

# poetry project

NEWSLETTER

APRIL/MAY 1998 ISSUE #169

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## WHAT'S INSIDE

Beijing Poets: An Interview  
with Mo Fei and Zang Li  
by Leonard Schwartz and Zhang Er

A Secret Location on the Lower  
East Side  
by Jordan Davis

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Leonard Schwartz

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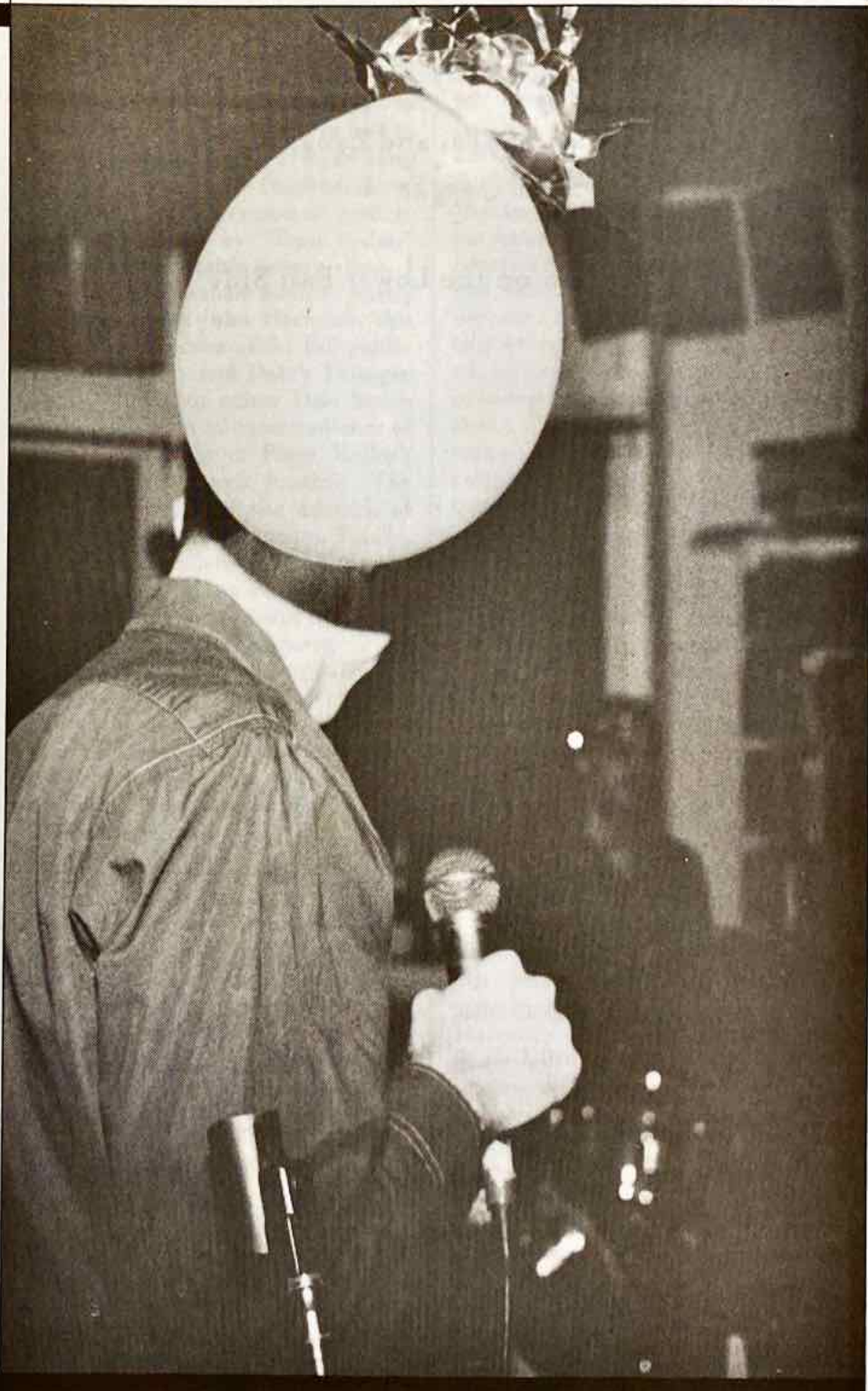
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# regional updates

Minneapolis Correspondent: Mark Nowak

Austin Correspondent: Hoa Nguyen

Honolulu Correspondents: Juliana Spahr and Gabrielle Welford

London Correspondent: Tim Atkins

## MINNEAPOLIS, MN

I've recently heard us called MinNeapolitans. Let's run with that & say these are the ice cold flavors of the month: Elaine Equi spooned out her quick wit, twisting imaginary, & even a second helping poem w/ "a line from a new friend in Minnesota." Playing the crowd? Of course, & you gotta love her for it! Steve Dickson from Small Press Distribution spent a few days in the cities, & met with a number of local poem-makers. Allison Adelle Hedge Coke gave several tasty readings from her new book of poems, *Dog Road Woman* (Coffee House Press) including gigs at both Center School & Heart of the Earth Survival School, providing inspiration to urban rez kids & all others who would listen. AAH Coke also helped celebrate the opening of a new Native-run coffee house & community (activist) meeting center, Black Bear Crossing, which has upcoming readings by the likes of Diane Glancy & David Mura. If you haven't read *Dog Road Woman* yet, no ice cream for you! Perhaps, though, the best event of this winter season was a dialogue w/ painter Robert Colescott & one of my favorite "documentarian" artists, Carrie Mae Weems, at the Walker Art Center. Hearing them talk about a poem by Quincy Troupe reminded me of all that's missing in the poetry world's endless self-referential, jargon-bound "tropes of discourse." That's, as they say, that: served up with a banana & some whipped cream.

