career should be illustrative of where the future — for "us" — lies. Much of this won't matter: the 1200 pages of *The Alphabet* will be judged on its own merits as something to read, as will the 60 or so pages of *Life Studies*. We can only guess why these works will be interesting in the future, one that may not even have room for such concepts as "perfect binding."

(P.S. It's ironic that, in that bit from Duncan, he quotes the end of the Lowell poem about Delmore Schwartz. My favorite ending of a Duncan poem is that one in which some attention to different registers of style in contrapuntal play is demonstrated, and that ends:

A second: a moose painted by Stubbs,
where last year's extravagant antler's

lie on the ground.
The forlorn moosey-faced poem wears
new antler-buds,
the same,
"a little heavy, a little contrived,"
his only beauty to be
all moose.

It's actually the same kind of compression that Lowell brings in at the end of the Schwartz poem — a sudden swerve from the dominant, even heroic, meter into a bathetic, skipping tone, finally focusing on a fine point at the end as if the poem were balanced on a pin, like some geological balancing act out in the Yellowstone Park. Duncan almost seems drunk here himself — and I like it. Ironically, the climax results in a telescoped image of an animal (or animal part) — "strong" imagism, à la white chickens, coming to save the day again.

Few poets were more afraid of letting his metrics be taken over by anything as vulgar as social realism or speech as Duncan — I find so much of him unreadable because of all the gaudy European trappings, the Pound-envy, the loping "stately" rhythms and capitalized Nouns, like he were Philip Sidney and didn't know better, or Mallarmé, enriching every detail with "correspondence". I guess I just never believed he had as much access to higher states of knowledge than the rest of us — I hope it's fair to be suspicious here, since he made some huge claims. In terms of "fear" versus "freedom," I'm not sure that Duncan wins. One is, after all, quite free before the "void" — it is, after all, the evacuation of meaning that provided some of the bases for the theory of Language writing itself (and that brought Mallarmé himself to start slinging words across the page like dice).

When Duncan starts psycho-analyzing his writers — Spicer is apparently the poet of "death" while he himself was of life, or sex, or whatever, from my dim memory of the Spicer biography — one must — as a good iconoclast and heretic — recoil, as it's clear such oppositional binaries are only intended to create the image of power around the naming creature, ye who sets terms (terms being, in themselves, very useful). Sacrificing this power for the sake of flows, on the one hand, or in service of the dialectic, on the other, seems to me to be imperative — if that doesn't sound too much like a "spiritual" disposition. But they must at the same time be questioned at all moments if possible — why not, seems to me the only confirmation of living that is reliable.

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Bells & Whistles

07 Jul 2003

Still on the "School of Quietude," now with Silliman asking whether Stefans had really called his positions "knee-jerk, even reactionary." He had, he concedes, and half-apologizes — then argues that Silliman may be the most-read critic in an uncritical America, which is not quite the compliment it sounds.

<http://www.arras.net/weblog/>

My hope is to gather more thoughts on this "School of Quietude" issue while I may, running up against this logic of the blog, which is to permit spokes of divergent meaning that could distract from a potentially absent core (I like the centripetal / centrifugal dialectic but it has its dangers). However, Ron Silliman asks, on his blog, whether a certain statement of his on "vispo" — visual poetry, a sort of grab bag descendent of Concrete poetry and, I guess, visual digital stuff — is what I, in my statement on Lowell, characterized as RS's "famously knee-jerk, even reactionary, positions."

I'm not going to claim that what I wrote was very nice — it wasn't, of course, and I suppose I could become infamous for being knee-jerk as well —so I apologize. But one might almost believe that Silliman is the most read critic in our decidedly uncritical America right now (certainly his advertisements of his hit count, a weird tick that other bloggers have picked up, seem to suggest it) along with the most trusted (I don't ever actually read much in terms of criticism of his very content, and he's certainly very selective of what he links to). Anyway, so I poked the growing behemoth, if only to give a little flavor to what I wrote and, more importantly, to keep it honest. Going out on a limb with something a little off-color like that while trying to make a point leaves one vulnerable to being dismissed outright.

Most recently, Ron writes:

"One thing that all the works I looked at here have in common is that they' re static – straight JPEG files, no Flash, not even an animated GIF. This I found very liberating. It puts all of the demands of the work right back onto the image itself, rather than trying to distract us with bells & whistles. It also suggests work that, over time, will be able to survive beyond current computing platforms. Anyone who is old enough to have seen "animated" poems written in Harvard Graphics or Ventura Publisher when they were the presentation software programs of the day will recognize the advantage of that. At the very worst, these works can just be scanned into whatever new platform exists ten, fifty or 150 years from now & be good to go, something you can be certain won't happen with the present generation of animated, sound-augmented writing."

There are several obvious flaws to this statement.

For starters, this assumption that .jpegs and .gifs will be what creators of new computer platforms will want to preserve from old ones, and not Flash and sound files. Why is this? Both formats are simply rows of digits that are then interpreted into something — an image, a sound, a bit of interactive software — that is translated by a machine into something more or less comprehensible by the senses and intellect. That one is for a "two-dimensional" image file and the other a "three-dimensional" or time-based digital object should not distract one from the like basis of each.

The second is a sort of purism about the "image itself" apart from the "bells and whistles." Did one ever write, after the first decades of film, that "I like this photograph because, unlike a movie, we are not distracted by the motion of the objects — they just sit there to be looked at"? Or after listening to a quartet of Beethoven's: "I would have much preferred one stringed instrument as the other three were distracting." Certainly, any Flash artist would want to create works that integrate the separate elements into a whole — if it fails, that's one thing, but the tool or the motivation itself cannot be blamed. (I've never used sound in my Flash works because I suck at it.)

The third is to compare the trivial experiments in the very nascent stages of a technology — the animated poems of Harvard Graphics or Ventura Publisher (I haven't seen them, but no doubt these are silent and without interactivity) with poems in Flash. This would be comparable to criticizing cinema based on the films of Muybridge and Edison, or criticizing live motion digital graphics — the stuff that brings you Titanic and Matrix Reloaded — based on an anecdote about Max Headroom and early episodes of Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer. Ironically, people love to look at these early incarnations of art in new media — the retrospective of video work from the 70s that was up at the Whitney two years ago was fantastic, and emulators of early computer platforms are rampant on the internet — there's even one for the ZX81 (search my blog to find it).

Lastly, it's quite obvious that Flash cannot be "scanned into a new medium" but neither can film — can you imagine people walking around holding flip-books of Abel Gance's three-screen, 6-hour or so long Napoleon in front of gas lamps? And can visual poetry be "scanned and good to go"? I suppose the assumption is that one prints out a .jpeg, that the paper on which it's printed will last 150 years, and then it can be scanned to reproduce what the original .jpeg looked like. But inkjet inks don't last that long, and cultural memory is even shorter — who will be around to say you got it right, and who is creating verbal descriptions for this work now? (Needless to say, one can't scan in ballet.)

One thing I always ask, though, when I see "vispo" is not "is it poetry" but, in the most basic sense, "what is it about"? I rarely see discussions of content, of social

relevance, of ethics, or even of art history — as in the use of appropriation to give a discursive element to what might otherwise be a completely non-linguistic creation — in relation to "vispo." Is it all just tweaking the sign / image divide? Is it's only purpose to make us ask questions of genre? Why have no visual poets tried to occupy the same space in American culture that, say, Andy Warhol did, or try to be as politically relevant and upsetting as the Situationists (or the clowns who made that "Empire Strikes Back" poster with Rumsfeld cast as Darth Vader)?

I think there is content to Mikel And's work, for example, it seems to have some spiritual / ecological dimension — some relation of the organic component of graphemes that suggests an interest in biodiversity — and Basinski often incorporates aspects of Greek mythology in his work that seem to suggest a relationship to the paintings of Cy Twombly when drops in tags about the sacking of Troy, etc. There's probably writing on them somewhere but I've not investigated it.

The list of great predecessors — Finlay, de Campos — are rich in social and aesthetic dimensions that I've written about elsewhere (my article in Jacket appears here: <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-by-stefans.html>; a better one by Drew Milne appears here: <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-milne.html>). Certainly, the TRG — Steve McCaffery and bpNichol — have created a rich discourse around their work that investigates some of the classic concepts familiar from Language poetry and deconstructionism, but with a "pataphysical dimension and modal variety that make reading this work fulfilling in its own right, beyond its use as "theory."

"Content" might be a clumsy word to use when discussing the thematics of what Finlay is doing — I often use the term "thematics" instead, since, at best, the disparate universe of his works points to some pre-Socratic philosophical landscape (located "here and now" in Scotland, of course) that simply cannot be revealed in material world. His content is the lava of history that flows under our fragile creations — the Roman coliseum, the Macintosh computer — and which only reveals itself in moments of terrible conflagration, social "eruptions" in a sense. It's all very scary. But certainly, one might look at his use of charged political symbols, such as the guillotine and the swastika, as some attempt to insure his work is never discussed in purely formal terms — is it "poetry" or not? — but rather to throw the focus on these subterranean aspects of his themes. If only for this reason, I've often focused on Finlay's place in the "vispo" universe — he doesn't let you relax into your prejudices.

Ironically, Ron has chosen a purely aesthetic — dare I say "quietist" — stance, and one based on fairly conservative aesthetic positions (the "pure" image released from any sort of social or historical considerations) to discuss, and subtly shout

down, the innovations that are being made in poetry using Flash and other new media technologies. His statement are even angled such as to preclude the possibility of such innovations, without a single piece of historical data to justify this preclusion.

I'll be the first to say that there is a lot of pretty clunky stuff being done in Flash, but my sense is that no "tradition" (or shall we say "lineage") in the arts is never as clean as one would like (but who wants it clean?). One needn't throw away the technology after discovering that the technology itself does not provide enough material for the theme of the work — quite the contrary, this void or emptiness can be a beginning (not to sound too much like Yoda). I'll be happy when Flash works are not "about Flash" or "about interactivity," not to mention when poetry is not "about language" or "about lineage." I hope this doesn't sound prescriptive — all options seem, to me, open (except, of course, that of being "quiet").

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further musings from Silliman and Lowell from the blog

08 Jul 2003

Cross-posted from the blog with a preemptive apology for the "American gunslinging," this installment hires Robert Lowell as a "staff writer" and lets his prose on Williams do the arguing. The conceit — Lowell revived by literary CPR to model the humility of a poet changing his mind — is a graceful way of scolding the present without saying so.

[Apologies again for just shoveling this in your inbox, please shout if this is worthless American gunslinging to y'all. I think it's important to use this moment in contention to clear up some ideas - or some of mine, at any rate - concerning the distracting generalizations that seem to me to have have been occurring since before I was born.]

I don't have time to write today... probably good news for you! But I've hired a stand-in — one of my staff writers, Robert Lowell, who has recently responded quite positively to literary CPR, has agreed to submit some of his early comments on William Carlos Williams and the Beats to FSC.

Lowell's collected prose is quite short, about 370 pages, and not ambitious at all as a "critical" collection. In fact, they are not unlike blog entries themselves — informal appreciations of what he felt informed him (though far from "lugubrious"). The parts that I most enjoy are those which depict him changing his mind, and which illustrate for me the humility one poet had before the language, which he recognized as coming from elsewhere, in a sense — transmissions from the culture in which he lived but felt that, at times, he didn't know. I don't think it was ever in fashion to be entirely candid about one's failures, especially after having won the Pulitzer with a first book.

Lowell's first two short essays on WCW were written in 1947, around the time he published *Lord Weary's Castle* (the title of which, Ron Silliman claims, told us "all about his literary allegiances"). But his longer, more considered "career assessment"-type essay was written in '62, from which the following quotes are taken:

To explain the full punishment I felt on first reading Williams, I should say a little about what I was studying at the time. A year or so before, I had read some introductory books on the enjoyment of poetry, and was knocked over by the examples in the free-verse sections. When I arrived at college, independent, fearful of advice, and with all the world before me, I began to rummage through the Cambridge bookshops. I found books that must have been looking for a buyer since the student days of Trumbull Stickney: soiled metrical treatises written by obscure English professors in the eighteen-nineties. They were full of glorious things: rising rhythm, falling rhythm, feet with Greek names, stanzas from Longfellow's "Psalm of Life," John Drinkwater, and Swinburne. Nothing seemed simpler than meter. I began experiments with an exotic foot, short, long, two shorts, then fell back on iambics. My material now took twice as many words, and I rolled out Spenserian stanzas on Job and Jonah surrounded by recently seen Nantucket scenery. Everything I did was grand, ungrammatical, and had a timeless, hackneyed quality. All this was ended by reading Williams. It was as though some homemade ship, part Spanish galleon, part paddle-wheels, kitchen pots, and elastic bands and worked by hand, had anchored to a filling station.

This is, to me, a fantastic, and well-constructed, paragraph — the use of the word "ungrammatical" followed by the 7-word sentence hinge that dramatizes RL's conversion is subtle. The phrase "All this was ended by Williams" almost reminds me of the "All the field was lifted..." line that Williams himself wrote about Olson's Projective Verse essay. Trumbull Stickney!

Next, here is Lowell on Williams's idiom. Note the use of the word "exotic," which I think is an accurate way to convey the very alien nature of Williams's use of "speech" in the context of anti-intuitive, quasi "formalist" — dare I say "futurist" — lineation:

I have emphasized Williams's simplicity and nakedness and have no doubt been misleading. His idiom comes from many sources, from speech and reading, both of various kinds; the blend, which is his own invention, is generous and even exotic. Few poets can come near to his wide clarity and dashing rightness with words, his dignity and almost Alexandrian modulations of voice. His short lines often speed up and simplify hugely drawn out and ornate sentence structures. I once typed out his direct but densely observed poem, "The Semblables," in a single prose paragraph. Not a word or its placing had been changed, but the poem has changed into a piece of smothering, magnificent rhetoric, much more like Faulkner than the original Williams.

One might almost think that Williams, who wanted to learn from the American idiom of his times, was all about simple sentence structures in the ideologically-tinged reading of his attention to "plain speech." I've always contended that

Williams had little to do with "plain speech," which seems to me a hangover from Puritan times when our souls (like the economy of a "rogue nation") were supposed to be transparent.

I was under the impression that the autobiographical free verse poems of Life Studies were the clearest indication of the effect of the Beats on Lowell's poetry, but the following suggests otherwise. I trust any poet who is honest about their conversions, including those who seem intent on changing their mind if only to keep it alive. The question, then, is how to keep a poem alive — here's one story (this could almost be a section from Eileen Tabios's excellent, probably utterly forgotten, *Black Lightning* — look it up!). I thought "Skunk Hour" was a fantastic poem when growing up and still do:

"Skunk Hour" was begun in mid-August 1957 and finished about a month later. In March of the same year, I had been giving readings on the West Coast, often reading six days a week and sometimes twice on a single day. I was in San Francisco, the era and setting of Allen Ginsberg and all about, very modest poets were waking up prophets. I became sorely aware of how few poems I had written, and that these few had been finished at the latest three or four years earlier. Their style seemed distant, symbol-ridden, and willfully difficult. I began to paraphrase my Latin quotations, and to add extra syllables to a line to make it clearer and more colloquial. I felt my old poems hid what they were really about, and many times offered a stiff, humorless, and even impenetrable surface. I am no convert to the "beats." I know well, too, that the best poems are not necessarily poems that read aloud. Many of the greatest poems can only be read to one's self, for inspiration is no substitute for humor, shock, narrative, and a hypnotic voice, the four musts for oral performance. Still, my own poems seemed like prehistoric monsters dragged down into the bog and death by their ponderous armor. I was reciting what I no longer felt. What influenced me more than San Francisco and reading aloud was that for some time I had been writing prose. I felt that the best style for poetry was none of the many poetic styles in English, but something like the prose of Chekhov or Flaubert.

When I returned to my home, I began writing lines in a new style. No poem, however, got finished and soon I left off and tried to forget the whole headache. Suddenly, in August, I was struck by the sadness of writing nothing, and having nothing to write, of having, at least, no language. When I began writing "Skunk Hour," I felt that most of what I knew about writing was a hindrance.

Here's a type of self-criticism that I would hope becomes addictive (not least with me). How many poets do you know who call their knowledge a "hindrance"? And if this is just a sign of manic depressiveness, then I don't know what to say except the depths, at times, are productive of useful confrontations with one's ego. Is this the writing of a person who was tied to (in Silliman's words) "presumptions about 'what poetry should be.'" (BTW, Has anyone ever noticed how James Schuyler's elegy for Frank O'Hara, "Buried At Springs," is practically indistinguishable, metrically and tonally, from a Life Studies poem. Sheik it out!)

Lastly, here is Lowell on the "poetry wars." Reading the following gives me the impression that Ron Silliman's contention that the "school of quietude" is performing literary CPR by buttressing the collected Lowell — they probably are, but who cares? — can be countered by a contention that Silliman is performing a similar service — by reviving the "poetry wars" he and other "New Americans" (the values of the Language poets don't seem to play a large role here) are able to don the old Cold War armor and appear rather fresh again. This is just a suspicion, and certainly there is no reason to "care" about this either, but alas I can't get over the nagging feeling that these forms of balkanization are stripping the poetry culture of an ability to think subtly through complex issues.

A seemingly unending war has been going on for as long as I can remember between Williams and his disciples and the principals and disciples of another school of modern poetry. The Beats are on one side, the university poets are on the other. Lately [in the sixties] the gunfire has been hot. With such unlikely Williams recruits as Karl Shapiro blasting away, it has become unpleasant to stand in the middle in a position of impartiality.

The war is an old one for me. In the late thirties, I was at Kenyon College to study under John Crowe Ransom. The times hummed with catastrophe and ideological violence, both political and aesthetical. The English departments were clogged with worthy but outworn and backward-looking scholars whose tastes in the moderns were most often superficial, random, and vulgar. Students who wanted to write got little practical help from their professors. They studied the classics as monsters that were slowly losing their fur and feathers and leaking a little sawdust. What one did oneself was all chance and shallowness, and no profession seemed wispier and less needed than that of the poet. My own group, that of Tate and Ransom, was all for the high discipline, for putting on the full armor of the past, for making poetry something that would take a man's full weight and that would bear his complete intelligence, passion, and subtlety. Almost anything, the Greek and Roman classics, Elizabethan dramatic poetry, seventeenth-century metaphysical verse, old and modern critics, aestheticians and philosophers, could be supplied up and again made necessary. The struggle perhaps centered on making the old metrical forms usable again to express the depths of one's experience.

For us, Williams was of course part of the revolution that had renewed poetry, but he was a byline. Opinions varied on his work. It was something fresh, secondary, and minor, or it was the best that free verse could do. He was the one writer with the substance, daring, and staying power to make the short free-verse poem something considerable. One was shaken when the radical conservative critic Yvor Winters spoke of Williams's "By the road to the contagious hospital" as a finer, more lasting piece of craftsmanship than "Gerontion."

Well, nothing will do for everyone. It's hard for me to see how I and the younger poets I was close to could at that time have learned much from Williams. It was all we could do to keep alive and follow our own heavy program. That time is gone, and now young poets are perhaps more conscious of the burden and the hardening of this old formalism. Too many poems have been written to rule. They show off their authors'

efforts and mind, but little more. Often the culture seems to have passed them by. And, once more, Dr. Williams is a model and a liberator. What will come, I don't know. Williams, unlike, say, Marianne Moore, seems to be one of those poets who can be imitated anonymously. His style is almost a common style and even what he claims for it—the American style. Somehow, written without his speed and genius, the results are usually dull, a poem at best well-made but without breath.

Lowell's Shakespearean approach to the culture wars — he occupies the role of Prospero in the staging of the Ariels vs. Calibans — seems, to me, just more trustworthy, at this moment in time (but also that), then the Leninist mode of aligning forces around some perception of obdurate "class" values (not to mention those of "nation") that are unclear even to those on which you side. Making your enemies out to be utter conformists while all your buddies are free-thinking individualists just never struck me as a good tactic.

I think it's a sign of the even-handedness of "madman" Lowell's approach that he includes this anecdote about Yvor Winters, and it seems to me that Lowell, if anything, hopes only to make this "war" tenable as something of cultural value, were that possible, than to win it! Such a dramatist's flair would be welcome in Silliman's blog. And sad to say, the final line of this excerpt seems to me true of a lot of the writing that RS seems to class under the "school" of plain speech — few are able to maintain the level of tension that appears in Williams' best work. Silliman may be right that there is a shipwreck occurring, but I'm not sure we are looking at the right shore.

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Getting Ready to Have Been Skunked

11 Jul 2003

Kasey Mohammad has taken up Lowell's "Skunk Hour" on his own blog; Steve Evans has taken up Stefans's defense of Lowell, and drawn the line at hearing "Skunk Hour" likened to punk rock. With laundry to do and a construction job to get back to, Stefans gathers the threads before they scatter.

[Please read the blog for more sophisticated formatting: www.arras.net/weblog.]

Kasey once again puts in the hours on his blog, this time about Lowell's "Skunk Hour." I don't have time to read the most recent post with any attention, I have laundry to do (and have to get back to my construction job).

But I caught wind of the following from Steve Evans' Third Factory there:

Though Lowell leaves me cold after numerous dutiful attempts, I'd been following Free Space Comix's recent defense of him with interest and admiration - until I hit the claim about "the tortured, jagged, compressed rhythms" of "Skunk Hour" being like "punk rock." I'd as soon assent to that statement as vote for Bush in 2004.

What I wrote was, of course, quite different:

There's a matter of context — I would never mistake Lowell for a member of Black Flag — and of the verb "come off," as here means "mistakenly appear to be". One can fart on a subway and one can fart in church - in one case, it's an act of indifference or even (considering the options, such as vomiting) "quietude," and in another heresy. Of course, I was being provocative, but I'm not sure what the point of elliding the subtlety of this statement is; such activity overripens this discussion, gets it ready to be old news too soon. I think it pays to be careful, if one cares.

The 60 so odd pages of "Non," from N/O, are rather listless and, I say, also tedious. More importantly, though, you will not find any poignant societal perspective there even after twenty pages, compared to which the 8 or so stanzas of "Skunk Hour" are like a 1 minute 30 second burst of -indeed - "negative" energy. Lowell lines up his targets and then takes them down; Silliman drifts along — in a similar quasi-pastoral mode, paratactically or not — reminding us periodically of his cred or "lineage" as a post-Marxist, post-structuralist syntactician ("Schizophrenoform"). The landscape is, at least in my view (I am getting a little forceful and final in my statements of quality here, I fear), left much the way he found it.

"The car radio bleats..." (from the "Skunk Hour") has a similar, if not the same, negatively that Adorno emits when writing about popular culture; it's an uncompromising condemnation, modified by a bad mood. And am I all that wrong in hearing "I am an antrichirst" in the words "I myself am Hell" — in contrast to various "I's" (mostly exhibited as "eyes") we see below? Drop the 8 stanzas of "Skunk Hour" into "Non" and I'm sure you will see — like dropping Radiohead's "Morning Bell," one of their sweeter songs, into Eno's "tedious" Thursday Afternoon — that you will hear compression, negativity, focus, passion, and noise.

If the issue is class and political viewpoint, it's worth remembering that a lot of punk rock bands were 1) populated by upper-middle-class renegades like Joe Strummer, or 2) populated by neo-Nazi skinheads or alluded to Nazi imagery quite careless of politics. (I don't think anyone is saying Lowell is a neo-Nazi, of course.)

The following is from "Non":

Divide wire coat hangers into those with cardboard, those without, those wrapped in filmy white paper, whether the hook is formed by one metal strand or two, design of the twist at the base of the neck

what I like most about the Albany Public Library is that it smells the same as when I was six years old

Schizophrenoform

It's not that there's a dead cat in the gutter but that it's been there all week

snoodlenook

*Little moths under the porchlight, be with me now A dog in the distance barks
compulsively Birds chirp to greet the early dusk*

*the landlady lives at the foot of the stairs that run down the hill beside the house so
wooded you don't even notice them*

&nbs p; Dreamlike, the color TV thru the neighbor's gauze curtain

ice crackles as it melts

*nibbling Cracker Jacks from the palm of my hand the little man in the blue suit salutes
the runner forgets to run, so is easily forced at second*

Etc. etc. It goes on like this (or has gone on like this) for 30 or so pages.

Is it really a strength of the “new sentence” that a pretty dull observation about the Albany Public Library, conveyed indifferently, rubs up against rather bizarre coinages (or perhaps overhead neologisms) such as “snoodlenook”? Is it right of me to hear the attenuation of syntax that we enjoy in WCW’s “As the cat...” poem in the first stanza here, or one of Marianne Moore’s “precisionist” poems about the structures of animals and shorelines, but with none of the formal elegance (or “precision”)? What is the nature of the irony of “be with me now” in reference to the moths —just dropping an echo of some other strata of language, some plead to God one might make in the throes of a distaster? Why?

But most importantly, beyond these syntlistic issues: where is the urgency here? I really do believe that arguments can be made for this sort of poetics of “drift” — the “Drifted... drifted precitate” section of Pound’s Mauberley, in the section in which Mauberley is in exile, echoes through my mind as I write this — but I’d really like to hear them, especially related to a politics of “critique.”)

Compare “the landlady” and “a dog” to the lengths Lowell takes to make his figures specific and of his locale, and you’ll see why I think Lowell is much closer to the imagist / Williams aesthetic line than is generally believed (at least in what is now “our” cyberspace). “The Skunk Hour” bears comparison to Williams’ “The pure products...” poem — which I think is perhaps WCW’s greatest single poem and perhaps my favorite of our long 20th century.

I am not saying I think “Skunk Hour” is as innovative, as “good,” at radical, or productive, etc., just that its author learned his lessons well from the predecessor poem. It’s a visionary evocation of an American landscape about which he can say little discursively but whose images — in the guise of animals, garbage, shitty music, displaced horniness, etc. —haunts and oppresses him. As I claim in a review — which I will publish eventually on this blog — after this you can only go

to Ashbery and "Daffy Duck in America" — a whole-hearted reclamation of the sublime production scale of pop culture in the grand metrics of, indeed, the "tradition." (I word it better there.)

(On a similar note, has anyone noticed, or thought about, how Ashbery's early "Portrait of Little J.A." is a defusing parody of the "confessional" mode, voiced through what I think of as a particularly [male] gay affect of envisioning oneself as the over-sensitive, delicate flower threatened by the violence inherent in heterosexual, suburban "normalcy"? "Normalcy" itself is coinage of Harding's, one of the few presidents that seem to crop up in JA's poems periodically. Anyway, I think the heavy rhymes, the stanzas, the "there I was" Mary Pickford woe-is-me attitude of the poem suggests some camping of the heroic "confessional" mode.)

Lowell's phrase "hermit heiress" is far from obvious — it's actually an interesting coinage, considering its position in the enjambment. I always wonder, reading this, whether one is prodded to sound out the "h" in "heiress" seeing it come right after "hermit," and where that would take me — in the language, geographically and classwise — to do so. I don't find similar changes of speeds in the metrics of, say, Duncan — the second line of "Skunk Hour" seems the remains of the explosion caused by the blockage of "hermit" the previous line, three words that seem just tripping over each other. This is a sign of the care I feel Lowell takes in his best poems with sound patterning — a sign of his relationship to Hopkins, who he's written about finely.

I guess my central question is, in these quick notes: which poem is more focused in its "negativity," more attuned to the properties of language, more aware that time, indeed, is precious, and that reading (not to mention writing) should not be a matter of indifference but rather a point-by-point handling of the opportunities and issues it throws up?

(I'm perfectly aware that fifteen volumes more of boring dross has been written about "Skunk Hour" than about "Non," or about Grenier and Antin or Silliman's great other books for that matter, and that some more of the latter needs to be done. My argument is for an approach to poetry that can get past the telegraphing of "lineages" and tell us, with fresh eyes, what in fact the language is doing in a poem — after all, one of the great claims of the poets who are not of the "quietude" is that there's some sort direct engagement with language as material that other poets are lacking. I'm just not convinced that's true — we are all prone to sleeping on the job.)

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Re: "fairy / decorator"

14 Jul 2003

Footnotes to a footnote: Stefans annotates Louis Cabri's reading of a Silliman passage from N/O, following the allegory of the black driver "advancing" in the rear-view mirror through Silliman's own confession of feeling a fraud. Close reading of someone else's close reading, which on this list passed for leisure.

Just some comments on what Loius had written about Ron's poem a few days back. He is comment on the following from NON:

Titles
are often misleading,
subtitles seldom are.
Checking
out the driver
in the next car
through my rear view mirror
at a stop light
(one never sees
the lower body),
thin ebony man
with a long white beard,
tricolor rasta cap,
high sharp cheekbones
that cause the eyes to recede.
I decide he's a gentle person.
Rolls of roofing
turned upright,
black cylinders atop the gravel.
There comes a moment
whenever
I read my poem when
it is apparent
it is terrible
I'm a fraud,
no one would ever
choose to hear
or to read this,
but then this moment of panic passes. (N/O 60)

LC writes:

"When you read the sentences as discreet units, it's pretty straight-forwardly denotational. But, reading the gaps between these sentences render the sentences completely wild, unpredicted (since the text is so overdetermined with

details, it would be impossible to stay in control of their interconnections), unconscious even. Here Silliman reads the "subtitle" of the guy in the car behind him, whose "title" refers to his physical description: "thin ebony man," etc. So, the guy is black, and is advancing on the white narrator, but the "advance" (i.e. suddenly we are no longer in a world of pure, objective-seeming denotation!) is benign ("he's a gentle person"): one can go allegorical here. This "advance" is benign probably because the man is old (eyes receding somewhat) just like the narrator admits of himself (and this ties again to the opening motif of old form). Now the next juxtaposition: how does one account for it? It has to be accounted for. The juxtaposition are not themselves arbitrary: the stanzas/sentences are. The skin color of the older gentleman who is in a car behind the narrator-driver now becomes (and at the same time importantly does not become) the black color of roofing tiles!!? This image's social evaluation is very ambiguous. It is work-to-be-done, of new roofing and of refurbishing - but, is it regentrification, or evidence of upward mobility (whose?), or completely unrelated to housing and instead about industrial expansion (we don't know the narrator's location)? This image becomes the next "title," and its "subtitle" is the following sentence, which seems to carry the emotions the narrator experiences at the sight of the roofing material: self-doubt about his own work-to-be-done as poet. The syntactic wonkiness of the middle phrases of this sentence ("whenever / I read my poem when / it is apparent / it is terrible") mirrors its subject, self-doubt.

It almost seems to me that Ron went back and changed the first "black" to "ebony" in order not to have the words appear twice in two successive sentences. If we were to read this as a social text the way you would choose (your reading reflects some elements of Jeff Derksen's idea of "rearticulation" as a development of the new sentence), then you would have to read the word "Ebony" (capital "e") in the use of the word — i.e. this guy has something to do with the magazine. The use of "ebony" just stuck out at me here as more a matter of creating a euphemism rather than a stylistic flourish, since there's so little here that represents an interest in stylistic flourishes of this sort — it's all kind of "Man pounds rice" language. Just like the "the landlord" and "a dog" in other parts of the poem. (Ron's turn to a belle-lettrist tone on his blog is curious to me for this very reason — he never seemed to have an interest in elements of what might be called "fancy" in his prose or even poetry, but all of a sudden there is this range of affects.)

When nouns and noun phrases get pared down like this they can often, ironically, become quite riddled with symbolism, and indeed your reading of this slab of NON points to all sorts of correspondences between the sentences and stanzas that are nearly as intricate as what is often said to occur in "Skunk Hour" (or

Eliot's Four Quartets, whose language is nearly devoid of adjectives that serve a visual purpose). I've never been much of a symbol guy myself — the thing is quite often the thing to me, so if the use of the word "ebony" doesn't let me get closer to what it is Ron is seeing — and my claim here is that he is seeing **less** because he's had to use a quick replacement word to get away from using "black" twice (merely my suspicion, of course) — well, I guess I just don't see how "ebony" improves upon what it is we're seeing here.

Take "Fairy decorator" as a contrast — I never read this as a reference to the decorator's sexuality but I see it now, I always just heard "fairy godmother" and assumed it was a comment on the privileged status of those for whom all things appear to be gifts — despite the semantic slippage Louis writes about elsewhere, I somehow **see** this a whole lot more. Maybe it's just synaesthesia — I have a tendency to see color in a lot of phrasing that is technically "colorless". I'm also, like Jeffrey (?), not sure how cheeks make the eyes recede, though I understand this as a painterly flourish — and unspoken "as if." (Ron often suggested in early interviews that his new sentence prose was an attempt to work into the space of a novel, so I wonder why he doesn't encourage some more novelistic traits in his writing — wouldn't Nabokov have really tried to nail this visual detail?) But the following observation from WCW which just drops out of the sky really impresses me:

(the
grapes still hanging to
the vines along the nearby
Concordia Halle like broken
teeth in the head of an
old man)

The very frailty of these words hanging in the stanza (an isolated by me here) suggest these grapes also.

Anyway, curiously, your reading of this stanza goes up against what I thought were some of the principles of the New Sentence, which is that the sentences were paratactic and would not be subsumed under a montage type of functionality — we see the titles, the titles appear on the cab, the man is black, the tiles are black, etc... — but rather thwarted narrative and syllogistic connections. The line "I decide he's a gentle person." seems to suggest that the poet wants us to play with a cause-and-effect determination here, a game I like. So I guess the new sentence doesn't have to be entirely "paratactic" (I think it works best when there is wavering), but it seems to me that if such an overdetermined matrix of social meanings as you present here were underlying such passages of

the New Sentence, then rather than the author permitting a play of meanings for the reader in his or her poem, asking the reader to be creative, the writer is merely making it much harder to see this matrix of meanings by not elaborating the connex.

I don't think this passage is so carefully written as to suggest that —connections are happy to occur, but you see some counter-charges within the mass — "ebony" slipping in to show that the author is aware of lexical repeats — the phrase "Titles are often misleading, subtitles seldom are" seems vague to me (so "President" is misleading because because the person is not actually presiding, but they "Hey you jerk!" under a flurry of Spanish curses is accurate?) — etc. I like the line about the doubt and the way it comes in after all of this detail from "outside" — ok, I know it sounds like I'm just harshing on Ron's poetry but it's really just this poem and how it relates to his ideas, especially what he's writing these days.

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Peacitude

16 Jul 2003

Mid-quarrel over Silliman's "School of Quietude" and his own contrarian defense of Robert Lowell, Stefans pauses — "waxing the moustachios, loading up the paint gun" before a trip to Toronto — to take stock of a debate that has forked past his ability to keep up with it.

www.arras.net/weblog

[This entry has been revised since I first posted it yesterday. It's been adjusted to fit your screen.]

I'm taking a break from this whole shebang as I'm preparing for a trip to Toronto — waxing the moustachios, loading up the paint gun, that sort of thing — and the debate's spawned such a variety of forking paths, many of which lead to a defense of Robert Lowell, which, in isolation, raises a lot of issues (as in Steve Evans' poignant "well why don't we write about James Schuyler") that I'm not sure how to proceed or if it even matters.

My point was to argue (grouchily but hoping to make a serious mark) with a set of terms being tossed about on Silliman's Blog (which I view as an effective act of criticism) — "school of quietude" versus an unnamed something else, the idea of a "third way" as a "death wish", the continued relevance of a battle against the British (except Raworth, of course) and their "dead" meters, the use of an ascertainment of "lineage" as a stand-in for "deep reading," etc. I think of these as strategies of "Balkanization" that are not useful, are blind politics, and seem terribly dated.