## AUSTIN, TX

In January, the poetry radio show "Conversations John Herndon," which had aired for two hours every Sunday on Austin's KJFK FM, came to a close. For the past year, John's show featured work from local and visiting poets. While most poems

were read in English, one could often hear work in Spanish, Farsi, and French as well as John's brand of ecopolitico poetry. KJFK boasts an all-talk format with Howard Stern and G. Gordon Liddy among its radio personalities. With little explanation as to why his contract would not be renewed, management strangely offered that John was "too good of an interviewer." More likely, commercial value was the motivating factor, as John's farewell show was cut in half to provide space for an hour-long product infomercial. The final show, in which I was fortunate to participate, was filmed by "Texas Nafas," Austin's access cable poetry show. I was also lucky to share another poetry event with poet John Herndon, this time in celebration of the Fall publication of *Mike and Dale's Younger Poets*. John, co-editor Dale Smith and I read to an intimate audience of thirty in local poet Peggy Kelley's studio in downtown Austin. The event also featured the artwork of local artist Saloni Robertson. Finally, here is an update for the Austin International Poetry Festival (AIPF), the week long poetry event to be held in April. Featured guest, Dana Gioia, will not be attending AIPF this year as planned. Despite a city grant and a ten dollar per poet registration fee, AIPF was unable to come up with enough money for Mr. Gioia's reading fee. A replacement reader is yet to be determined.

## HONOLULU, HI

On December 23 last at Anna Bananas, a slate of activist poets, singers and dancers came together for an alternative to a Christmas Celebration: Nurturing the Flame of Resistance. In front of a stage lit by candles set on the stairs of two stepladders, the evening began with songs by Uncle Tommy and continued with poetry by Imaikalani Kalahale, Ruth Mabanglo, Linda Middleton, Keith Camacho, Mamo Kim and Kermit. Epi Enari and Noenoe Silva read fiction. Didi and Gabrielle sang, and Nadia Hava-Robbins danced. The evening ended with music provided by the Hawaiian

Country Band. Everyone had a lot of fun and it was a rare opportunity for local activists to get together and enjoy sharing their talents as artists. The Global Guerilla Gardeners Union (G3u), who organized the event, say they are planning another one at UH Manoa Gardens on February 30 and a repeat at Anna Bananas on March 24. In January Meredith Carson read but I forgot to go. And then in February Carolyn Lei-lanilau read to an audience of 8. Lei-lanilau won the American Book Award as Carolyn Lau awhile back. She has transformed her identity from an Asian-American into an Asian-American-Hawaiian (or something like that). I was very excited to go because I had been told that she wrote in a wrong pidgin and I was interested in seeing what a wrong pidgin sounded like. She opened by talking about issues of fluency and her author photo on the back of her book. She said her book was all about language and how it is designed by men. She used the word "sincerity" three times and talked a lot about the amount of grants she has to write. She spoke in standard English. She read for a few minutes in the middle of her talk a piece about going to a ritzy local private school. I can't comment on the quality of her pidgin but I found the whole performance rather amusing.

## LONDON, ENGLAND

Europe awaits the arrival of Steve Evans & Jennifer Moxley in Paris, and Peter Gizzi, Lisa Jarnot, & Lee Ann Brown in England for the Cambridge Conference of Contemporary Poetry this Spring. Other forthcoming visitors include Norma Cole, Leslie Scalapino & Kit Robinson, all of whom will be reading at the 5 / 10 reading series in London. A festival of Poets Plays is also planned, including works by Clark Coolidge, Larry Fagin, & Ted Greenwald. In January, Stacy Doris & Lisa Robertson gave individually excellent readings in London in to a packed Serpentine gallery: Lisa Robertson reading from *Debbie: an Epic*, and Stacy Doris, new work.

# announcements

## Planet News: A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg

Planet News: A Tribute to Allen Ginsberg celebrates five decades of Ginsberg's social activism and political awareness. The event will take place in the Cathedral at St. John the Divine (Amsterdam Ave. and 112th St.) on Thursday, May 14th at 7:30 p.m. There will be performances, talks and readings by Philip Glass, Sonya Sanchez, The Fugs, Anne Waldman, Jayne Cortez, Steven Taylor, Stephan Smith, Pedro Pietri, Andy Clausen, Danny Schechter, David Dellinger, and others to be announced. Admission is free. For more information, contact Bob Rosenthal at (212) 358-9534.

## Brannan Scholars Announced

The three recipients of the Lisa Brannan Memorial Scholarship for Spring 1998 Writing Workshops at the Poetry Project are: Reniqua Allen, Megan Burke, and Asha Punnett. Allen is a student at Academy of the Holy Angels and Senior Editor for Children's Express news service. Burke is a student of LaGuardia High School and Children's Express Teen Editor. Punnett is currently working toward her Bachelor of Fine Arts in Fiction at Brooklyn College.

## The World #54

The World #54, the Poetry Project's literary magazine, will be out and about May 1st. This

issue's contributors include: Roberta Allen, Anselm Berrigan, Charlotte Carter, Clark Coolidge, Marcella Durand, Ed Friedman, Kimiko Hahn, Paul Hoover, Kenneth Koch, Tan Lin, Pansy Maurer-Alvarez, Gillian McCain, Susan Mills, Ron Padgett, Edwin Torres, Lewis Warsh, Barrett Watten, Susan Wheeler, Terence Winch, and many more!

## Chapbook Competition

The Sow's Ear Poetry Review is seeking submissions for its annual Chapbook Competition. Awards are \$500 and 50 copies, and \$100 second and third place awards. Submit 22-26 pages of poetry, title page and table of contents without your name, a separate sheet with chapbook title, your name, address, phone and publication credits, SASE and \$10.00 reading fee. Send submissions to The Sow's Ear Poetry Review, 19535 Pleasant View Dr., Abingdon, VA 24211-6827. The postmark deadline is May 1st.

## Events in Western New York

On Thursday, April 23rd, 12:30 p.m. at SUNY-Buffalo, Carolyn Burke, author of **Becoming Modern: The Life of Mina Loy** (University of California, 1997) will speak about and read poems by the great modernist poet Mina Loy. Charles Bernstein will introduce. The event will take place at North Campus, 438 Clemens Hall, Buffalo. Call (716) 645-3810 for more information. Admission is free.

## New Reading Series

A new series of May readings in Carl Schurz Park (at the garden end of the East 86th Street Mall, off East End Avenue) on Tuesday evenings from 6:30 to 7:30 p.m. will begin May 5th, when Patricia Spears Jones and Paul Muldoon read. Tuesday, May 12th, Jack Agüeros and Yusef Komunyakaa will read. Tuesday, May 19th features Grace Schulman and Gerald Stern. All readings are free.

## Dear Newsletter readers:

The Poetry Project will be publishing a new Summer Reading Supplement of the Newsletter this year. That issue will appear on the newsstands in June.

Beginning in the Fall there will be a new newsletter editor, yet to be named. I would like to thank everyone who contributed to the success of the Poetry Project Newsletter over the last two years. I have enjoyed working with everyone in the community and it has been a pleasure to work closely with the Poetry Project staff. I would especially like to thank Ed Friedman, Jo Ann Wasserman, Dirk Rowntree, Marcella Durand, and Bridget Brehen for their ongoing assistance and support.

LISA JARNOT

# Beijing Poets: An Interview

with

## MO FEI AND ZANG LI

by

Leonard Schwartz and Zhang Er



Mo Fei (left) and Zang Li (right)  
photo by Zhang Er

This interview was conducted in Mo Fei's Beijing apartment on January 19th, 1998, a bitter cold afternoon on which the sun managed to break through the dark smoke that often enshrouds coal-burning Beijing in winter. Present were Mo Fei, widely regarded as one of Beijing's most important "unofficial" poets; Zang Li, a poet and professor at Beijing University; and the poet Zhang Er, originally from Beijing, now living in NY, and the only person in the room who spoke both Mandarin and English. All translations and transcriptions are hers.

**Schwartz:** Where should we begin, with questions pertaining to your individual work or with a discussion of the general situation of Chinese poetry? Stereotypically, the American way would be to begin with the individual, and the Chinese way would be to begin with the collective.

**Mo Fei:** Whatever you choose.

**Schwartz:** Well, I deserved that...

**Zhang Er:** You certainly did.

**Schwartz:** Mo Fei, I have co-translated some of your poems. It seemed to me that these were intense meditation on objects. In fact your recent book is entitled *Words and Objects*. Could you comment?

**Mo Fei:** Without language, there is no world. That's my starting point. Thus the objects in my poetry are the objects themselves. That is, I seek for the objective in my work. Of course I make subjective choices—"rose," say, as

opposed to "daisy"—but I'm searching for the objective being of things, the "thing" in things, not my personal attitude.

**Schwartz:** The objective being of objects is a way of undermining the social function of objects, however subtly, isn't it? The poem marks a distinction between manufactured objects and natural objects. The natural object is subversive because it is not socially produced?

**Mo Fei:** Well, I want to emphasize the purity of an objective choice of words. This attitude is very much influenced by my having been a professional gardener—I worked the same garden for some three years so that I became familiar with all the plants, all the trees in that garden, and could see them for what they were, not as imaginary entities, not as indicators of something else, just as the things themselves. Poetry can do that as well, without any ideological interference.

**Schwartz:** The American poet Gustaf Sobin has the idea that one grows the poem, tends it like a plant, and that the poem thus emerges as its own. He writes: "the poem grows out of the poem, not out of one's own particular intellect. The intellect is merely a guide, a gardener to those shoots, those roots..."