Worse (I've just thought of this), these concepts don't really give us tools to look at literatures that are not primarily white, and not primarily American. For

example, these lines in the sand don't exist for Australian literature — though there was a New American-style rebellion in the sixties, it produced very stanzaic poets like John Forbes, Martin Johnson and John Tranter, and radicalism was still tied to some form of Surrealism due, I think, to the Ern Malley incident — nor does it exist in Asian American poetry, which I learned when working on *Premonitions* with Walter Lew.

They do exist in some ways, but it's more complex than saying that Theresa Cha and Gerry Shikatani reflect an interest in big-M "Modernism" that poets like Arthur Sze or David Mura don't immediately have. If the argument is for a thing called "Asian American poetry" — and I've argued that such a thing might not exist — but if so, then the universe of that poetry must be incredibly diverse and rich, heterogenous and electric, not just depicted as a rivulet departing from the so called "avant-garde" line. Asian American poetry is not "better" because "we" are no longer just "telling our stories" — that historical determinism (expressed in one of RS's essays) has always seemed offensive to me, for obvious reasons, but also simple-minded.

What has come out of this debate, to me, is that more poets of the "alternative" current are very astute and willing "deep readers" in a standard (not necessarily "New Critical") sense, and that these methods of deep reading have only been somewhat problematized by the changes of reading tactics advocated by poststructuralism, etc. Certain readings of Silliman's *Non* have utilized tactics that are not that different than those used for "Skunk Hour," even if the conclusions as to the "content" (or just what side of the political coin one is) are different. And these tactics have been effective, if not getting "us" closer to what "good" writing is without stylistic prescriptions.

But for example: the Battaillian excessive flows of McCaffery's reading of Bill Bissett in *North of Intention*, with its stress on the ludic and excess, have rarely if ever been evoked, or if so in the somewhat less rigorous form of polysemia — which in other terms can simply mean "ambiguity," a word one associates with William Empson. I haven't read Empson, however, so I can't say more. The Brechtian "v-effekt," which Bernstein writes about in "Artifice of Absorption" (Silliman blogs about this, also) is also not being used critically — so has the critical approaches of Language poets really made their mark? Likewise for Projective Verse: are any of "our" poets really taking a stand against the "verse that print bred"?

I still think that, often, linguo-Marxist strategies of understanding the material of language can be more usefully applied to a "conservative" poem like "Skunk Hour" — or "Having a Coke with You" — than can often be applied to "avant-garde" poems, and that these are better poems because of, not in spite of, their

narrative attributes and relationship to the history of poetic form. Spatializing the words "Polish Rider," "coke," and "Frick," however effectively done and giving us a sense of language's "materiality" (a term I rarely use myself), does not quite provide us with the meat for a precise hermeneutic strategy that gets us closer to the world. The poems in Ashbery's *Tennis Court Oath* or Coolidge's *Space* have emotional nuances that are rarely written about. And pomo reading strategies, in my naive view, were created for reading narrative and "linear" poems, and don't necessarily argue for the need to break away from these forms.

On a more selfish note: I (along with a few others) have been trying for several years (quietly) to come up with a language for describing poems—in my reviews for *Boston Review* and *Publisher's Weekly*, the "little reviews" series on this blog and on *arras.net*, on *Jacket*, in *Rain Taxi* and the *St. Mark's Newsletter*, etc.—that try to focus on specific effects in poems in spite of where an author might have gathered his or her experience with language, and to introduce new, mostly non-US American, names into the mix (admittedly mostly Scottish, British and Australian), not to mention a way to describe poems that don't rely on one's knowledge of, and unquestioned reverence for, the esteemed American avant-garde masters. In fact, finding a way to modify these appreciations without causing wild dismay has been another project.

(I'm monolingual — with the exception of being able to sing most of "Die Ballade Uber die Sexuelle Horigkeit" at the drop of a hat — and go in fear of translations, but it would be a great thing to see some convincing writing on non-English language poetry — something that makes the work exciting and not merely good for you as a taste of the "other." My only real attempt has been something on Christophe Tarkos in the Little Reviews.)

So it's seemed, reading parts of Silliman's *Blog*, like a shuttling back to a (golden) stone age to see that someone is actually dissuading readers from reading British poetry (claiming the meters are flat or adherent to a dead heritage — the "past"), or reading outside of a presumed counter-formation, or railing against a lineage that includes Bryant and Holmes (my *American Library 19th Century American Poetry* volume is quite fascinating to me, actually), etc., as if that's better for you, one, we, it, and has something to do with the future. I'm probably exaggerating, but I'd like to hear the arguments otherwise, if only just to hear them made fresh again, and thereby reflect favorably back on the entire "avant-garde" project in the US (which methinks, still, was "quiet" compared to the French one — so there).

Thanks everyone who chimed in about these minor rants, on the poetics list and elsewhere.

Punch Drunk Love was great, by the way.

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Exchange on Circulars

28 Jul 2003

The third section of a three-part essay on the anti-war website Circulars, written with Darren Wershler-Henry as a volley of 250-word paragraphs and bound for an MIT anthology. The two argue toward — and then a little past — the idea of the site as an “anti-poem.” Half the words are Wershler-Henry's; it is kept whole because the argument is.

www.arras.net www.arras.net/weblog www.arras.net/circulars

Here's the final, unedited version of Darren Wershler-Henry's and my exchange (in a series of 250-word paragraphs) about the website Circulars, which yet lives even if we treat it here as a dead project. The exchange meanders into a discussion of blogs, group authorship, appropriation, the public sphere, intellectual property, etc. and we get a little argumentative at the end — not quite Freddy vs. Jason, but enough to create wrinkles. This exchange forms the third part of a three section essay on the website to be published in a forthcoming MIT book.

BKS: I've come up with an awkward, unsettling title for this essay: "Circulars as Anti-Poem." I'm sure cries will be raised: So you are making a poem out of a war? The invasion was only interesting as content for an esoteric foray into some elitist, inaccessible cultural phenomenon called an "anti-poem"? (There is, in fact, a lineage to the term "anti-poem" but I don't think it's important for this essay.) This legitimate objection is to be expected, and I have no reply except the obvious: that a website is a cultural construct, shaped by its editors and contributors, and more specifically, Circulars had a "poetics" implicit in its multi-authored-ness, its admixture of text and image, its being a product of a small branch of the international poetry community, etc. Of course, the title also suggests that this website has some relationship to a "poem," but perhaps as a non-site of poetry—as it is a non-site for war, even a non-site for activism itself, where real-world effects don't occur. But my point for now is that the fragmentary artifacts of a politicized investigation into culture—Gramsci's Prison Notebooks for example—has an implicit "poetics" to it, but standing opposite to what we normally call a "poem." This suggests roles that poets can play in the world quite divorced from merely writing poetry (or even prose, though it was the idea that poets could contribute prose to the anti-war cause—as speech writers or journalists, perhaps—that initially inspired the site.

DWL: Hey Brian: what are you using to count words? MS Word says the previous paragraph has 254 words; BBEdit says 259 (me, I'm sticking to BBEdit). Poets—particularly poets interested in working with computers—should be all about such subtleties. Not that we should champion a mechanically aided will to

pinpoint precision (a military fiction whose epitome is the imagery from the cameras in the noses of US cruise missiles dropped on Iraq during the first Gulf War), but rather, the opposite—that we should be able to locate the cracks and seams in the spectacle ... the instances where the rhetoric of military precision breaks down. As such, here's a complication for you: why "anti-poem" instead of simply "poetics"? Charles Bernstein's cribbing ("Poetics is the continuation of poetry by other means") of Von Clausewitz's aphorism ("War is the continuation of politics by other means") never seemed as appropriate to me as it did during the period when *Circulars* was most active. The invocation of Smithsonian's site/non-site dialectic is also apposite, but only in the most cynical sense. Is the US bombing of Iraq and Afghanistan the equivalent of a country-wide exercise in land art? In any event, the relationship is no longer dialectical but dialogic; the proliferation of weblogs ("war blogs") during the Iraq War created something more arborescent—a structure with one end anchored in the world of atoms, linked to a network of digital nonsites.

BKS: I hesitate to tease out the "non-site" analogy—the site itself is too variable: for me, I was thinking of *Circulars* as being the non-site of activism, not just a corollary to the sweat and presence of people "on the streets" but a vision of a possible culture in which these activities (otherwise abandoned to television) can exist, not to mention reflect and nourish culturally. That is, are our language and tropes going to change because of the upsurge in activity occurring around us - in the form of poster art, detourned "fake" sites, maverick blogging? I admit that some of what we've linked to is nothing more than glorified bathroom humor, but nonetheless if the context creates the content for this type of work as a form of dissent, I think that should be discussed, even celebrated. I haven't read too much about this yet. Thinking of *Circulars* as the "non-site" of the bombing itself is both depressing and provocative: it's no secret that one of the phenomena of this war was not the unexpected visibility of CNN, but Salam Pax's Dear Raed blog, written by a gay man from the heart of Baghdad (even now he is remaining anonymous because of his sexuality). I could see *Circulars* as a "poetics" but I prefer to think it as an action with a poetics, my own tendency being to think of poetry as the war side of the Clausewitz equation, simply because poetics seems closer to diplomacy than a poem.

DWL: The variability and heterogeneity of the site, was, I think, partly due to the infrastructural and technological decisions that you made when putting the site together, because those decisions mesh well with the notion of coalition politics (I'm thinking of Donna Haraway's formulation here). The presence of a number of posting contributors with varied interests, the ability of readers to post comments, the existence of an RSS (Rich Site Summary) feed which allowed anyone

running a wide variety of web software packages to syndicate the headlines, a searchable archive, a regular email bulletin—these are crucial elements in any attempt to concentrate attention on the web. Too seldom do writers (even those avowedly interested in collaboration and coalition politics) take the effect of the technologies that they're using into account, but they make an enormous difference to the final product. Compare Circulars to Ron Silliman's Blog: on the one hand, you have an deliberately short-term project with a explicit focus, built around a coalition of writers on a technological and political platform that assumes and enables dialogue and dissent from the outset; on the other hand, an obdurate monolith that presents no immediate and obvious means of response, organized around a proper name. Sure, the sites have different goals, but Silliman's site interests me because it seems to eschew all of the tools that would allow any writer to utilize the unique aspects of the web as an environment for writing. And sadly, that's typical of many of the writers' blogs that exist.

BKS: I haven't been too bothered with those aspects of Silliman's Blog for the mere fact that it would double his time having to respond to the comments, many of which could be vicious flames. I've deleted some of the comments on Circulars, in one case because the poster was making scandalous allegations (drugs, child molestation) about the head of an advertising agency, and another because the poster, in American fatwa-esque fashion, deemed that I should have a rocket shoved up my ass. Of course, your point is well taken—Silliman's Blog could use some real-time play-by-play; I'm sure a diagnostic essay is forthcoming. I did set Circulars up with the intention of there being subsets of discussion on the site, separate groups of people who would engage with each other over some time—"committees" of sorts, with their own story threads. This happened for a brief period—there was a lot of heat generated by one of Senator Byrd's speeches against the war, and there was a discussion about Barrett Watten's "War = Language." I was prepared to develop new sections of the site if anyone so requested, though I confess to being dictatorial about the initial set-up, basically because I know more about the web than most poets and I hate bureaucracy. I was hoping that some of the more frequent poet bloggers who were writing political material would send their more considered material for posting to Circulars, but most simply posted to their own blogs without telling me.

DWL: I'm not suggesting that blogs and newsforums should be about the abrogation of editorial control—far from it. It's always necessary to do a certain amount of moderation and housecleaning, which, as you well know, takes asloads of time. During its peak, I was spending at least 2 or 3 hours a day working on Circulars, and I'm sure you put in even more time than that, even with the help of the other industrious people who were writing for the site. Which takes me

back to the value of the coalition model: a decent weblog NEEDS multiple authors to work even in the short term. The classic example of a successful weblog is Boing Boing , a geek news site that evolved from a magazine and accompanying forum on the WELL in the late 80s/early 90s. Mark Frauenfelder, the original editor, has worked with many excellent people over the years, but the current group (including Canadian SF writer/ Electronic Frontier Foundation activist Cory Doctorow, writer/video director David Pescovitz and media writer/conference manager Xeni Jardin) presents a combination of individual talent and a shared vision. There's nothing **wrong** with personal weblogs, but, like reality TV, they get awfully thin over time. Even when the current search technologies adapt to spider the extra text that blogging has created, the problem of anemic content isn't going to go away unless we start doing more collective writing online. The problem is partly a need for education; most writers are still in the process of learning how to use the web to best advantage.

BKS: I'm not sure that it's necessary for a blog to be multi-authored; what it really needs is a mandate, and it's possible that, were the mandate simply to produce rich, incantatory prose — imagine the Marcel Proust blog — a highly disciplined approach could work. Steve Perry's Bushwarblog, for example, succeeds quite well on this level (not the Proustian but the muckraker), as does Tom Mantrullo's Swiftian Commonplaces. Both of them have "political" agendas, but they are also well-written and thoughtful for what are in effect news publications without an editor. It helps that these two are journalists and conceptualize their blogs as a distinct form of news writing alternative to the mainstream — the individual voice is sharpened by an informed sense of the social arena in which it will resonate (in which the message will ultimately become dulled). Just today, Tom posted a link to the Times story on corporate blogging—yecch — and has coined this aphorism, a detournement from Foucault though sounding somewhat Captain Kirkish to me, to describe his project: "To blog is to undertake to blog something different from what one blogged before." A version of "make it new" but with the formal precedent being the blog itself — a vow not to let individual "multi-authoring" become equal to corporate mono-glut. Perhaps the model blog is that which responds to the formal issues of other blogs as if they were social issues (i.e. beyond one's "community"), hence transforming the techne of the writer into a handling of hypertextual craft.

DWL: It's all too easy to imagine the Marcel Proust blog—Christ, what a nightmare (shades of Monty Python: "Proust in his first post wrote about, wrote about ..."). Endless streams of novelistic prose, no matter how incantatory, are **not** what I want to read online. William Gibson, for one, thinks there's something inimical about blogging to the process of novel-writing. I think that the

paragraph-as-“post” is the optimal unit of online composition, and that an optimal online style would be some sort of hybrid of prose poetry and healthy geek cynicism (imagine a Slashdot full of Jeff Derksens). But I think I see your point, that it’s possible for one writer to produce the kind of dialogic multiplicity that could sustain a blog. There is, however, a large difference between “possible” and “likely.” IMO, as less stratospheric talents than the geniuses of high modernism, we stand a better chance of generating strong content collectively. Another model that I find promising is the Haddock Directory — a site I’ve been reading daily for at least 4 years. Haddock has recently moved to a two-column format: standard blog description-plus-link on the left (maintained by the site’s owner and editor-in-chief, if you will) and entries from the Haddock community blogs, identified by author, on the right. It’s a very neat example of the effective aggregation of data within a particular interest group. And it seems to follow Stein’s dicta “I write for myself and for strangers.”

BKS: I’m still curious about the line “generating strong content”—what do you mean by “content”? My guess is not “writing” as we know it, but some admixture of links, intro paragraphs, pictures, HTML formatting, that creates a dynamic, engaging, and timely space on the screen. “Content” moves from “writing” to the shape one creates by selectively linking to other sites, serving, but also provoking, a “particular interest group.” (I wrote earlier today in a dispute over blogs: “Circulars was a short-term effort (or as short-term as the war) that was a response to what I sensed was, or would be (or hoped to be) a moment of crisis in terms of American self-identification.” Who would have thought, ten years ago, that a group of weblinks and writing could contribute to a crisis in national identity?) Most writers would probably feel demeaned to be referred to as “content managers,” as if all writing were a versioning of some other writing (put it back in your pants, Harold), but, frankly, we’re admitting for a whole lot of plagiarism in this concept of “content.” I think the blog-ring model on haddock.org is strong, since it lets writers tend their gardens, deriving whatever classic satisfactions one gets from writing, and yet contribute unwittingly to a larger collective. I agree: some “types” of writing just work better online—claustrophobic syntax, also non-sequiturs, drives readers back to hunt for hearty prose (though writers like Hitchens seem to be as uncompromisingly belle-lettristic on screen as on paper).

DWL: I like to think of myself as a malcontent provider. As someone who works regularly with found text, copping to the “plagiarism” that’s at the heart of all “original” writing doesn’t worry me at all; in fact, I’m beginning to think it’s a necessary strategic position for artists at this particular moment in history. As thinkers like Siva Vaidyanathan and Lawrence Lessig have been arguing

strenuously for the last few years, the concept of intellectual property is a relatively recent, regressive invention that has nothing to do with the reasons that copyright was established two hundred years ago, and that it actually reverses copyright's original function – to provide a short-term monopoly solely to drive innovative thought, not to create perpetual profit. Artists in many disciplines are increasingly moving toward creative processes based on appropriation, sampling, bricolage, citation and hyperlinking, but the multinationals and the entertainment industries are driving legislation in the exact opposite direction by arguing that ideas can and should be owned. Artists and writers who have a large investment in their own “originality” do us all a serious disservice by refusing to recognize and protect the public domain ... the very thing that makes ongoing artistic activity possible. So by all means, yes, don't just “write” (a verb which in many cases bears the superciliousness of the Romantic), build (mal)content. Bring on the hyperlinks, intro paragraphs, pictures, PHP scripts and HTML formatting, especially if they help to demonstrate the mutual indebtedness that all creativity entails. Use Your Allusion.