**Mo Fei:** I'll say this: writing poetry is really a lot like gardening. No matter what piece of land you are working, if you don't tend it, if you don't cut, it's just like any other piece of nature. Within a year it won't be a garden, it will be something else. Without the cutting,

you don't have a thing. The destructive element is as important as "the growing." Nature and the human hand are not divisible.

**Zhang Er:** Poetry is in the cutting—the editing—not in the growing or the composition?

**Mo Fei:** For me it is, at any rate. Poetry has to do with a satisfaction with limited things, a paring down. It is the acceptance of a certain form of poverty. It is not endless construction. For example, I meet my most basic material needs. After that I want nothing more, except for a poetry that articulates the matter. My book begins, as you mentioned earlier, "in the backyard of time you've written the lines to replace words and objects."

**Schwartz:** Zang Li, could you comment on the view of poetry Mo Fei is articulating? How does it square with your own view?

**Zang Li:** Of course. In the 1980s I started off working in poetry as a closed system—by that I mean I conceived of it as a high art, a self-enclosed universe. At the time I was reading a lot of Valery and Rilke (in fact my edited Rilke in translation just recently came out). But after 1989—the events at Tiananmen Square—I moved towards a more open system, an idea of poetry as an intelligent reaction to the social world. Everything changed. Ginsberg's poetry came to mean a lot to me, for example, and I'm now also interested in Rita Dove, an

American poet who I think of as having social relevance. And I have to say to Mo Fei, I think poetry has to be subjective, not objective.

**Schwartz:** What do you mean?

**Zang Li:** Subjectivity, as in individualism. For me, poetic technique is a disguising of subjectivity in socially acceptable forms. But everything is really subjective.

**Schwartz:** A disguising?

**Zhang Er:** I think that what Zang Li is saying is that in China we are still under the reign of the Confucian—the individual is a suspect concept. The real subversive work of poetry still has to do with letting that individual in.

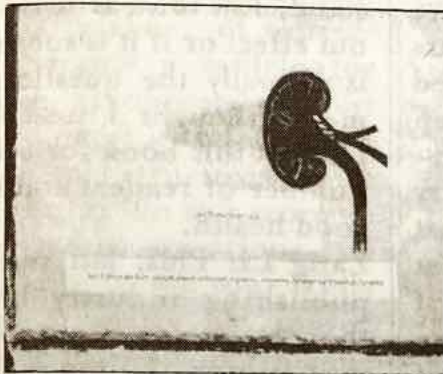
**Zang Li:** Exactly.

**Schwartz:** Yet the odds against poetry seem so great here. It looks to me as if there is a double threat to the poet in China—both the current mania for making money, doing business, emulating capitalism, and the political pressure, the absence of freedom of speech. How can poetry continue? Which is the worse threat, the profit contagion or the limits on political freedom?

**Mo Fei:** Neither of these affects my writing. Of course, like many others, I had to start to work for a living since the economic reforms came in with their concomitant inflation, as opposed to being able to live without work. The reforms did push a certain artist class into the job market. But economically, I'm satisfied. I'm meeting my basic needs... The poems

in *Words and Objects* were written between 1989 and 1992, at the start of the market reforms, which shows that I was immersed in my own writing, not the market. As far as the political question goes, I can always write... I just can't always publish. But all I need is two or three readers. Didn't Pound say his poems printed in a magazine sent to 27 readers meant he would be handed down? I'm not quite so optimistic but I like the idea. Many readers, that scares me. Publishing doesn't interest me, only poetry.

**Zang Li:** Well... I would agree that the new economic conditions aren't a big deal. Some poets even get rich doing business and still continue to write. But the political pressure is a real one. After 1989, words like "death," "gun," and "Square," were effectively banned from poetry. This type of censorship affects the imagination of writers as it is internalized. Since most poets in China, unlike Mo Fei, still have the desire to communicate, to publish, to speak to the world, such censorship is discouraging. Most poets in China publish less than a third of their work. What is published is the abstract, although even here there are difficulties—when the authorities cannot understand something, they suspect it might have a political message that they are not catching. The Misty School, for example, was subversive because its work was not clear, over and against socialist realism.



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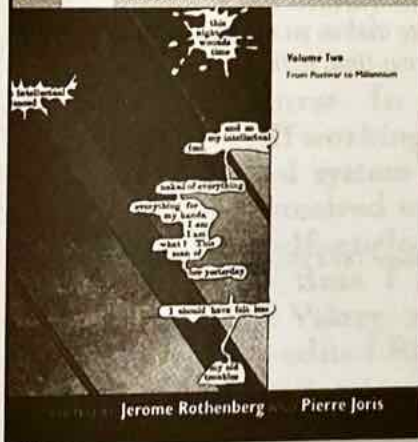
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Publishers are still afraid of that obscurity. And certainly poetry that comments directly on the political situation is held back, read in private.

**Schwartz:** Mo Fei, you've been writing for many years and that writing has achieved a certain national and even international recognition—you were invited to a poetry festival in Paris last November, for example. Yet you only published your first book last year. Given the skepticism or lack of interest in publishing you have articulated here, why publish *Words and Objects* just now?

**Mo Fei:** Friends helped me to find a publisher, although like every one else in China, I had to pay for publication

myself. I was already an old virgin, like several of the other poets I admire, and I just decided it was time. My book is difficult to understand, I'm told. If it is without effect or if it is subversive isn't really the question for me. I thought I needed to publish this book for a small number of readers and their good health.

**Zang Li:** Plus, last year the publishing industry briefly thought poetry might be the next fashion. Filling the post 60s, post-Misty void hasn't been easy, and there was a moment last year when our own publishers got curious about what might have been happening afterwards. So periodically there are cracks we can work through.

**Schwartz:** Doesn't the new market economy also affect the terms on which poetry is published?

**Mo Fei:** Of course, it does give poets trouble. But I tell you the major problem is that the whole society has a prejudice against poets. Theorists, critics, professors all have many places to publish, and mostly what they do in these places is dismiss contemporary poetry as garbage or nonsense, insisting instead on classical forms, or social utility. It is still a very conservative literary culture. This internal pressure within literature is worse than either the economic or political tensions you ask about. Zang Li is a professor, he has a position, at least he can argue back when the relevance of a contemporary poetics is decided.



**Zang Li:** Don't forget, contemporary Chinese poetry is only 80 some odd years old. The language went through extraordinary changes around the turn of the century, when the oral manner of expression became a vehicle for writing, as opposed to just being speech, and Western syntactical structures were brought in. On this score we have many questions we would like to ask you. While Chinese poetry has moved past the stage of simply emulating Western modernist models, we are still in the process of developing a new language, and poetry must play a key role in that development.

**Mo Fei:** I agree. The seeds planted in the early years of modern Chinese poetry are only now beginning to bear fruit. I've criticized the conservatism of our established literary culture, fixated as it is on the classical and on social utility, but secretly, I must say, I see the possibility of something very interesting emerging in the next several years, for those who watch closely.

*Leonard Schwartz is most recently the author of **Words Before the Articulate** from Talisman House Press. Zhang Er is the author of **Winter Garden** from Goats and Compasses.*

## Two Poems by Mo Fei

### This is not the Last

I'm not the last  
that's punished by language.  
A new wooden house  
is knocked down by a tree.

The prisoner  
makes traps around himself.  
If he's let out alive  
he'll take the crimes with him.

He has no other shortcut.  
A knife between life and death.  
Light is cut open  
and bent by the lonely sky.

Living hurts.  
Words are shackles, because of fate.  
Once he confesses,  
no one can defend him.

Translated by Wang Ping and  
Lewis Warsh

### Stuck In Place

The person stuck in this room  
is scared of the table.  
Words are endless holes  
he doesn't know how to repair.

A piece of blank paper lives a cleaner life.  
Everything is a habit.  
He often wonders about the clock on the wall.  
It might be more accurate if only it  
stopped ticking.

A premonition throbs in his temples.  
He can hear nothing.  
Thunder stuns the woods  
as in a vicious dream.

Dawn arrives  
after a sleepless night.  
An utterly unjust fire  
saves his life from the book.

Translated by Wang Ping and  
Leonard Schwartz

### THE FIGURES

Elaine Equi, **Friendship with Things**, drawings by Joe Brainard, 40 pp, \$8  
Tom Clark, **White Thought**, cover by Tom Martinelli, 64 pp, \$10  
Michael Gizzi, **No Both**, cover by Barbiero Barros-Gizzi, 120 pp, \$12  
Roger Mitchell, **Braid**, cover & drawings by Claudia Goulette, 64 pp, \$10  
Geoffrey Young, **Admiral Fever**, drawings by Philip Knoll, 44 pp, \$10  
Kenneth Goldsmith, **No. 111 2.7.93-10.20.96**, 606 pp, \$17.50

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## A Secret Location on the Lower East Side:

Adventures in Writing 1960-1980

by  
Jordan Davis

On the third floor of the New York Public Library's main branch at 42nd Street, across the hall from the room set aside for the papers of Shelley and his circle, is an exhibition of unusual interest for readers of new American poetry. The show consists of the work of over eighty presses' books and magazines (mainly closed) under glass, interspersed with manuscripts, photographs and explanatory texts on handsome display cards.

Beginning with *Measure* and ending with *Mag City*, it covers magazines publishing San Francisco Renaissance poets and Beats, Black Mountain poets and ethnopoeticists, Naropa poets and Language poets, and New York school writers of the first three or four so-called generations. Curators Rodney Phillips and Steven Clay have included samples from almost every small press, mimeo and otherwise, that published American poetry from 1955 to 1985.

The Lower East Side part of the title, then, is misleading; included are magazines from locations around the city, state, country and world. Visitors expecting a history of *The World* (with ample *Fuck You*) will be surprised, but no less taken with the flattering likeness. Dominating the room are two paintings by George Schneeman: a portrait of Ted Berrigan and a group nude study (unfinished?). On the walls, pictures of Ron Padgett, Joan Inglis and Larry Fagin taken in a photobooth on the Staten Island Ferry. The cover of *Contact's* Fagin issue, Larry in a tight t-shirt holding a typewriter up above his head. A picture of the poets at City Lights Bookstore, Allen Ginsberg standing at center, and in the crowd, a very young Fagin sitting in front of him. In the corner a security guard sits watch over a television playing Fagin's "Portraits and Home Movies," a series of super-8 films of:

preening Gerard Malanga, jogging Michael Brownstein, skipping Tom Veitch, stripping Lewis Warsh, kid-tossing Ron Padgett, sleeping Berrigan, handsome Bill Berkson, then-newlywed Aram and Gailyn Saroyan, as well as the wedding itself of Larry and Joan Fagin, and a faded print of many of the above "Fooling Around on Long Island Sound." In the display cases, pictures of Anne Waldman and Lewis Warsh, Kenward Elmslie and Joe Brainard, Bob Rosenthal and Rochelle Kraut, Alice Notley, Steve Carey. The subjects have an aura of intense productivity and intense idleness. A bunch of artists enjoying life (i.e. youth). Nobody's worried. The resigned anonymity, the mild self-deprecation, the exaggerated grace, the nudity; everything is hidden in plain sight.

The show is about the look, the beauty a few dozen editors found in simple production. The oddball size, format, and circulation of Wallace Berman's *Semina*, and Robert Grenier's determinedly unbound *Sentences* (as well as Daisy Aldan's absent but equally eccentric *Folder* [printed sheets collected in a folder], and Hershon and Pawlak's *Hanging Loose* [sheets collected in an envelope]) make much of their difference from the conventional codex-style book. Oversize is another familiar MO, from *Jargon's* big books to the absent tabloid *Hasty Papers*, to the legal-sized issues of "C", *The World* and *Telephone*, to the letter-sized *Adventures in Poetry*, *Angel Hair*, *United Artists*, and *Frontward*. These last seven are all mimeo productions, their stencils cut on the same rounded style of typewriter type. While not as pristine as Aram Saroyan's *Lines*, these magazines are nevertheless cleanly and clearly laid out, and they have attractive covers (except for the second issue of *The World!*) supplied by famous artists—Andy Warhol, Brice Marden, Ed Ruscha, Joe Brainard. For contrast, the show also includes the baroque and exquisite typewriter art of Jack Spicer's covers for *J*, the expensive-looking concrete poetry anthologies of Emmett Williams, the printed and bound letter-size books from Kulchur Press, and the topographies of the language poets' collaboration *Legend*.

As lovely as the covers are, as exciting as it must have been at first to see typewriting instantly become a book, and an insolent form of book at that, the thing I wanted, looking at the show, was to turn a lot of pages, especially the pages of the magazines that circulated around the Lower East Side. The connection between art and life (the everyday part of it, anyway) holds strongest in this work from say 1963 ("C" being the open-date) to 1979 or 80 (the early issues of *United Artists* closing the bracket). It is poetry as fabulous gossip, borrowing heavily from Andy Warhol's style and Frank O'Hara's taste, a goofy mixture of radical behavior and conservative avant-garde art, of high spirits and a little cruelty. I could reread it all day. On the other hand I'm glad I didn't live through it; I'm terrible at taking drugs, and I'm even worse at hanging out.

Maureen Owen explains what producing a book on mimeo was like: cranking the Gestetner, having a collating party, stapling. The Poetry Project's mimeo remained in use up into the 90s. Sparrow and Ellen Carter's *11th Street Ruse* may have been the last magazine to use the church's mimeo. *Gandhabba*, *The National Poetry Magazine of the Lower East Side*, *Tamarind* all carried on the tradition of collation party as editorial meeting.

It's been remarked of the first group of New York School poets that there are almost no skyscrapers in their work. In the show, a copy of *The Maximus Poems* is open to "I have had to learn the simplest things/ last." I am so happy that this show exists to celebrate the poetry that changed my life, and I wish that the magazines and books in its cases were everywhere. They're not, but I am.

"A Secret Location on the Lower East Side: Adventures in Writing 1960-1980" is open at the New York Public Library, Henry W. and Albert A. Berg Collection of English and American Literature, Center for the Humanities, from January 24-July 25, 1998.

Jordan Davis is the author of *A Little Gold Book* from Golden Books and is the editor of *Goodbye Books*.

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# book reviews



photo courtesy Penguin Books

## ANN LAUTERBACH *On A Stair*

Penguin (375 Hudson Street, New York, NY 10014), 1997, 89 pages, \$14.95.

Ann Lauterbach's latest collection of poems is about placement, to be understood in a quasi-infinite variation, from syntax to memory; from gaze to narrative; from musical scoring to identity. The underlying question which supports and animates these exquisite word structures is from what vantage point does the I speak? How to account for having chosen this step instead of that other one? What grounds poetic speech? Or, in Emerson's words (quoted by the author), "Where do we find ourselves?"

"She places herself there," not so much on the eponymous, Emersonian stair which shadows the title and directly crops up in seven out of twenty-eight poems, but rather on a momentary landing from which to launch a song about the inevitable dispersment of the line, the slow drifting of language, the nomadic movement of bodies.

If one were to highlight with a blue marker all the sites this volume evokes: window/ bar/ canopy/ pond /

canyon/ stoop/ bed/ page/-to name a few at random-one would have touched the visible field of the real where the poem exists as squarely material as a water cistern or hotel lobby: "a home, garden overlooking a vista,/blossoms, a path, the sea."