BKS: Copyright laws may never expire fast enough for internet plagiarizers who want appropriation now, but I haven't heard anything recently about the Edison company suing Napster, nor did the estate of George Meredith go after David Bowie for stealing “Modern Love.” Unfortunately, for poets it hardly matters—if there were a P2P system for trading poems, we'd love it, and so poetry may be not a rich ground for recruitment in this battle. No one cared about the Vaneigem series until the Times cease-and-desist letter came in (Vaneigem still doesn't care); it's the reverse of that Benny Hill routine in which a pervert's trying to look up a lady's skirt—once she takes it off and stands there in a bikini, he loses interest. Poets are already in the public domain—we're floundering there, certainly not unwittingly, but nobody asks permission to steal their turns-of-phrase, their new sentences and rhetorical ticks, or any linguistic innovation. As for creative products geared toward highlighting how indebted creativity is to reworkings of other cultural products—I like them, of course, but didn't this trend already pass, along with *Verfremdung* effects in theater—placards, talking to the audience, sweating on them? Kenny's Day is an exception, but it took him 836 pages to be one. I welcome the challenge of working with language apart from appropriation, I suppose because, on the web, I'm all about appropriation—The Truth Interview, Circulars, etc.—and non-appropriative stuff—programming Flash, “writing” poems—seems fresh again. Ah, the dialectic!

DWL: If we treat creative products geared toward highlighting how indebted creativity is to reworkings of other cultural products as a trend that's had its time,

we'll get precisely the culture we deserve – i.e. one with no public domain (with the Supreme Court's rejection of the Eldred appeal of the Sonny Bobno Copyright Extension Act and Mexico considering extending copyright to life-plus 100 years and allowing the government to collect royalties on works in the public domain, we're that much closer to a continent-wide lockdown). And while I agree in spirit with the notion that poetry's value is arbitrary (which, for the most part, means it's valueless), as someone who ran a press for five years, I know all too well that (a) poets are as capable of getting all pissy about contracts as any other kind of writer and (b) that no business is too small to receive a cease-and-desist letter from a multinational hell-bent on maxing out the value of its intellectual property holdings. Besides, with *Circulars*, I thought that the project wasn't poetry *qua* poetry as much as it was expanding an innovative poetic sensibility outward into policy and politics ... which means, in my mind at least, championing the values of an open relationship to content. As writers, we need to have the freedom not only to repost and recontextualize the news of the moment, but also to deconstruct, *détourner* and all of those other French verbs that start with D, without a constant fear of litigation.

BKS: *Circulars* was indeed intent, on the most abstract level, on "expanding an innovative poetic sensibility outward into policy and politics," but not to argue for that sensibility. I agree that a liberated public domain is necessary to maintain the type of free-wheeling, free-borrowing public discourse necessary in a heteroglot "democracy" but, alas, the point of the site was to upset a government and exploit any means necessary in creating the sort of fervor one might associate with a "revolutionary" culture. Appropriation was one surprisingly popular means. Tom Raworth's poem "Listen Up," written in the voice of a bigoted warmonger in tight couplets and submitted as a joke to the "Poets For the War" website, was another (and stronger for being *sui generis*). I do think the torrent of "remixes" and *detournements* that ensued leading up to the war put centerstage a seething but as yet underground counterculture that shares many of your (and my) views on "property" – that could go somewhere. This is a generation of people who are on the other side of the paradigm shift regarding cultural property – that and other values could be the seed of a new, but as yet themeless, sensibility. My hope with *Circulars* was to illustrate the potential power of such sites in times of crisis as provocative, popular cultural tools, and to put our "avant-garde" poetics to the service of a specific cultural effort, not to refresh arguments for classic avant-garde gestures themselves. But, of course, intentions are neither here nor there.

DWL: Okay, time to boat this bass. I don't think it's possible to separate advancing an argument from at least the implicit support for the underlying

sensibility – otherwise, you have no credibility. If the arguments you make succeed to some extent in supporting the cultural effort in question, then there is still some point in proceeding to operate from that underlying sensibility, because you’ve demonstrated its efficacy. Circulars was a beautiful thing because, within the mandate it established for itself, it worked ... but part of the reason that it worked is that there’s something useful in the fusion of innovative poetics, geek culture and a transnational left/oppositional politics. That’s a more quiet stance than revolution, but I’m not a revolutionary, just a frustrated idealist with a talent for synthesis. As we continue to glue new fins and antennas to our weird little poetic cyberspaceship, I can’t help but feel that the underlying sense of the mission continues to evolve. I mean, I’ll use some of the techniques that the historic avant garde has to offer, but am not interested in many of its values (opacity, for instance) and am skeptical of the potential for revolution. That doesn’t mean that I won’t try to craft together a more amenable space (for and with anyone who’s interested in being involved) in the interstices of late capitalism with whatever tools and materials are available. Right now, that means, among other things, websites, weblogs, mailing lists and whatever else we find along the way.

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Jeff Derksen, *Transnational Muscle Cars*

13 Aug 2003

Stefans situates Derksen's "socialist one-liners" in the lineage of Dwell and finds the third book confident but not enlarging — "doesn't add greatly to the poet's arsenal," he says, which from him is neither insult nor praise but simply the ledger kept honest. Note the care taken to distinguish Derksen's accessible content-forward mode from the opaque formalisms of Watten, Andrews, and Silliman; the review is half taxonomy of the tribe.

Jeff Derksen

Transnational Muscle Cars

Talonbooks, 2003

Little Review: Jeff Derksen, Transnational Muscle Cars Talonbooks 0-88922-473-0

Derksen likes to position his poetry right in the mainstream of the saltier, sparring realms of “political discourse,” his lines surfacing from the same semantic gumbo that produced Spiro Agnew’s “nattering nabobs of negativism” and Oscar Wilde’s whipsmart butlers getting one over on their narcissistic, hidebound masters. A spirit of paradox lurks behind the arras of Derksen’s lava-paced comedic discharge: “From agitprop to diamat / I believe it was Tatlin / who said — or was it Jacques Villeneuve: / Learn to make leisure / more work, rumours over tumours, / strategies over tactics. I stand / before you asking to be memorable /

for my memorabilia and / symptomatic for my mottoes / in these times when we are told / that movement is what we all share / it's just that some have more legroom." (98) 1996's *Dwell* began the exploration of a style that would become linked with Derksen: poems of spare, astute "socialist one-liners" (his own phrase) that accrued sentence by sentence to elaborate a complex field of issues, mostly concerning geopolitics and nationalism but also sexuality, culture and class identity. The mode departed from earlier varieties of "Language" poetics – such as those espoused by Barrett Watten, Bruce Andrews or the "new sentence" of Ron Silliman — by not fetishizing opaque formalisms over (or in place of) "content": *Dwell* was, even for the newbie, accessible in themes, comfortably paced, and motored by an anti-heroic punk sensibility that jived with the author's working class background in Vancouver, Canada. *Transnational Muscle Cars*, his third full-length collection, doesn't add greatly to the poet's arsenal of poetic methods — the title poem, "Social Facts are Vertical" and "But Could I Make a Living From It" could be extensions of poems from *Dwell*, and indeed of each other — though "Jobber" and the stanzas of "Forced Thoughts" (which read at times like decidedly un-Juba-to-Jived Harryette Mullen quatrains) reflect a confidence in extending his methods into longer works. There is a noticeable increase in the language of globalism — focus on the "specific," especially brand names, is valorized, as a gumbo of capitalist detritus is depicted as links in a chain of transnational correspondences ("I want to see / the real relations / but you've got Nikes on and I like you / so I have to try and understand") [10], while abstract terms are rendered material, humanized so as to be subjected to warm satire: "I'd like to inflate a bubble building as a mobil public sphere, but I'm a little breathless." (106) Derksen quirps in "Social Facts are Vertical": "I questioned authority and the question won," a characteristically self-effacing remark that takes the "self" as both identity trace and Cartesian burden, but exhibiting a note of frustration with the language of theory itself as a wieldable force of opposition. But Derksen has turned this question into incredibly effective, lively but careful, Brechtian poetry that turns the event of reading into a hootenanny in the village square, and has already been quite influential on other writers creating bridges between radical formalism and a vaudevillian social platform, such as Kevin Davies, Rodrigo Toscano and Tim Davis.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

Ezra Pound, *Poems and Translations*

20 Aug 2003

The reviewer confesses at the outset that he has too much to say and so will say almost none of it — Pound was “my first great poetic love in high school,” and the paragraph is filed as “credit” against an essay promised and, the reader may suspect, deferred forever. Even hobbled, it does the hard thing: holds the elegist reaching for peace and the virulent anti-Semite in the same sentence without letting either off.

Ezra Pound

Poems and Translations

The Library of America, 2003

[I hope to do a much fuller write-up on this book — Pound was my first great poetic love in high school, and I had far too many ideas about this book than could fit in one paragraph — so please accept this as “credit” for the later essay. I’ve put a picture up on the website: www.arras.net/weblog]

The writings of Ezra Pound have been traditionally associated with the late James Laughlin’s avant-garde publishing venture New Directions, and volumes such as his 1949 “collected” poems *Personae*, his sprawling epic *The Cantos*, his thick book of *Translations*, and the slim, tidy distillation of *Selected Poems* with its forbidding, purse-lipped profile of the poet, have been foundational, strangely comforting features on poetry lovers’ shelves for decades. Containing Pound in a single, albeit huge, volume that made claims to completism seemed impossible, and yet Richard Sieburth – best known as a critic and translator of Holderlin – has done an amazing job of finding and logically arranging nearly everything that Pound wrote that could be called a poem or translation, including the juvenalia of “Hilda’s Book” – written for fellow University of Pennsylvania student Hilda Doolittle – to the late, moving elegy, first published in 1971, that he wrote for the brother of one of his St. Elizabeths acolytes, but which Sieburth clearly intends for Pound himself: “Out of the turmoil, Mother of Grievs receive him, / Queen of Heaven receive him, / May the sound of the leaves give him peace, / May the hush of the forest receive him.” (1203) That Pound could figure himself as a seeker of peace while being, infamously, a virulent anti-Semite and supporter of Mussolini, is just one of the conflicts that make this volume compelling; but except in the rich chronology and footnotes that Sieburth provides (there is, sadly, no introduction), practically none of this social context make its presence known beyond proclivities of style: the poet’s always precise, even “macho” meters, the near absence of any intimate or autobiographical tone, and his Puritan impatience with “Symbolist” ambiguities – he was set on curing the world of the decadent “nineties.” That Pound famously considered his life-work, the 800 page *Cantos*, a “botch” – and took to referring to himself as a “minor satirist” during the last years of his life as he suffered crippling depressions – makes the verve, optimism

and confidence of such undertakings as the reversionings of Guido Cavalcanti and Arnaut Daniel (however shackled by 19th century conventions), the robust, still fresh "Cathay" sequence, the metrical displays of "Tenzzone," "Dance Figure" and "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" and the innovative "Homage to Sextus Propertius" - all from his richest period before the 1920s - right through his passion for translating Sophocles and Confucius' Classic Anthology, seem like an Icarian flight primed for a great, however morally distressing, fall - one that took some of American poetry's very thirst for hearty, internationalist undertakings with it. Pound believed that all mankind needed to know of literature could be contained in a two-foot shelf, and he set out translating, for a country he thought had yet to ascend out of "barbarism," those works that were missing; his own place on that shelf might not be that thick - all-in-all, many of these pages are taken up by trivial sequences like the "Alfred Venison" poems (Cockney ballads in support of his "social credit" ideas) and the social farce of "Moeurs Contemporaines," idiosyncratic "readers" versions of Sophocles and Japanese Noh plays, and the Confucian works which crave simplicity and wisdom but are clearly the products of a didactic, irascible and fatally undialectic iconoclast: "He said: problem of style? Get the meaning across and then STOP." (731). Yet one can't help to think that the appearance of this volume, which seems streamlined, coherent and responsible compared to the many pages of The Cantos that are barely readable due to stylistic infelicities and political excesses - compare his work on the Analects to the "American President Cantos" - will give readers of American poetry a sense of starting over, of renewed energy in resorting through the horrific details of a long, ideologically wounded century and the myriad luminous details of a few millennia of European and Asian literature.

[↑ Little Reviews](#)

What is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers (a new blog) & Fashionable Noise promo blitz

26 Aug 2003

Another blog, a redesign of an older blog, and a starred review — Stefans catalogues his own overproduction and calls it silliness.

Announcing my most recent spate of silliness:

What is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers

a new blog that is just a bunch of poems and photos that are supposed to eventually have to do with each other — you laugh!

<http://www.arras.net/whatis/>

also, Free Space Comix: The Blog has a new design and lots of new materials on it

—

<http://www.arras.net/weblog/>

Highlights:

reviews: Little Review: Robert Lowell, Collected Poems digressions: Haroldo de Campos 1929-2003 links: The Monkey Shakespeare Simulator reviews: Little Review: Please Pay Attention Please: Bruce Nauman's Words reviews: Little Review: Ezra Pound, Poems and Translations reviews: Little Review: Jeff Derksen, Transnational Muscle Cars poems: Sonnet: On Literary Criticism skids: Skid 29 links: Eigenradio / Dublab chatter: Requests for Porno / Silliman on the English poems: The Window Ordered To Be Made chatter: HP rips off The Dreamlife of Letters reviews: Little Review: Michael Magee, MS links: Acronym Blog open letters: Email to the New York Review of Books re: Comics for Grown-Ups exchanges: Exchange with Darren Wershler-Henry on Circulars: final version links: The dullest blog in the world links: Combo: new issue and website Lastly — Fashionable Noise is now available from Small Press Distribution (<http://spdbooks.org>), amazon.com, and barnesandnoble.com.

It was recently reviews in Publisher's Weekly — starred review — and I also received this great blurb from Adelaide Morris:

PUBLISHER'S WEEKLY

Less a programmatic critical volume than an improvisatory, searching look at a still-nascent form, Stefans's ruminations, exhortations, gags ("Th plug may be puld any day on cultur; th poem must be prepared") and excitations comprise a print take that is closest to the online world's free-wheeling sense of formal inquiry, semi-disposable experimentation and ardently utopian possibility. The eight longish pieces here are mostly concerned with screen-based poetry, but are utterly different from one another. A real-time, online interview with poet Darren Wershler-Henry (The Tapeworm Foundry) kicks things off, covering everything from the Toronto Concrete poetry scene to Situationism, Prynne, Eno, Hakim Bey, the launch party for Cabinet magazine and Frampton Comes Alive. "Reflections on Cyberpoetry" offers a tight series of straight-faced pronouncements ("`Mauberley is a cyberpoem; The Cantos, not.") and insights into algorithmic composition; "Stops and Rebels" unwinds into a dense, rewarding essay that manages to proceed via footnotes without invoking banal postmodernist tropes; "Proverbs of Hell" riffs Blake-wardly ("Condemn not Flash because it is `slick' "), while "A Poem of Attitudes," a long, beautiful abecedarian work composed with the aid of splicing programs, comes on like Bruce Nauman emptying out his neon tool box: "Not a curse. Not all the songs,/ no gimmick. Not be. Not in my poem./ Not like a room. Not mix the beans." Stefans's two major cyberworks, "The Naif and the Bluebells" and "The Dreamlife of Letters," are

easily locatable online, as is his multi-author political blog, Circulars. With more ideas per page than most poets put into entire books, Stefans (Free Space Comix) provides a provisional, wickedly smart and goofily joyous lay of a land that is still being discovered—and created from scratch. (June) Copyright 2003 Reed Business Information.

GREAT BLURB FROM ADALAIDE MORRIS, editor of Sound States: Innovative Poetics and Acoustical Technologies

In Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics, Brian Kim Stefans does for digital poetry what Lev Manovich's Language of New Media does for contemporary media art. Starting from dynamics peculiar to the computer poem—its algorithms, source files, and flows of digitized information—Stefans imagines the computer poem from the bottom up. Instead of aligning it with or against conventional verse or avant-garde texts, he situates it in the larger field of digital art and new media. The book's major essay—construction—"Stops and Rebels: a critique of hypertext"—is an annotated computer poem that provides not only a canny mix of poetic and critical source files but a lexicon of critical terms, a history of digital experiments, and a series of brilliant meditations and riffs on new media creations. The result is essential reading for anyone interested in new media art and poetics. — Dee Morris

More here from the Atelos site: <http://atelos.org/fashionable.htm>

My new play — for those of you who care — is called "Kinski in Kanada" —sick — premieres Nov. 6th at the Bowery Poetry Club.

And I'll be teaching a poetry workshop at the Poetry Project starting October called (tentatively) "Jai-Alai for Autocrats." Sign up!

<http://poetryproject.com/>

Bah-b-b-bah-bah-bah — that's all folks!

love,
your local (scottish) spammer

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Denis Roche bootleg

17 Sep 2003

Not an announcement so much as a want ad: Stefans crowdsources translations of an obscure French poet on the off chance it becomes a book.

Dear ...

I'm working on a "bootleg" file of poems by the French poet Denis Roche. Depending on time and whatever allies I muster, this could turn into a book idea. The material I have of his so far is:

3 poems in Locus Solus translated by John Ashbery a sequence in the Paul Auster 20th Century American poetry translated by Harry Matthews selections in Veronica Forrest-Thomson's Collected Poems selections in one of Serge Gavronsky's books on poetry in France (title eludes me at the moment) more work translated by Gavronsky for the Tyuonyi "Violence of the White Page" issue

For you Googlers, there's a children's book illustrator named Denis Roche who is not the same person.