But against this geography of mimetic gardens and stairs, Lauterbach proffers another, more compelling topography. Call it logos, the placeless place of partition, lacunas and aporias within which the "I detaches." "Slowly," as Cage says, "we are getting nowhere and that is a pleasure." We are stranded, out of the loop, "in a cluster of meanwhiles" while the familiar markers which bridge words to things recede, more tenuous at each telling. "A small boat traverses the page" and someone perches on the "threshold of consent."

What strikes us as remarkable about this enterprise is the fact that the vexing interrogations about language and desire should be made so luminous and tangible as to almost overshadow the real world of bedrooms and desks, giving it an illusory place, while the other mapping intensifies its presence: "pushing this aside to get/under the floor/below the written."

This elegant series of poems has an impressive range of strategies and tonalities which at times evoke the serene beauty of madrigals, of ancient tapestry or the soothing rhythms of a Montaigne essay. At others, language moves in a strangely disembodied manner, like a pre-recorded session that starts up all by itself, ghostly riveting.

The necessity to make room for what is out of range, to include both the bound and the unbound, to trace the exits, the decomposing, "the field's dementia," and the stupendous loss inscribed in certain names which punctuate the text (Celan, Beckett, Brainard) receives a surprising frame in a universe we associate with commedia dell' arte. The car-

navalesque procession of clowns, dolls, angels, and girls opens the gate to another space we have locked with outgrown props:

The staircase spirals upward tracing the curve of desire; clowns, hooligans and slippered minions take up their post, giggling into the wet theatre.

Of course, to get there from here or to simply "keep going, going on" as Beckett recommends, one must shed the consoling certitudes of our times. This is precisely what Ann Lauterbach allows to happen, even when the threat of dissolution ("without attachment a riot") looms over the fence. The text will rip the haloes of angels and undo "the place of protection."

CHRIS TYSH

## ECE AYHAN *The Blind Cat Black and Orthodoxies*

Translated by Murat Nemet-Nejat, Sun and Moon (6026 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, California 90036), 1997, 81 pages, \$10.95.

"Shame is held delicately by the hand." The phrases bring to mind surrealism, but not the poems. In Ece Ayhan's work the world is mosaic. The Christians, the Jews, the prostitutes and homosexuals dominate in what might seem to others a conservative Islamic environment. But Ayhan never mentions that world. It is the sense of being an outsider, identifying with other outsiders and telling their stories. Here, orthodoxy refers to the Orthodox Christians,

**Corrections:** The last issue of the newsletter (February /March 1998) should have noted that David Shapiro edited Frank Lima's *Inventory: New and Selected Poems*. Apologies also to Tom Devaney whose name was spelled incorrectly.

who are alienated from the larger culture in which they take part. In the same way, Ayhan presents a language which is alienated from itself, and that of the "truly" orthodox language of Turkish. Here slang puns on common usage blend with mainstream usage, particularly the slang of male prostitutes and secret codes of urban street life.

The first section of the book, entitled, "The Nigger in the Photograph," contains a poem called "The Secret Jew." Rats nibble on corpses. The writer is dead, and his body has been inhabited by someone else, someone who is foreign to him. In this poem, as in many others in the book, there is decay going on around the reader. Disembodied images vie with one another for the reader's attention. Description is precise, but tilted at strange angles.

The second section of the book, "A Blind Cat Black", grows darker in its mood, and the jarring juxtapositions grow closer together, their friction makes music in the mind. Declarative sentences take over,

description slides further away. The narrator beds strangers from distant mindscapes. Mythical images are used to describe sexual trysts. "How the horses, how the chugboats rotted in that depth." Obviously, decay continues in these poems. "Ruins brought to the empire." It is hard to define what happens in these poems, but it is not metaphor. It looks like metaphor, but it is too literal for that.

Ahyan reaches and surpasses the top of his form in "Orthodoxies," the final section of the book. Here, the language takes over. While one might compare the earlier poems to the French surrealists, these poems take off in another direction. "She has grown pregnant by leaning over the corpse." Description returns, only to describe itself. Christian ritual mingles with kinky sex in a timeless zone of elsewhere. Not even Artaud knows this place. It is both enlightening and frightening. Throughout, the writer oscillates between childhood and adulthood.

It is this sense of being unmoored

in the world and in language, which appeals. Like Sadegh Hedayat, Ayhan picks up where most Western writers come to a full stop. In fact, I wonder if a European writer could possibly find this place, which the translator defines as Levantine. To quote Nemet-Nejat, "In Ece Ayhan, levantine is any national, cultural, or sexual presence repressed by the mainstream power, each subculture with its peculiar flavor of names, its slang, its mixture of Turkish and ancestral words." Thus, Ahyan's work is distinctly political, despite the fact that he makes no overt references to politics of any kind. It is deeper than any surface meaning of politics. Ahyan's politics are the politics of the soul, full of forbidden feelings and oppressed history. As Nemet-Nejat points out in his afterward, this is a particularly relevant poetics at the end of this millenium. Highly recommended.