Our Denis Roche was an editor of Tel Quel, a translator of The ABC of Reading and I think the Cantos in to French, and is now (primarily?) a photographer. I did find the following list of translations:

From the papers of Eric Mottram: "French poets: Mottram manuscript essay headed 'Under the influence of Rimbaud' [1973-1978]; Mottram manuscript notes on mid-20th century French poets [1973-1978]; a section of photocopies of modern French poets' work, including Marcelin Pleynet, Denis Roche, Anne-Marie Albiach, Jean Daive [1984]"

From The Paris Review # 42: Winter-Spring 1968: Eros Possessed: A Play

From New Observations (a journal I never heard of before): 54. Ecriture - The French Mind -Serge Gavronsky January/February 1988 Julia Kristeva, Anne-Marie Albiach, Ludovic Janvier, Marcelin Pleynet, Emmanuel Hocquard, Leslie Kaplan, Jacques Roubaud, Denis Roche, Martine Aballea, Denis Levaillant.

And a book published by Pennsylvania State University Press called that has a half chapter dedicated to his writing, published in 1999: Poeticized Language The Foundations of Contemporary French Poetry Steven Winspur

I could probably get this last one in my library. The Paris Review issue is available cheap on abe.com.

Anyone know where the Mottram is available outside of his papers collected at King's College? Or what New Observations is all about? Also, come across any translations of Denis Roche? Interested in making some?

Cheers,
Brian

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interview / writing workshop

23 Sep 2003

An online interview bundled with a \$300 poetry workshop titled, naturally, 'Jai-Alai for Autocrats.'

Hi again,

There's an interview with me and a new sequence, "The 'Nineties' Tried Your Game," on the Iowa Review web:

<http://www.uiowa.edu/~iareview/tirweb/feature/stefans/>

Also, am teaching my first poetry writing workshop at the Poetry Project:

"Jai-Alai for Autocrats"

SATURDAYS AT 12 PM: 10 Sessions Begin October 18th. Stefans writes, "This workshop will focus on the relationship between poems inspired by a sense of play - the way we appreciate words when they're randomly, surprisingly conjoined - and work, which might be loosely described as poems that are subtly crafted, resistant to easy meanings, even 'traditional.' We'll look at elements of prosody that extend beyond meter as it is generally understood - whether that be the counting of accents or the line by breath - into the use of literary masks, deviant syntaxes, Oulipian practices, writing in dialect (invented or not), and experiments with computers." Stefans' books include Free Space Comix and Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics.

The workshop fee is \$300. This includes a one year Individual membership, as well as tuition for any and all workshops at the Poetry Project for the fall and spring. Reservations are required due to limited class space, and payment must be received in advance. Please send payment and reservations to:

The Poetry Project St. Mark's Church 131 E. 10th St. New York, NY 10003

For more information, please call [REDACTED], or email: info@poetryproject.com

All workshops will be held in the Parish Hall at St. Mark's Church on the corner of 10th St. and 2nd Ave.

What's Jai-alai???

<http://members.ozemail.com.au/~jaialaioz/code/generalinfo.html>

Cheers,
Brian

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I'm performing with Douglas Dunn!

11 Oct 2003

Stefans name-drops a famous dancer in the subject line and admits it — self-promotion, at least, honest about its methods.

Sorry to name drop in the subject line but quickie last minute self-promotion needs all the charge it can get.

I'm performing tomorrow, Sunday, with writer Melissa Ragona (we're doing "soundscape") and dancers Eric Bradley, Douglas Dunn, and Nicholas Leichter. They must think we're going to do something brilliant because we're last on the bill!

Lots of great writers and dancers on the bill — come out for some good-spirited New York-style performance whatchamacallit! (Boston won't clinch it Sunday, don't worry.)

THE BOWERY POETRY CLUB

308 Bowery (at Bleecker)

NY, NY 10012

presents

TalkTalk WalkWalk

A festival of dance/poetry collaborations

Sunday, October 12, 2003 from 4-7pm, \$7

Box Office information: 

The Bowery Poetry Club at 308 Bowery (at Bleecker) hosts a 3 hour festival of dance/poetry collaborations, TalkTalk WalkWalk curated by choreographer/performers Jen Abrams and Sally Silvers on Sunday, October 12 from 4 to 7 pm. Tickets are \$7 & are available at the door. There will be a short intermission at the end of each grouping during which the audience can come and go. Check www.bowerypoetry.com for updates.

On a cabaret stage with club atmo, 13 separate acts will spin the way words and movement can mix, riff, flim, flip, and flam together (or apart). Some are long term collaborators; some are shotgunning for a juiced up afternoon of skates on, earwiggling pizzazz.

The program order is:

4 PM * Jen Abrams * Megan Boyd and Cathy Park Hong * Johanna Walker * Lee Ann Brown, Abby Child with K.J. Holmes, and Edisa Weeks

Short Break

* Monica de la Torre and Sally Gross * Adeena Karisick, Amy Cox, with Gus Solomons jr * Bob Holman and Yoshiko Chuma * Eva Lawrence

Short Break

* Marjorie Gamso * Barbara Mahler and Donna Masini * Nada Gordon with Karl Anderson, Alison Salzinger, and Jody Sperling * Kim Rosenfield and Sally Silvers * Melissa Ragona, Brian Kim Stefans with Eric Bradley, Douglas Dunn, Nicholas Leichter

Pieces are approximately 10 minutes long.

Program subject to change. Please see website for updates.

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE!

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come see my play, "Kinski in Kanada"

05 Nov 2003

Stefans invites you to a radio play in which he stars as Klaus Kinski, then reassures you it will be fun.

This Saturday, November 8, will be the Poets' Plays event at the Bowery Poetry Club, featuring work by Jordan Davis, Ethan Fugate, Charles Borkhuis, and myself.

<http://www.bowerypoetry.com/> 308 BOWERY, JUST NORTH OF HOUSTON SATURDAY, 4 - 6 PM \$4 admission goes to support the readers

I don't have any info on what the others are doing, but here's the basic skinny on me:

KINSKI IN KANADA a radio play

Time: Kelowna, BC Place: About 2 pm Scenario: Off a major artery...

Featuring: Stephanie Sanditz as Christopher Brian Kim Stefans as Klaus

Directed by: O. Gus Trainbourg

"A moist, sour taste in the mouth. Satisfaction of three square, and evenly devoured, and easily evacuated, meals. A train station in topical, Frankfurt light. A costume of impeccable, class-hatred beige. I could lose myself in that color, that sound, that taste of pretzels and beer. I hadn't allowed kitch into my stable of affects. Minhoi, are you listening? And my little prosciutto, Nastassja? Are you done rising through the mainlining mists of Vietnam? Will I see you when I close my eyes tonight?"

But don't let that scare you... I think it will be fun.

cheers,
Brian

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2004

Kinski in Kanada this Monday

23 Jan 2004

The Kinski play returns for an encore, billed by its author as 'fringe fringe fringe' — thrice-marginal and proud.

Hey folks...

Stephanie and I are doing a reprise of our fringe fringe fringe work Kinski in Kanada this Saturday as part of Tonic's Little Theater series, run by Kate Ryan and Jeffrey Jones. Hope you can make it!

THE TRANSIT PLAYS: written by Sheila Callaghan, directed by Hayley Finn, with Deron Bos, David Brooks, Flora Diaz & Hilary Ketchum, music and sound by Sophocles Papavasiliopoulos

KINSKI IN KANADA: written and performed by Brian Kim Stefans, with Stephanie Sanditz

PAPA PETROVSKY AND THE BIG FROSTED CAKE: written & directed by Ann Marie Healy, with Graeme Gillis & Rachelle Mendez

YOUR GUEST HOSTS: Stephanie Mnookin & Eliot Laurence of GUILLE

Monday, January 26, 2004 at 8:00 pm @ Tonic, 107 Norfolk Street between Delancey and Rivington. Tickets are \$8.00 at the door, first-come first-served; reservations are not accepted.

There are now three new levels of MSN Hotmail Extra Storage! Learn more. <http://join.msn.com/?pgmarket=en-us&page=hotmail/es2&ST=1>

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Stefans/Mellis/Wilson—11 February

07 Feb 2004

A three-poet bill at Dixon Place, five dollars at the door — Stefans third on a program headed by a monologist and a former aerialist, and you had to be there.

Brian Kim Stefans + Miranda Mellis + Kirsten Wilson

Wednesday, February 11

Dixon Place @ Chashama 111 West 42nd Street (between 6th and 7th avenues)
7:30pm: \$5

Kirsten Wilson is a performance artist, writer, and teacher. She was the founder and artistic director of the Santa Fe-based choreographed theater company, Friendly Fire. She has written numerous performance pieces, including There's No Place Like Home, A Case Study, The Amazing Magician's Beautiful Assistant Clara, and Odalisque. She taught monologue writing and performing classes at the College of Santa Fe, and Playback Theater through Bard College in New York; She currently teaches Letting the Body Speak: The Autobiographical Monologue Class, and Writing as a Spiritual Practice.

Miranda F. Mellis is a writer from San Francisco set to graduate in May with an M.F.A. from Brown University. She is in the Providence-based chamber-punk band Television Astronaut and has been published in BeeHive, Cabinet, h2so4, Fence, Nerve Lantern, Persephone, and a few anthologies. Formerly an aerialist in the tiny avant-garde circus, The Turnbuckles, she toured with Sister Spit in '98. She is a founding editor with Tisa Bryant and Kate Schatz of the forthcoming multifarious publication The Encyclopedia and is currently collaborating with Ali Lieb Gott on a graphic novellet called Goodnight Apocalypse.

Brian Kim Stefans is the author of three books of poetry, including Free Space Comix and Angry Penguins. His most recent book - comprising essays, poems and a dialogue - is called Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics. His Web site, devoted to new media poetry and poetics, is arras.net, at which his net art can also be found. He had a reading of his short play "Kinski in Kanada" on November 8 at the Bowery Poetry Club.

Do you Yahoo!? Yahoo! Finance: Get your refund fast by filing online. <http://taxes.yahoo.com/filing.html>

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Death of a Disco Dancer

29 May 2004

Stefans debuts as auteur of the rock video: a three-legged cat, a stranger from the park, and the Smiths — "fast connections only."

Here are two versions of a new "Flash Polaroid" though I think this goes a bit beyond the concept.

They star my partner's 3-legged cat, Stump, and some crazy dude I saw in the park.

They have sound, the first is set to the Smiths' "Death of a Disco Dancer" — my first rock video:

http://www.arras.net/polaroids/guy_cat_pan_disco.html

The second is a sort of minimalist sludge a la Steve Reich, but this one using a Jeff Buckley bootleg of him doing "The Boy With a Thorn in his Side," though you can hardly tell.

http://www.arras.net/polaroids/guy_cat_pan_growing_sound.html

Both are the same basic file, but in the second the loop is faster, 16fps I think, while in the first it's only 12 fps. Perhaps that hardly makes a difference, but I wanted the Disco one to be slower.

The minimalist one sounds great really loud, lots of bass.

Fast connections only!

xo

brian

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Re: Look who failed the Blake test...

14 Dec 2004

Stefans at his least buttoned — "Noam, my chimpanzee, could do this while rolling over and cutting the cheese" — the polemicist reminding you that he was, always and also, a comedian.

So there I am, just surfing along, when I come upon this crapola — this guy's a _writer_? "E e e e e e e e e e e"??? Noam, my chimpanzee, could do this while rolling over and cutting the cheese.

http://collection.nlc-bnc.ca/100/200/300/chbooks/online/carnival/2a_05.html

(Those etymologist among us would notice that the name McCaffery is probably Irish — he would probably read this "A a a a a a a a a a". The literary among us would suspect a Joycean pun in there somewhere. Either way, it's hooey!)

And then there's this sh*t — all monosyllables! There isn't an allusion to Dante or Lorine Niedecker in the whole run — what happened to the _American_ tradition. And she's a woman to boot! (Sorry that I haven't mentioned any women yet in this post, I guess I'm just a bit imperfect, like everybody.) These lines would never work in a book — that's why she has to "dress them up" so to speak — with lights and t-shirts! Fat chance!

http://www.guerillaone.com/feature_artist_08_25/gallery_index.html

Blake would vomit. Then call his lawyer.

This guy's clearly been looking at Rob Grenier — where else would he get this idea? (And what did Grenier write about singing from the diaphragm? You can't even _hum_ this.) You call this a quatrain? I call it FRAUD!

<http://www.zwirnerandwirth.com/exhibitions/2002/112002Twombly/25.html>

I thought I had put all this behind me — and then I find this tripe! Numbers again — these poets are getting so a-political! What a travesty of the Language tradition. Why, why, if I were editing an anthology now... this guy would be banned to the Poetics section. I don't care if he gave me a ride to a Stephen Rodefer reading in Berkeley 1974 once, when my wife was sleeping and the baby and Kathleen were sleeping — all saliva under the bridge! Basta!

<http://ger-www.uia.ac.be/webger/ger/joyce/livre.html>

There's a grand canyon of difference between the tight quatrains of Kit Robinson and this turgid mess, which looks like it was written _by_ a computer _for_ a computer. I think I may have to give up poetry after all.

(Winky winky, Your friendly neighborhood Brian)

www.arras.net/fscII

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Abigail Child Homepage is live

20 Dec 2004

Another homepage goes live, and Stefans dutifully asks the list to “set your links” and help a friend climb the charts.

This is to announce that the homepage of filmmaker and poet Abigail Child is now live. Please set your links to help it move up the charts:

<http://www.abigailchild.com/>

Abigail Child is a film and video maker whose work in montage and sound/image relations pushes the envelope of film/video with humor and ephemeral beauty. Her recent work explores mixed genres and strategies for rewriting narrative, as well as exploring public space through memory and history.

Child began filmmaking in 1970 as a documentarian, producing seven independent 16mm documentaries between 1970 and 1976, among them the award winning *Game* (1972) and *Between Times* (1975). In the mid 70s, Child began to produce experimental work, culminating in her series *Is This What You Were Born For?*, which included the films *Prefaces* (1981), *Mutiny* (1983), *Both* (1988), *Perils* (1986), *Covert Action* (1984), *Mayhem* (1987), and *Mercy* (1989).

In the 90s she turned to an investigation of public spaces, with *B/side* (1996) and *Below The New: A Russian Chronicle* (1999) which was shot in St. Petersburg Russia. Her newest films include *Surface Noise* (2000), *DARK DARK* (2001) and *WHERE THE GIRLS ARE* (2002), all premiering at respective New York Film Festivals while the single channel version of *CAKE AND STEAK* (2004) was featured at Oberhausen Film Festival this spring. Her works range in length from 5 to 70 minutes.

Child is, as well, the author of a number of critical articles and several books of poetry (*A Motive for Mayhem*, *Mob*, *Scatter Matrix*, *Artificial Memory* most recently) with a new critical book forthcoming from University of Alabama Press: *THIS IS CALLED MOVING: A Critical Poetics of Film*. Both poetry and critical texts have appeared in a number of anthologies, including *Moving Borders* (Talisman Press, 1997), *From the Other Side of the Century* (Sun and Moon Press, 1994), and *Resurgent: An Anthology of Women's Writing* (Southern Illinois Press, 1992).

Child's films and videos have won many awards and have been shown in retrospectives in conjunction with the New Museum at Anthology Film Archives (New York), Torino Film Festival (Italy), ICA (London), Mercer Union Gallery (Toronto), The Collective For Living Cinema (New York), The San Francisco Cinematheque and Frameline Film Festival (California). The work has officially been selected for the Oberhausen Film Festival, Visions du Reel, Nyon, the London and Rotterdam International Film Festivals, Pesaro Film Festival (Italy), the New York Film Festival and Video Sidebar, the Latin American International Short Film Festival (Toronto), and World Wide Video Festival (Den Haag)-among many others.

Child is the recipient of a Fulbright Fellowship (Russia), an NEA Fellowship, a Guggenheim Foundation Grant, a Massachusetts Arts Council Grant, an AFI Independent Filmmakers Grant, multiple grants from the New York State Council on the Arts, the New York Foundation for the Arts, the Jerome Foundation, and the MacDowell Colony (residential studio).

Child studied History & Literature at Radcliffe College (Magna cum laude) and graduated with an MFA from Yale University School of the Arts (Honors). She has taught film/video production and history at various schools, including NYU, Massachusetts College of Art, The Art Institute of San Francisco, Sarah Lawrence and Hampshire College. Since Jan. 2000, she is Chair of Film /Animation at the School of the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.

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2005

Flash Polaroids on turbulence.org

02 Jan 2005

The Flash Polaroids resurface on a new host, this time armored with a Harold Bloom endorsement Harold Bloom did not give.

New on turbulence.org

Flash Polaroids

"I don't care what William Blake says, these are fun!"

— Harold Bloom

The Flash Polaroids occupy a middle ground between an experimental film/video aesthetic - particularly the works that use the single frame as the unit of composition - and interactive installation video works. The earlier "Studies" involve loops of digital photographs taken in "burst mode" - in quick succession - and were partly inspired by David Crawford's Stop Motion Studies. The "Portraits" involve several views of the same subject in juxtaposition, and could be compared to a Warholian take on the portrait - a moving image that essentially sits still, or a still image that moves only slightly over time. The "Micro-narratives" introduce "stories" to the Flash Polaroids, especially "Guy Cat Pan," which, like a metaphysical painting of De Chirico's, gets its charge by placing disparate, enigmatic objects on the same stage. The "Interactive" set pushes outward toward the user, and demonstrate what could be done with this simple use of Flash and digital photographs as projections in an installation setting.

About the artist

Known primarily as a poet, Brian Kim Stefans has been producing work for the web since 1998. His most well-known work is The Dreamlife of Letters, a 14-minute Flash poem that can be found, along with other works, at arras.net in the "web poetry" section. Other web projects include the anti-war blog Circulars, and the series of New York Times detournements called "The Vaneigem Series," which incurred a cease-and-desist letter from the Times. He edits the series of Slash Ubu e-books that are found at www.ubu.com/ubu, and has published several books of poetry (Free Space Comix, Gulf, Angry Penguins) and one of experimental criticism, Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics. He is working on a new series of 32 short pieces of digital poetry called "A Book Of Poems," due in Spring 2005.

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W.S. Graham, Collected Poems (review)

15 Apr 2005

A pointer to the Boston Review notice, opening on the grievance that American critics have left British Modernism to nod-and-move-on. Stefans makes the large claim plainly — Graham belongs with Hopkins, Stevens, Crane — and earns it on the strength of a single line, "I stand in my vocabulary looking out."

My review of W.S. Graham's Collected Poems is now online at the Boston Review website:

<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.2/stefans.html>

British Modernism has not been served well by American critics and readers. Preoccupied by American poetry's own version of family court—who are the true heirs of William Carlos Williams, Charles Olson, or even Robert Lowell? when will the prodigal Stein finally come back from Europe and take her place at the head of the table?—we have been content merely to nod approvingly at the likes of Basil Bunting and David Jones. But as the recent publication of J.H. Prynne's Poems, Tom Raworth's Collected Poems, and the many collected and selected volumes streaming out of Salt Publishing remind us, the story of British Modernism in America is still a work in progress.

Add to that story W.S. Graham's New Collected Poems, which not only returns Graham to the central narrative of 20th-century British poetry but should also mark his introduction to the United States as a major lyric poet. A daring technician teased, but not intoxicated, by visionary impulses, he belongs in the company of Gerard Manley Hopkins, Wallace Stevens, and Hart Crane, but as the one who believed language to be an obstruction to communication, an "other" just behind, yet inseparable from, the stage machinery of the self. "I stand in my vocabulary looking out," he writes in "Notes to the Difficult One," and the first part of "Clusters Traveling Out" ends, "Whoever / Speaks to you will not be me. / I wonder what I will say." This see-saw between a near-paranoia about language and an utter devotion to its unveiling places him among such chroniclers of the "word virus" as William S. Burroughs, Laura Riding Jackson, Jack Spicer, and any number of later writers who were inspired by the language philosophies of Wittgenstein and Heidegger, or who, steeped in Roland Barthes, vexed the borders between reader, writer, and text.

<http://bostonreview.net/BR30.2/stefans.html>

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2006

What the &*% _is_ Electronic Writing?!?

25 Jan 2006

A plain answer to the question he says he is asked more than any other, written up for his Brown students: electronic writing as any writing that takes what the screen can do — link, animate, compute — and makes it matter to the work. The title's expletive is the only impatience in an otherwise patient primer.

A fully linked version of this post appears at:

http://www.arras.net/brown_ewriting/

What is Electronic Writing?

Im asked this question quite often, and have rarely been able to come up with a short answer. Its many things, and quite often, a work of electronic writing is so unique that its a genre until itself.

If I were to come up with a fortune cookie answer to the question, I would say that it is any form of writing that takes advantage of the possibilities afforded by digital technology such as the internet, or graphics programs such as Illustrator or Photoshop, or animation / audio / interactive programs such as Flash in their creation and presentation.

But it is also those forms of writing that are informed by new ways of thinking brought on by the way digital technology has impacted our world, i.e. forms of writing that are organized according to the principles of the database, or that work primarily as texts distributed over the internet, or that in the manner of Dispositions, which was written with the aid of a GPS device relied on computer technology in the writing.

Now for the long answer Electronic writing can be:

- Classic hypertext fiction, in which different pages of writing (often called lexia) are maneuvered by the reader by clicking on words or images. These can be choose your own adventure type narratives, or more poetic interactive texts in which there are no fictional elements at all. Many of the better ones of these, such as Patchwork Girl and Afternoon, are not available online, and have to be purchased from Eastgate Systems.
- Animated poems, such as The Dreamlife of Letters or Axolotl, in which the viewer/reader is not asked to do anything but watch and listen while text performs before them. Think of this as the art of movie titles applied to creative ventures. Bambos Zoo is another classic example.
- Conceptual blogs and websites, such as The Dullest Blog in the World or Dagmar Chili Pitas, which are sites that explore a particular type of writing to the nth

degree, such that you really cant categorize them under anything in particular. Entropy8, by Aurelia Harvey, is a classic in this genre.

- Non-electronic conceptual writing, such as The Tapeworm Foundry or Dispositions, that explore some aspect of writing that relates to a database aesthetic, i.e. a collection of fragments that are organized into a poetic whole.
- Parody and hactivist websites, which are conceptual sites that attempt to comment on the conventions public communication on the web, such as whitehouse.org, my own Vaneigem Series, or Blackness for Sale, which was really just a page of Ebay. These sites usually engage in some form of artistic plagiarism, i.e. taking graphics and design elements from corporate sites.
- Wordtoys, which are more sophisticated forms of classic hypertext, in which the user is invited to play with an experimental interface in such a way that new textual creations are manufactured in real-time, such as Camille Utterback installation Text Rain or the projects of Daniel Howe.
- Interactive Fiction and literary games, in which the user is the hero of a story, and must input commands to navigate the literary piece and solve it like a puzzle, in the manner of early text-playing or role-playing games. Nick Montfort has been the biggest advocate of this type of writing.
- Cave Writing and installation texts, which takes place in the VRML environment of Browns Cave or in galleries, like Text Rain or Legible City. Some installations, such as Mark Dominos glås, are not interactive.
- Email and collaborative art, and other forms of writing that take advantage of the forms of communication peculiar to electronic communications, such as Implementation, which is a fiction that requires the user to download stickers that they can paste up in the cities or towns they live in, or even writing that is primarily distributed via text messaging.
- Computer generated texts, in which a computer program helped in the creation of the text, or in which a web spider culled live text from the internet to create the work, such as in Noah Wardrip-Fruins Regime Change & Newsreader. A version of this is website translators like Pornolize.com, which converts the text of any website into a (kitchy) porn language.

There are a billion variations on the above, and in fact no piece is ever peculiar to one of these categories. A work called They Rule, which uses a database of CEOs of the major corporations of the world, is an interactive political cartoon that is almost entirely a textual experience, while All Your Base Are Belong to Us is just a crazy Flash movie made by any number of people spontaneously around the world.

Practical websites - such as ubu.com, a collection of concrete, audio and avant-garde video files, and rhizome.org, the premiere internet website -are often considered a form of art since they are often the expressions of very personal, non-commercial and often very obsessive artistic and political visions. Communities often develop around these sites, thus putting them somewhere in the camp of activism.

Great electronic art can be created with little or no computer skills, which is kind of the drama of the entire venture. Some of the most effective forms of Electronic Writing are INCREDIBLY SIMPLE to create, such as Blackness for Sale and the Vaneigem Series. I have a soft spot for these types of projects, since they don't require a team of computer scientists to create, and their impact is clean and immediate.

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Re: Electronic Writing II

26 Jan 2006

Housekeeping from the syllabus end of Stefans's life: he thanks Jim for links, weighs whom to fit into a sidebar, and mourns the marooning of the Storyspace hypertexts on machines that no longer run them. The one sharp line is aesthetic — the best-looking web work, he notes, comes from people whose money is made elsewhere, their design sense 'unhindered by other people's money.'

Thanks for all the great links, Jim. And Gregory Whitehead is indeed a great one for audio "electronic writing." I'll put him up there, and maybe Christophe Mignone. Only so much I can cram into the sidebar.

Chris Joseph is a real find, I wish I had known about him earlier, but it appears he's only been working since 2002. Still working through the rest of the links. Mark Tribe gave me a bunch of good ones too.

I agree that the loss of all of the Storyspace work for now is huge. I really thought that I'd be able to teach some of that stuff, but it's so awkward to get them to borrow copies from the library, read them in the lab (where the software doesn't even run on the new Macs, from what I understand) etc. I don't know why there is no Java version of Storyspace, it seems like a no-brainer. Then those students who didn't want to learn Flash could just learn that.

As for funding for these projects, yes there is a difference between those who can pay to have their stuff designed for them, but I actually find many sites pretty, well, unbeautiful, even when there seems to be institutions behind them. It's when it comes to projecting your words on a wall and dancing around in front of them with an electronic glove that it gets expensive. Most of the better looking web stuff tends to be by people who make their money elsewhere anyway, with

their own design sense unhindered by other people's money. A computer in itself is an investment, of course.

I encourage people to visit the blog, especially when student work starts to go up, but please do me a favor and don't leave comments. The comments are for them, and I'd like to make them feel like they have some privacy, even though they know they don't. (Feel free to comment at FSC however.)

Thanks again! Brian

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Ian Hamilton Finlay: a casual reminiscence

01 Apr 2006

Finlay — the concrete poet and gardener of Little Sparta — died at eighty on a Monday in March, and Stefans, a devoted admirer, set down not an obituary but a reminiscence: the son met at a reading, the dandruff brushed into Jackson Mac Low's soup, the party in Edinburgh he reached by way of Miles Champion. It is the one elegy in these pages, and among the warmest things in them.

From Free Space Comix: the blog:

<http://www.arras.net/fscIII/>

It's no secret that I am a huge Ian Hamilton Finlay fan. Finlay died of cancer last Monday at the age of 80.

I was lucky enough to meet Finlay's son, Eck, at a poetry reading I did in New York on St. Patrick's day. I forget exactly what year this was, it must have been 1996, when the holiday fell on a Sunday, or 1995, when it fell on a Friday (the most recent one on a Saturday was 1990, when I was still in college). I was subbing for Melanie Nielson, and because of the holiday the Ear Inn didn't want to host the reading. In any case, I read to a not very packed house at a tea shop near by with Norma Cole - the only other notable event was that I accidentally brushed dandruff into Jackson Mac Low's soup, and I met Erica Hunt that day but didn't know it was her because she sat alone, with her child, at the back (actually, very front) of the room, and I assume she was some woman who stopped by on a whim.

I saw Eck give a talk about his father's work later that week at Teacher's and Writers. Because his father was an agoraphobe, Eck used to give talks about his work around the world, which afforded him a great chance to meet poets outside of the UK.

I didn't see Eck much after that, but in 1998 I went to London to spend time with Miles Champion, and while there met Thomas Evans, a good friend of both Miles' and Eck's, who invited me to a party at Eck's apartment in Edinburgh. I remember being keen on seeing a reading in London at the same time at

Subvoicive, the sort of equivalent of the Ear series over there, but it was an Ann Waldman reading, so I felt it was probably something I could miss being as I'd seen Ann read numerous times already. (I'll never forget the phone call I had with Tim Atkins about this dilemma - he said "a reading by Ann Waldman or a weekend on the Scottish shore. let me make your decision for you.")

So I took the train up to Edinburgh. It was packed with football revelers who were rather dismayed that their team, Newcastle, had just lost to Arsenal in some sort of final or other. (Miles and I had been chased by Arsenal fans the night before, so I don't think winning or losing changes much in terms of how much is imbibed.) It was early afternoon, but everyone on the train was drunk, drunk, drunk, and loud as hell. I knew I would hear it when I got up to go the bathroom, but it wasn't so bad in the end.

But Edinburgh was a relief. The Scottish cabby who managed to find Eck's place for me was a dear, or at least compared to London cabbies. The architecture really amazed me, and for the first time on that trip I felt like I was in another country. Not a "Blockbuster" sign in sight. The party was great - I won't go into details, but there were Gaelic songs, an intoxicated elder Scot with an eye for a much younger lady, the reading of much poetry, and the poet Gael Turnbull, who in a reversal had visited W.C.W. in Rutherford many (many) years before.

(I've just learned from Wikipedia that Turnbull, who died in 2004, also created "kinetic poems," which were "texts for installation in which the movement of the reader and/or of the text became part of the reading experience." Maybe I should stop believing in coincidence.)

The next day was, indeed, spent driving around the Scottish shore and through the hills of Fife, accompanied by Eck, two friends of his, the daughter of one of the friends named Sinead (who sang several of the Gaelic songs the night previous), and Thomas. I saw cows on hillsides that looked right out of the cover of Atom Heart Mother . We visited an artist who lived in a converted movie theater at the peak of a cliff that overlooked the shore, and I sat with Thomas on that shore as he regaled me with memorized lines from the letters of Jack Kerouac. Only an English poet would bother to memorize such things written in a haze of alcohol as if they were Samuel Johnson, but I certainly never faulted him for it! (Now that I think of it, it might have been Clark Coolidge he was quoting to me.)

We also visited Eck's childhood vacation home, which was overrun by spiders, and spent a good hour with Eck's mother, Sue, who helped build Little Sparta. She and Ian, who had known each other since childhood growing up on those hills, were estranged, but both still lived in Fife. I also saw gorse, which is good

because now I can use the word "gorse" in poems and sound like I know what I mean, but the opportunity hasn't yet arisen.

I'm making a short story long, but this really was one of my finest weekends. I have several beautiful photographs to show you if you ever want to visit me.

We did finally get to the garden, the road to which is (if I remember correctly) only marked by the most crude of signs. Eck told me that Ian wasn't so keen on having visitors because he felt the poems "weren't there yet" - the foliage had not yet accrued to the degree that was ideal for their presentation. But because I was with Eck - who I didn't think liked me the night before when I was an uninvited guest but who turned out to be very friendly - we got in. (One memory also from that trip - I sang one of the few songs of my own that I memorized a cappella in the car as we were driving, a feat that will never be reproduced in my lifetime, or in yours.)

We approached the garden, I with great anticipation. It was almost anti-climactic to come upon Ian sitting on a stone bench in his long rubber boots looking at one of his poems right there at the entrance to the place. I would have much rather we had to muck around in his living room looking at stuff while he was upstairs getting decent. Nonetheless, the poem he was looking at was beautiful, and though we barely said anything to each other, I could tell immediately that he was a very gentle and kind man, not quite what I expected for a guy who lost a commission in France because he wanted the piece to include a long row of working guillotines.

I'd tell you about walking around the garden and all the amazing things I saw, but you can look at the photographs (links below) and get your own sense of what it was like. Specific memories: going into the Temple of Apollo, which had once been a sort of small museum of IHF works but was now closed to the public because Ian had not been able to have it declared a religious site (rather than a cultural site, which is taxed much more). It was now a storage room - I saw several boxes of works that had just been shipped to Finlay from his collaborators (I photographed the mailing label on one of them).

The other memory was of Eck and his lady friend whose name I can't remember rowing around in the "Sea Eck" in the pond there. She was doing all the rowing, Eck was doing all the talking. Somehow this seemed hilarious to me because she was rather skinny and didn't look exactly like she was enjoying the imbalance of physical exertion. But that might just have been my satirist's eye acting up.

The hills are as bare as they appear in the photographs, and the parts covered in the foliage in the garden are as green and rich. The stones you see above, so difficult to photograph, are littered (if that's quite the word) on the outer edge of

the garden, and they read: "The present order is the disorder of the future." I am not always able to quote this line properly - I even had to look it up just now - because I somehow believe the opposite to be true, but neither version cancels the other out. I'm not sure which is more optimistic than the other; it really all depends on where you sit on the Foucauldian fence (oh god, did I just use the word "Foucauldian"?).

We didn't see Ian again until we left. There is a photograph in my shoebox of Ian and I with the sun setting behind us - a pretty awful photograph, as the sun really should have been upon us. You can't see either of our faces very well, but his arms are crossed and I am wearing my famous red gingham shirt. I was too nervous (and physically exhausted, given the previous evening's drunkenness - my entire London trip's drunkenness, you won't be surprised to hear) to say anything significant. But then again, I hardly expected to hit it off right away with Finlay, we are from quite different worlds. I've only ever rented, for example. I could have told him that my doctor was William Carlos Williams' son, but that's an ice breaker that works on too few occasions. I could have also told him that Robert Smithson was also from Rutherford - their work seems to have something to do with each other - but I didn't know it at the time.

I wrote an article about Finlay for the St. Mark's Poetry Project Newsletter which Lisa Jarnot was kind enough to publish. John Tranter republished it in Jacket, and I think it convinced him to have an entire section devoted to Finlay's work, including a really excellent (much superior to mine) article by Drew Milne. I encourage anyone who reads this blog to take a peek at these articles and also at the links to photographs below.

I don't have anything terribly profound to say about his work right now, except perhaps that he really enriched my thinking on what it means to be a "postmodern" artist - he was not "postmodern" in any convenient sense of the term, there is/was nothing obvious about Ian Hamilton Finlay, his politics, his aesthetics or his philosophy. He is the first concrete poet I knew whose work actually pointed to a larger world view that was not entirely a meditation on text and its paradoxes, or some easy comment on modern culture - his "vision of sweet philosophy" permeated everything he did, and he created an easy transport between his wee garden in Scotland and the greater (and most frightening) themes of Western Civ.

Ok, that's a bunch of abstraction for you, but I did use the word "Foucauldian" earlier. He used many of the same techniques that artists like Bruce Nauman (script in neon lights) and several other conceptual and performance artists (words on the side of buildings, on gallery walls, appropriation, not to mention the "crates" event) but it all pointed to some vision that was, on the one hand,

sublime, historical and full of sense of order and the ideal, but on the other anchored in the particular, the ephemeral. The garden may very well sink into ruin, but that seems to have been part of the plan (again, an echo of Smithson here, whose Spiral Jetty was meant to degrade beautifully, then disappear). Most of us are hoping for something a little better than that, at least for the immediate future.

Thanks to mIEKAL aND for sending some of these links along to the ubuweb listserv. I append the New York Times obituary since it will eventually become a pay-only piece of reading; I hope they (and Jeffrey Julich) don't mind.

Ian Hamilton Finlay's Garden Gallery Photography by Philip Hunter
http://www.perlesvaus.easynet.co.uk/hippeis/gallery/little_sparta/

The Little Sparta Trust <http://www.littlesparta.co.uk/>

Little Sparta on Flickr <http://www.flickr.com/photos/tags/littlesparta/>

The Death of Piety Ian Hamilton Finlay in conversation with Nagy Rashwan
<http://jacketmagazine.com/15/rash-iv-finlay.html>

The Mark Scroggins The Piety of Terror <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-by-scroggins.html>

BKS on Ian Hamilton Finlay <http://jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-by-stefans.html>

Adorno's Hut Drew Milne <http://www.jacketmagazine.com/15/finlay-milne.html>

Ian Hamilton Finlay on ubu.com <http://www.ubu.com/historical/finlay/finlay.html>

Ian Hamilton Finlay, 80, Poet and Conceptual Artist, Dies

By KEN JOHNSON for The New York Times Published: March 31, 2006

Ian Hamilton Finlay, a Scottish poet and conceptual artist known for his neo-Classical-style sculptures inscribed with poetic texts as well as for his home and garden, an imaginative echo of ancient Rome in the Pentland Hills of Lanarkshire, died on Monday at a hospital in Edinburgh. He was 80.

The cause was cancer, said Katherine Chan, director of the Nolan/Eckman Gallery, which represents Mr. Finlay in New York.

The famously contentious Mr. Finlay began calling his home Little Sparta in 1980, partly to symbolize his refusal to compromise with the local authorities over whether a building dedicated to Apollo should be taxed as a religious or a commercial structure.

Now maintained by a foundation, Little Sparta resembles the home of an ancient Roman philosopher-poet. Rustic and Classical-style stone carvings bearing literary quotations have been carefully placed throughout the property. One

stone block, seemingly antique and tilted in the ground as if it were a ruin, presents the neatly chiseled words of the French revolutionary Louis de Saint-Just: "The world has been empty since the Romans."

But the grounds are not completely given over to nostalgic traditionalism. Images of 20th-century warfare are also distributed about. The two posts of a stone-and-brick gateway, for example, are each topped by an oversize stone carving of a hand grenade.

Mr. Finlay conceived and designed his sculptures, but hired craftsmen to produce them. He also created works for exhibitions in Europe and the United States and for public commissions. Although he had agoraphobia, which restricted his traveling, he had an internationally recognized career, and many visitors made the pilgrimage to Little Sparta.

Mr. Finlay was on the short list for Britain's Turner Prize for contemporary art in 1985 and received the honorary appointment of a Commander of the British Empire in 2002. His work was selected to be part of the 2006 Tate Triennial, a survey of British contemporary art now on view at Tate Britain in London.

Ian Hamilton Finlay was born on Oct. 28, 1925, in Nassau, the Bahamas, where his father was a bootlegger who smuggled rum into the United States during Prohibition. At 6 Mr. Finlay was sent to boarding school in Scotland. War cut short his education at 13, when he was evacuated to Orkney, an archipelago at the northern tip of Scotland. As a teenager he briefly attended the Glasgow School of Art before being called up in 1942 for duty with the Royal Army Service Corps.

After the war, Mr. Finlay worked as a shepherd while producing paintings; short plays, which were broadcast by the BBC; and stories, which were published in *The Herald of Glasgow*.

In 1961 Mr. Finlay founded the Wild Hawthorn Press, which initially published contemporary poets like Louis Zukofsky and Lorine Niedecker but later focused mainly on Mr. Finlay's poetry. In the early 60's he became interested in concrete poetry, in which the visual appearance of words was meant to count as much as the literary meaning. He also began producing short poems sandblasted on glass. One read simply, "Wave Rock."

In 1966 Mr. Finlay and his second wife, Sue, moved to the cottage and grounds that would become Little Sparta, a patch of highlands then called Stonypath, 30 miles southwest of Edinburgh. It was to be his home for the rest of his life. Mr. Finlay's marriage to his first wife, Marion, ended in divorce. He is survived by his wife and their children, Alec Finlay and Ailie Simpson.

Today visitors to Little Sparta are greeted by a bronze plaque mounted on a brick wall that nicely sums up Mr. Finlay's independent, high-minded and mercurial spirit: above the imposing, precisely modeled image of a machine gun, sentiments from the poet Virgil read, "Flute, begin with me Arcadian notes."

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New Media Poetics: Contexts, Technotexts and Theories (MIT Press)

14 Jul 2006

An MIT Press anthology arrives, and Stefans forwards the full catalogue copy on the reasonable assumption that he is somewhere in the contributor list.

New Media Poetics

Contexts, Technotexts, and Theories

Edited by Adalaide Morris and Thomas Swiss

New media poetry—poetry composed, disseminated, and read on computers—exists in various configurations, from electronic documents that can be navigated and/or rearranged by their "users" to kinetic, visual, and sound materials through online journals and archives like UbuWeb, PennSound, and the Electronic Poetry Center. Unlike mainstream print poetry, which assumes a bounded, coherent, and self-conscious speaker, new media poetry assumes a synergy between human beings and intelligent machines. The essays and artist statements in this volume explore this synergy's continuities and breaks with past poetic practices, and its profound implications for the future.

By adding new media poetry to the study of hypertext narrative, interactive fiction, computer games, and other digital art forms, New Media Poetics extends our understanding of the computer as an expressive medium, showcases works that are visually arresting, aurally charged, and dynamic, and traces the lineage of new media poetry through print and sound poetics, procedural writing, gestural abstraction and conceptual art, and activist communities formed by emergent poetics.

Contributors:

Giselle Beiguelman, John Cayley, Alan Filreis, Loss Pequeño Glazier, Alan Golding, Kenneth Goldsmith, N. Katherine Hayles, Cynthia Lawson, Jennifer Ley, Talan Memmott, Adalaide Morris, Carrie Noland, Marjorie Perloff, William Poundstone, Martin Spinelli, Stephanie Strickland, Brian Kim Stefans, Barrett Watten, Darren Wershler-Henry

Adalaide Morris is John C. Gerber Professor of English at the University of Iowa, where Thomas Swiss is Professor of English and Rhetoric of Inquiry.

Thomas Swiss is Professor of English and Rhetoric of Inquiry at the University of Iowa.

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Brian Kim Stefans

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Brian Kim Stefans and Darren Wershler-Henry

4. Riding the Meridian

Jennifer Ley

5. Electric Line: The Poetics of Digital Audio Editing

Martin Spinelli

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N. Katherine Hayles

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Loss Pequeño Glazier

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Carrie Noland

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William Poundstone

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Alan Golding and Giselle Beiguelman

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Talan Menmott

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John Cayley

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Barrett Watten

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[New Philadelphia address]

28 Aug 2006

Stefans announces he has moved to Philadelphia — cats petted, babies bad-mouthed, book plugged — in a change-of-address notice that becomes a personal essay.

I've unpacked my Kiss records and the five volume Collected Poems of F.T. Prince and left a few of my very own rings around the bathtub. I've pet cats, I've pet dogs, I've bad-mouthed babies. I've also been propositioned by a prostitute at 10 a.m. as I strolled down the street holding a large Duncan Donuts coffee in one hand and a sausage/egg/cheese croissant in the other. I'm home.

Home being my new Philadelphia address:

193 North 16th St.

Apt. 3

Philadelphia, PA 19130

My number is the same: [REDACTED].

New York friends, prepare for a lot of make-up visits and watching Phillies games in smokeless bars with me as I am just a \$12 Chineese bus away.

Love,

Brian

Oh, and buy my muthafuckin' book to read on the muthafuckin' plane when you come to visit me (it's snake proof):

<http://www.factoryschool.org/pubs/heretical/index.html>

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Before Starting Over

09 Sep 2006

The selected prose arrives in the mail, which Stefans takes as proof of publication — and no, Omar Pound is not getting a copy.

I'll probably put together a more attractive piece of spam later, but thought I'd let you know that I received copies of my book of prose in the mail yesterday, so I assume (this is how the world works in these our superstitious times) that it has been published. The table of contents is pasted in this email—many of you are written about this book, but unfortunately I can't send copies to everyone I write about, it would be too much. Omar Pound isn't getting one either.

Salt did a great job on the cover! Now more people than ever will be able to mispronounce my name to rhyme with "the Fonz."

Brian

Brian Kim Stefans

Before Starting Over

Selected Writings and Interviews 1994-2005

<http://saltpublishing.com/>

<http://saltpublishing.com/books/rec/1844710882.htm>

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AUTOSTART: a festival of digital literature

21 Oct 2006

A digital-literature festival flyer rendered in ASCII static, because a festival of screens could hardly be announced in plain type.

d1scuss1on - open house - workshop - read1ng - tour - jam

AUTOSTART - A Festival of Digital Literature

Kelly Writers House, October 26 & 27

Celebrating the Electronic Literature Collection, volume 1

MACHINE series # Electronic Literature Organization

[http://writing.
upenn.edu/wh/autostart.html](http://writing.upenn.edu/wh/autostart.html)

Charles Bernstein

Jim Carpenter

Mary Flanagan

N. Katherine Hayles

Daniel C. Howe

Aya Karpinska

Aaron Levy

Marjorie Luesebrink

Nick Montfort

Stuart Moulthrop

Jason Nelson

Jena Osman

Bob Perelman

Scott Rettberg

Ron Silliman

Brian Kim Stefans

Stephanie Strickland

Noah Wardrip-Fruin

All events except the tour of Slought take place at the
Kelly Writers House, 3805 Locust Walk, University of Pennsylvania,
Philadelphia, PA

THURSDAY Oct 26

1:00-2:30 pm Discussion (Arts Cafe)

A conversation about writing and literature in the digital
age, featuring four prominent poets:

Charles Bernstein - University of Pennsylvania

Jena Osman - Temple University

Bob Perelman - University of Pennsylvania

Ron Silliman - Silliman's Blog

2:30-5:30 pm The Open Machine Open House

Electronic literature available for reading and discussion
throughout the downstairs area, with guided tours at
3:30 pm & 4:30 pm by two Electronic Literature Collection,
volume 1 editors:

Stephanie Strickland - New York City

Nick Montfort - University of Pennsylvania

4:00-5:30 pm Wet Digits Workshop

An introductory workshop for those new to HTML and digital
writing, led by the editors of The New Media Reader:

Noah Wardrip-Fruin - University of California, San Diego

Nick Montfort - University of Pennsylvania

[[[RSVP REQUIRED: contact [wh@writing.upenn.](mailto:wh@writing.upenn.edu)

<mailto:wh%40writing.upenn.edu> edu]]]

5:30-7:30 pm Reading (Arts Cafe)

Presentations of electronic literature by Electronic

Literature Collection, volume 1 contributors:

Mary Flanagan - Hunter College

Aya Karpinska - Brown University

Stuart Moulthrop - University of Baltimore

Noah Wardrip-Fruin - University of California, San Diego

FRIDAY Oct 27

10:30-11:30 am Tour of Slought Foundation (4017 Walnut St)

Slought Foundation broadly encourages new futures for contemporary life through public programs featuring international artists and theorists.

Aaron Levy - Slought Foundation Executive Director

1:00-4:00 pm Electronic Writing Jam (Room 202)

A time to write collaboratively and to discuss forms, techniques, and technologies, hosted by:

Jim Carpenter - University of Pennsylvania

Participants include readers and editors from AUTOSTART's Thursday program as well as:

Daniel C. Howe - Brown University

Brian Kim Stefans - Richard Stockton College of New Jersey

Participants by videoconference include two editors of the Electronic Literature Collection, volume 1:

N. Katherine Hayles - University of California, Los Angeles

Scott Rettberg - University of Bergen, Norway

An editor of volume 2 and volume 1 contributor:

Marjorie Luesebrink - Irvine Valley College

And volume 1 contributor:

Jason Nelson - Griffith University, Australia

[[[RSVP REQUIRED: contact [wh@writing.upenn.](mailto:wh@writing.upenn.edu)

<mailto:wh%40writing.upenn.edu> edu]]]

The Electronic Literature Collection, volume 1 is edited by

N. Katherine Hayes # Nick Montfort

Scott Rettberg # Stephanie Strickland

This volume features 60 digital selections by

Jim Andrews # Ingrid Ankerson # babel # Giselle Beiguelman

Philippe Bootz # Patrick-Henri Burgaud # J.R. Carpenter

John Cayley # M.D. Coverley (Marjorie Luesebrink) # Martha Deed

David Durand # escha # Damien Everett # Sharif Ezzat
Edward Falco # Mary Flanagan # Marcel Fr'emiot
Elaine Froehlich # geniwater # Loss Peque~no Glazier
Kenneth Goldsmith # Tim Guthrie # Richard Hopley
Daniel C. Howe # Jon Ingold # Shelley Jackson # Michael Joyce
Aya Karpinska # Robert Kendall # Deena Larsen
Kerry Lawrynowicz # Donna Leishman # Bill Marsh # Talan Memmott
Maria Mencia # Judd Morrissey # Brion Moss # Stuart Moulthrop
Jason Nelson # Marko Niemi # Millie Niss # Lance Olsen
Jason Pimble # William Poundstone # Kate Pullinger
Melinda Rackham # Aaron A. Reed # Shawn Rider # Jim Rosenberg
Megan Sapnar # Dan Shiovitz # Emily Short # Alan Sondheim
Brian Kim Stefans # Reiner Strasser # Dan Waber
Noah Wardrip-Fruin # Rob Wittig # Nanette Wyld
The Collection will be available on the web and on CD-ROM under a
Creative Commons license - see <http://eliterature.org>.
<<http://eliterature.org>> org

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Stefans/Long Philadelphia Book Launch, this Friday 7-9

04 Dec 2006

A free Philadelphia launch promising short readings, some BKS videos, and "otherwise simply carousing" — spelling optimism included.

BOOK LAUNCH

Friday (yes, this one), December 8th 7-9 pm

Higher Grounds Café 631 North 3rd St. (near corner of Fairmount)

"What Is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers" (poems) Brian Kim Stefans
Published by Factory School <http://www.factoryschool.org>
<<http://www.factoryschool.org>> school.org

"The Dog" and "The Last Hot Day of Summer" (stories) Nathan Long Published by
Popular Ink <http://www.popularink.com> <<http://www.popularink.com>> nk.com

FREE

Books and T-shirts for sale... Drink and foodstuffs provided...

SHORT READINGS BY THE AUTHORS SOME VIDEOS BY BKS BUT OTHERWISE
SIMPLY CARROUSING

...with you...

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2007

**Poets BRIAN KIM STEFANS & SUEYEUN JULIETTE LEE at the
Writers House — 1/16**

11 Jan 2007

A Writers House reading, its notice padded out with a bibliography long enough to suggest the poems themselves may run short.

The Kelly Writers House welcomes

poets BRIAN KIM STEFANS &
SUEYEUN JULIETTE LEE

— for a reading & conversation —

-----Tuesday, 1/16 at 6 PM 3805 Locust Walk This event is
free & open to the public -----

BRIAN KIM STEFANS has published several books of poetry including "Free Space Comix" (Roof Books, 1998), "Gulf" (Object Editions, 1998, downloadable at ubu.com) and "Angry Penguins" (Harry Tankoos, 2000), along with several chapbooks, most recently "What Does It Matter?" from Barque Press. "Fashionable Noise: On Digital Poetics," a collection of essays, poetry and interviews, appeared in 2003 from Atelos. His newest books are "What Is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers" (Factory School, 2006), collecting over six years of poetry, and "Before Starting Over: Selected Writings and Interviews 1994-2005," to be published in September, 2006, by Salt Publishing. He is the editor of the /ubu (slash ubu) series of e-books at www.ubu.com/ubu and the creator of arras.net, devoted to new media poetry and poetics, where most of his work, including his own series of Arras e-books, can be found. His internet art and digital poems, such as "The Truth Interview (with Kim Rosenfield)" and the "Flash Polaroids" appear at Ubu, Rhizome, How2, Jacket and Turbulence. "The Dreamlife of Letters" was published by Coach House Books. These and many other works can all be found at arras.net.

SUEYEUN JULIETTE LEE grew up three miles from the CIA. Her poetry has appeared in journals such as Chain, The Columbia Poetry Review, 26, and Glitterpony. Her online chapbook "Trespass Slightly In" is available from Coconut Press (www.coconutpoetry.org) and her latest chapbook "Perfect Villagers" (Octopus Books) is due out in December of 2006. She edits Corollary Press, a small chapbook series of innovative work by writers of color (www.corollarypress.blogspot.com), and her first book "Underground National" should be out in late 2007. She received her MFA in poetry from the University of Mas-

sachusetts at Amherst and is currently at work on a Ph.D. in English Literature at Temple University.

Blowzy with age, Matta Fact contemplated testicular violence; festoons of frankness had ways. Pale as seeds, going gone laughter on the chill chance of recovery, stuck in the effigy, instilled more confidence in hype. Ape a penny, do things that matter when purchasing oranges (hot or cold), lacquered tribute. Connecticut as Kearny, polaroid as a cheap thrill in Hoboken. Nobody talks of development, anymore.

— "Storm Fields," Brian Kim Stefans

Lit up inside, of several generations. By being tangerine, I was also olive beneath my skirts, made of bamboo inside the bones and frayed cheesecloth at the fingertips. By being a girl and not a color and made up of pencils, curly fries and shot by a man on horseback somewhere. By being joined together at the hips with starlight or jackfruit, now bowed at the knees inside an oceans spray. Lacking a lisp in consonants. The pith of a fig, inside a honeydew. Keeping time inside the mouth, counting sugar grains, arriving at the ph of a jackals tear. Neither color nor thing, a slice of jade. The color of before a tree. Tucked into a catacomb, tied together with poison ivy or twine. The skin peels without sunlight or shade. I bleed silk curtains and cinnamon sticks, words being both perfume and antipathy, built to last.

— "I was tangerine inside the mosque," Sueyeun Juliette Lee

-----The Kelly Writers House wh@writing.upenn.edu 3805
Locust Walk 215-573-WRIT Philadelphia, PA 19104
<http://www.writing.upenn.edu/~wh>

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Brian Kim Stefans and Eric Baus, Thursday (tomorrow) in NYC, 7 pm

05 Dec 2007

A reading resent to correct for having been "unclear, offensive, or just plain weird," and offered with the promise that Stefans won't read New York again for 27 years — and that there is food.

Just in case my last announcement was unclear, offensive, or just plain weird, I'm resending an invite to this reading TOMORROW (Thursday).

I'll be reading a new longish piece called "Harold and Sonia," based on the life and writings of H.P. Lovecraft. which is better than it sounds, along with some short poems. Eric is someone whose poetry I've enjoyed for some time now — a

sort of Cornell-esque visionary in miniatures — magical realism that gets under your odor-eaters.

Despite a vow of not-weirdness (you can see the original invite here: <http://www.arras.net/fscIII/>), you have to see this photograph of Eric Baus rolling around in a bathtub of canned bake beans:

http://static.rateyourmusic.com/album_images/s4658.jpg

Eric and I have read together in the past and make a good sweet and sour combo — so you should come! If only to say hello! And there's food. And I won't be reading in New York again for 27 YEARS (or until Bush is out of office, is decomposing in the ground, is a forgotten nightmare on the winds of fame and farts — whichever comes first). Oh, and there's food.

Thursday, December 6th 7pm FREE Teachers & Writers Collaborative 520 8th Ave, Suite 2020 A,C,E, to Penn Station

wine, cheese reception to follow

Brian Kim Stefans' recent books of poetry are Kluge: A Meditation (Roof Books) and What Is Said to the Poet Concerning Flowers (Factory School). A book of interviews and criticism, Before Starting Over, was published by Salt Book in 2006. He teaches new media studies at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey and lives in Philadelphia, PA.

Eric Baus is the author of The To Sound (Wave Books), Tuned Doves (Octopus Books, forthcoming), and several chapbooks. He is a contributing editor for PENNsound and publishes Minus House chapbooks. He lives in Denver.

Mobile Libris will be selling books.

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2008

Poetry Job at Stockton

17 Apr 2008

Bound for UCLA, Stefans forwards his own vacated Stockton line as a job ad, lightly staged as a testimonial to teaching Video Game Narrative Studies unmolested.

As some of you know, I'm leaving Stockton at the end of this semester to take up a job at UCLA. So there's an opening at Stockton. They want to hire a poet with digital humanities experience, rather than a new media specialist, given the relatively few new media people who actually can teach literature. Here's the advert... it's a fun place to teach! You pretty much create your own classes, with no hassles from the administration — this semester, I taught Video Game Nar-

rative Studies, Experimental Writing Workshop and Indie Films and Filmmakers (for their General Studies Department).

Literature and Creative Writing -The Richard Stockton College of New Jersey seeks applicants for a tenure-track Assistant Professor in Literature for their Literature Program to start September 2008. Ph.D. or MFA required for position. Salaries competitive (\$49,124-\$56,494), excellent benefits.

Successful candidate will be expected to teach introductory through advanced courses in poetry and creative writing, teach core courses in support of the Literature curriculum and to support program initiatives in the digital humanities. Preference will be given to candidates with evidence of excellence in college teaching and experience with digital humanities, such as digital publishing, digital archives, blogs, podcasting, web design, and the use of technology in the classroom. Academic experiences with culturally diverse populations desired. Teaching load is six four-hour courses per year, which includes two self-designed courses in Stockton's interdisciplinary General Studies program.

Send letter of application, C.V., statement of teaching philosophy, three letters of recommendation to Dr. Robert Gregg, Dean of Arts and Humanities, Richard Stockton College of New Jersey, AA___, PO Box 195, Pomona, NJ 08240-0195. <http://www.stockton.edu> Screening begins immediately and will continue until position is filled. Stockton is an equal opportunity institution.

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2009

Los Angeles Poetry PDFs

29 Dec 2009

Stefans the archivist: an announcement of scanned, out-of-print Los Angeles poetry, which becomes an impromptu essay on the HUAC-generation poets, the blacklisted McGrath, and the mystifying James Boyer May. The list post as finding aid — generous, particular, and cut off mid-sentence on May, as if the archive itself ran out of shelf.

I've been posting a series of scans of poetry books from Los Angeles over the past century. Most of these are long out of print, or by authors that don't have national (or even local) reputations. All of this is part of a research project I'm working on of avant-garde or experimental (or just unusual) poetic practice here in Los Angeles. An introduction to this project can be found on my blog:

<http://www.arras.net/fscIII/?p=530>

And these pages have links to the PDFs themselves:

<http://www.arras.net/fscIII/?p=681> <http://www.arras.net/fscIII/?p=744>

Here are the very brief introductions to the PDFs that appear on the blog:

Los Angeles Poetry I (Villiers Publications Ltd., London: 1958) Edited by James Boyer May, Thomas McGrath and Peter Yates.

This is the representative collection by what I loosely call the HUAC generation - both McGrath and Edwin Rolfe (who doesn't appear here) were either fired or blacklisted due to their political views, and others in the collection were affected by McCarthy-era madness. An interesting study and anthology of this group of poets (though not including the avant-garde or non-political ones) is *Poets of the Non-Existent City: Los Angeles in the McCarthy Era*, by Estelle Gershgoren Novak.

Included in this collection is a weird, Joycean poem by the eccentric Philadelphia writer Gil Orlovitz (who frequented Hollywood as an a screenwriter; CA Conrad is a big fan, and you can read about him on Conrad's blog), poems by surreal, experimental photographer Edmund Teske, a large slab of McGrath's Letter to an Imaginary Friend devoted to the pleasures of sex, early work by the well-known poet and teacher Ann Stanford, and spare, compelling work by Josephine Ain, who doesn't seem to have written much but whose name appears frequently in the literature on the period.

Other poets include: Melissa Blake, Guy Daniels, Gene Frumkin, Sid Gershgoren, Stanley Kiesel, Bert Meyers, William Pillin, Lawrence P. Spingam, Zack Walsh, Mel Weisburd, Peter Yates, Curtis Zahn - I don't know much about these poets except that Bert Meyers has a collected poems titled *In a Dybbuk's Raincoat*.

This anthology is a testament to the impact of the Thomas McGrath, who lived here for ten years, on the Los Angeles poetry world, since nothing of comparable scope was published for a few decades.

James Boyer May, *Selected Poems 1950-1955* (Inferno Press: San Francisco, 1955)

I'm quite mystified by James Boyer May. He's best known as the editor of *Trace*, a small press journal that reviewed and charted the progress of small press journals worldwide. A chapter of the book *Mavericks: Nine Independent Publishers* is devoted to him (along with the likes of James McLaughlin and John Martin), though I haven't read it yet.

The idiom in these poems is unlike anything I've come across in American poetry, though it does have a strange resemblance to certain British poets such as those

associated with "Cambridge" writing - a high tone that is open to vulgarities, a careful, tradition-wary metrical precision, a moral earnestness, a syntactic and lexicographical density, even a tendency toward Hopkins-esque word-clusters - though May was born and raised in Los Angeles. "Incredibly, ideals of bomb-feared noons - / here, violent blooms should scintillate, / men supplicate annihilative plans." (from "Ossia").

May, due to his connection with Villiers (see above), helped Ginsberg publish the first edition of *Howl* in the UK, which in turn led to the books being confiscated in mail on the way back.

John Thomas, *Epopoeia and The Decay of Satire* (The Red Hill Press: Los Angeles & Fairfax, 1976)

Now here's a difficult case: an undeniably excellent poet who died in prison, serving a sentence for having molested his daughter; a poet whose early work seems to show a visionary breadth and bounding imagination, but who barely published any new poems (or republished, times over, older poems) during the latter part of his life; and a poet Charles Bukowski called "the best unread poet in America" whose style synthesized elements of the most opaque of Olson's *Maximus* poems or the collage aesthetic of the *Tennis Court Oath* (but who was also, at times, sexually frank, morally unambiguous in his amorality, and could tell a good story, like a West Venice West Georges Battaille).

Outside of this small group (most of which also appear in his first collection, called *John Thomas*), Thomas published a chapbook of poems called *Nevertheless* in 1990, and contributed to the excellent volume *Abandoned Latitudes* (with Paul Vangelisti and Robert Crosson) in 1983. A good, if not probing, obituary was published in the UK *Independent*; a much more detailed, and harrowing, account of his personality by his daughter, Gabrielle Idlet, appeared a little later in the *LA Weekly*.

Michelle T. Clinton, *High Blood /Pressure* (West End Press: Los Angeles, 1986)

I don't know much about Michelle T. Clinton - there's almost nothing on the internet about her - except that she doesn't live in Los Angeles anymore, and that she has a second volume of poetry, *Good Sense & The Faithless*, also from West End Press (1994). She's also recorded a spoken word cassette called "Black Angeles" (1988) with Wanda Coleman, who writes that Clinton's poems are "exorcisms - the rootings out of racism and sexism."

I thought of her as a sort of female Etheridge Knight at first, as some of the poems reminded me of Knight's "Hard Rock Returns To Prison From The Hospital For The Criminal Insane," with its anecdotal focus on the most hidden parts of society, occasional use of Black English, and somewhat nihilistic underlying

bphilosophy. But Clinton's poetry is far more interesting - less "literary" (following through on that distrust of the "literary" that runs through much of Los Angeles poetry) though formally quite precise and refined. These poems, unsettling as they can be (and funny also) are packed with an amazing energy, frankness and skill, not to mention searing anger.

Bob Flanagan and David Trinidad, *A Taste of Honey* (Cold Calm Press: Los Angeles, 1990)

Bob Flanagan is best known as a performance artist, cystic fibrosis sufferer, and subject of the documentary *Sick: The Life & Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (view his Super Cystic Fibrosis Song for a taste of that). David Trinidad is best known as David Trinidad, well-known New York poet. But in their younger years they were hanging out at Beyond Baroque with Dennis Cooper, Amy Gerstler and the teenaged Kim Rosenfield and publishing with Cooper's press Little Caesar (follow the link for full issues).

This is a really enjoyable little volume - 12 poems of 36 lines each, and in iambic pentameter! It has some of the crazed feel of the Berrigan/Padgett collaborations but with a distinctly LA setting. The formal constraint gets you trying to read the poems as monologues (in the manner of, say, Browning), and brings them to a level that Flanagan, in his short, difficult life, was able to achieve in his solo poems (but more on that later).

The cover image, a combined portrait of the two authors, looks a little to me like David Carradine.

Bob Flanagan, *The Kid is the Man* (Bomb Shelter Press, 1978)

Early poems by an artist better known for his extremely masochistic performance work, written around the time when he was hanging out at Beyond Baroque with the Little Caesar crowd. I posted a later collaboration of Flanagan and David Trinidad, *A Taste of Honey*, elsewhere on this blog.

Abandoned Latitudes, by Robert Crosson, John Thomas and Paul Vangelisti (Red Hill Press, 1983)

This is a very excellent and various collection of writing by the three authors. Crosson is an under-appreciated Los Angeles poet who writes in a sort of fictional quilt style, which is to say, it is very much "collage" work but based on his own skewed narrative imagination. Selections of his *Daybooks* were recently published by Otis Books/Seismicity Editions.

Paul Vangelisti, of course, was the editor of *Invisible City*, an important journal of poetry from the seventies and eighties (among other several other excellent editing and translation ventures before and since) and is a prolific poet whose

selected poems, *Embarrassment of Survival*, appeared in 2001. Here is an interesting video of his recent interview with Ezra Pound's daughter, Mary de Rachewiltz.

I posted a collection of John Thomas's poetry elsewhere in this blog. This "unfinished" prose sequence is by turns beautiful and harrowing, sounding at times like Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia* and George Bataille's *The Story of the Eye*. It also reminds me a bit of that Jack Nicholson movie *Five Easy Pieces*, though I don't know why - I guess I keep expecting Toni Basil to appear suddenly in it.

William J. Margolis, *The Anteroom of Hell* (Inferno Press, 1957)

These poems can seem, at times, like a parody of typical "Beat" poetry of the time; as the title of the book suggests, it is full of visionary, stream-of-consciousness condemnations of conformity and modern life, as well as lofty, faintly archaic paeans to love. There's more than a bit of Gregory Corso and Arthur Rimbaud traipsing around these pages, though without the humor; Jim Morrison probably read this as a teen.

It's actually a pretty enjoyable read, especially given the historical context, as the author was a key figure in the Venice West scene and a occasional collaborator with Wallace Berman on *Semina*. The book itself is a beautifully printed, which might come through in the .pdf, or not.

Guy de Cointet, *A Few Drawings* (1975)

I posted a video of Guy de Cointet's theater on Youtube. There are actually several great resources about this French-born Los Angeles artist on the web, such as [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#) and [here](#), as well as a cache of .pdf reprints of various essays and reviews about his work. I also posted a photo and brief intro to his work elsewhere.

This collection of "drawings," which are really more like concrete or visual poems and are quite hilarious, confirms for me the rightness of calling de Cointet a "poet" (even if, in this time of conceptual literature, I hardly have to break a sweat to make that argument). A full list of his compelling, but extremely expensive to procure, publications can be seen [here](#).

Dennis Cooper, *The Missing Men* (Am Here Books/Immediate Editions, 1981)

A really beautiful, simply but elegantly produced collection of early poems and very short fictions by the well-known author Dennis Cooper. Cooper's own website suggests that all of the issues of his seminal journal *Little Caesar* appear online in pdf form, but this turns out not to be the case, though I do love the first page of the first issue which lays out their editorial philosophy:

In Paris ten year old boys clutching well worn copies of Apollinaire's *ALCOOLS* put their hands over their mouths in amazement before paintings by Renoir and Monet. Bruce Lee movies close in three days. This could happen here.

Peter Levitt, *Running Grass* (Eidolon Editions. 1979)

I don't know much about Peter Levitt, but found his poems in a couple of Bill Mohr anthologies and appreciated them for their quietness, formal integrity and detail. From what I know, he is living in the Bay area now, but certainly lived a great portion of his younger years in L.A. This book has a nice, short introduction by Robert Creeley.

Stuart Perkoff, *Love is the Silence* (Red Hill Press, 1975)

Ah, Stuart Perkoff. probably the most well-known of the many poets in Los Angeles who never fully realized their talent (Nora May French being the first). He figures prominently in Lawrence Lipton's *The Holy Barbarians* (several photographs of him appear in the appendix, along with the likes of Los Angeles residents Lawrence Ferlinghetti and Kenneth Rexroth. haha, that's another story), as well as in the later, very interesting scholarly study of the Los Angeles arts scene in the sixties, *Venice West: The Beat Generation in Southern California*, by John Arthur Maynard.

Even better, though, is that he is the one Los Angeles poet to appear in Donald Allen's *New American Poetry* in 1960, and his collected poems, *Voices of the Lady*, was published by the National Poetry Foundation in 1998, though now appears out of print.

This selection was made by Perkoff and Paul Vangelisti a few years before Perkoff's death. Like the poetry of Margolis, it might seem a bit dated in style, but in fact, after a few reads, Perkoff's distinct personality, which is not lacking humor or irony, and the sureness and playfulness of his formal talents come through. Olson was a big fan, and in some ways, he's kind of like the West Coast Paul Blackburn.

I really enjoy this book for the image it gives me of some aspects of life at Venice Beach in that time of oil derricks, "jazz canto" and extensive drug use - by turns "existential" in its despair but cosmic, infused with a giddy, bohemian light. (Well, I'll give describing his poetry another shot later.)

Phivos Delphis, *Modern Greek Poems* Translated by James Boyer May (Villiers Publications, 1954)

Just throwing this up for you James Boyer May fans. I don't know much about the poet he is translating, but though these "versions" are a bit archaic and stiff

sounding, they fit together another piece of the puzzle of this nearly unknown poet. I put his Selected Poems: 1950-1955 on this blog earlier.

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Afterword

On My Assistant

A word, in closing, about the young man who assisted me in assembling this book — though the verb, in his case, is used in its most hopeful and most nearly fictional sense.

He came to me sideways, as these arrangements do. I had spent the better part of a year inside his posts — admiring the reviews, forgiving the announcements — and when the labour of the edition grew past what one woman and a flatbed scanner ought to attempt alone, I engaged him. It had the look of an elegant solution: who better to catalogue Brian Kim Stefans than Brian Kim Stefans? He knew where the bodies were buried. He had buried most of them himself.

I began, I will admit, as an admirer. The prose was quick, the ear was real, the man could turn a listserv flame into an essay before the thread had cooled. I had expectations.

They did not survive contact with the work. My assistant, it developed, is a man of many gifts, not one of which is the gift of finishing a thing he has begun. Asked to date the posts, he dated the ones he could recall and supplied plausible feelings about the rest. Handed a stack of his own reviews to proofread, he read them instead — aloud, with evident pleasure, to no one — and returned them uncorrected but much admired. When I observed that a sentence about Carla Harryman had been cloven in two by a stray line break for the better part of a decade, he confessed he had grown rather fond of it that way; I closed the wound myself. He did title the book, I grant him, and titled it well — “I Don’t Have Time to Write Today.” He did not, I have come to understand, intend it as a joke.

There were compensations. He is fine company at two in the morning, which is when scanning gets done, and he can tell Reznikoff from Rakosi, which is more than the last three interns could manage. But an assistant is judged, in the end, on whether the editor’s life is the lighter for his presence, and I cannot in conscience report that mine was. I did the Index myself. I did the Index twice.

So the book is his and the errors are mine — the customary treaty between a poet and whoever tidies up behind him — and I have made my peace with the terms. He has moved on to other projects: several, all unfinished, each more promising than the last. I wish them the completion I could not coax out of him. And should

he ever find himself in want of an editor again, he knows precisely where to reach me. I shall be unavailable.

— *K. M. F.*