MITCH HIGHFILL

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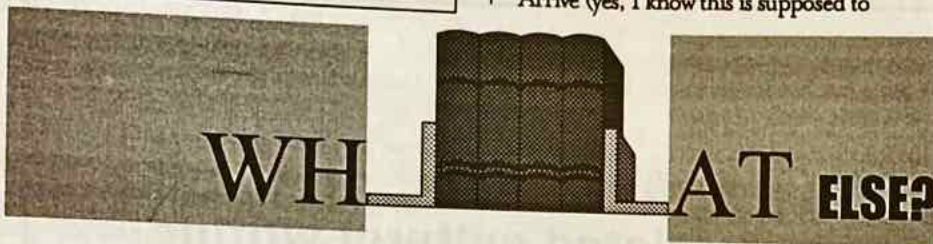
**CHRIS STROFFOLINO**  
**Light As A Fetter**  
Situations Press, New York, 1997,  
30 pages, \$5.00.

The cover of Chris Stroffolino's latest chapbook parodies the yellow and black stripes and boldface type of the Cliff Notes series. While this is obviously intended as humorous (the market for Cliff Notes being literature students who haven't read their assigned books), it might also suggest a classroom application for the seventeen lyrical poems collected within. This suggestion I take ironically—for Stroffolino's poems so obviously want to be out of the classroom, on the street, in the company of pop songs or strange women who are acting as muses, that it's a little funny to imagine them as texts hoisted upon some ragtag group of undergraduates, or as notes condensing such a (meta-?) text for classroom consumption. Yet this suggestion is only one of the rich ironies which Stroffolino's work serves.

Imagine a life in which just the desserts  
Arrive (yes, I know this is supposed to

be an advanced class). Now chisel something  
Neurotic from that pre-narcissistic stone.  
This is your task (not to have tasks), to think  
Of obstacles as easily rid of as they really are  
In certain moods. Moods certain of uncertainty.  
Of the porous walls the actor playing the phantom.  
Chance topples during the outtake  
(of a kissing storm by the subway stop)  
That becomes an underground classic to pay  
The rent of the middlement I wish  
To see myself as now that the autopsy  
Proves what the author has died of  
("refinery smoke") without proving it dead.

In the book's opening stanza, images that seem like references to films we haven't seen ("the porous walls the actor playing the phantom/Chance topples during the outtake") spool by in wavelike passages, like cars gone by above the speed limit. This analogy suggests a smooth (or studied?) wrecklessness within Stroffolino's work: a speedy narrative flow belying the dissonance of the objects and images it carries. Yet this analogy is misleading: because Stroffolino's smoothness is carried out as if in defiance of a rich, subtle disjunction running through the work, akin to both the later Ashbery and the "new sentence"/San Francisco period of Bob Perelman's writing. "Imagine a life in which just the desserts/Arrive (yes, I know this is supposed to/be an advanced class). Now chisel something/Neurotic from that pre-narcissistic stone." The relationship, characteristically, between these sentences is purely one of torque and flow. Their content is metaphorical, but none of the metaphors (for example, the "desserts" or the "advanced class") recur elsewhere in the poem, or even find corollaries from which we could infer "development." Here is the psychodrama of the breakdown of ideas as a justification for poetic reality: what, for example, is a "pre-narcissistic stone," and how could something "Neurotic" be chiseled from it? Unlike say the work of Lowell, Stroffolino's poems seem most successful when, in the triumph of rapidfire attention, they forget the metaphors they are trying to develop and crash ahead to a lyrical crescendo which may provide a kind of rudimentary, and often unsatisfying, for-



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## WRITING WORKSHOPS AT THE POETRY PROJECT

**Experiments in Poetry Workshop with Bernadette Mayer (Tuesday evenings, 7-9 pm; 10 sessions to April 28th)**

A variety of writing methods are to be explored in connection with Mayer's ever-expanding list of experiments, exercises, rehearsals, practices and intentions. Guest lecturers include Ron Padgett, Jack Collom, John Giorno, and others.

Bernadette Mayer has three books forthcoming: *Another Smashed Pinecone* (United Artists), *The Studying Hunger Journals* (Hard Press), and a yet-to-be-titled collection from New Directions.

**Poetry Workshop with Tony Towle (Friday evenings, 7-9 pm; 10 sessions to May 1st)**

Participants will be encouraged to explore their own work individually, from the point of view of what is already there, as opposed to an idealization of what it should be.

Tony Towle's most recent book is *Some Musical Episodes*, published by Hanging Loose Press, 1992.

**Mystery/Crime Fiction Writing Workshop with Charlotte Carter (Saturday afternoons 12-2 pm; 10 sessions to May 9)**

While accommodating a wide range of writing styles—from poetic to pulp—the goal will be to produce sellable crime fiction. Frank King, author of more than 20 mystery novels, will guest-lecture.

Charlotte Carter is the author of *Rhode Island Red* (Serpent's Tail, 1997) and the forthcoming *Coq au Vin* (Warner/Mysterious Press, 1999).

The workshop fee is \$150, which includes tuition for unlimited classes and membership with The Poetry Project for one year. Reservations are required due to limited class space and payment must be received in advance. Membership includes free admission to all regularly scheduled Project events, discount admission to special events, and subscription to the Poetry Project Newsletter. 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 (212) 674-0910, or e-mail us at [poproj@artomatic.com](mailto:poproj@artomatic.com).

# poetry project

events

# calendar

## APRIL 1 WEDNESDAY

### Renee Gladman & Diane di Prima

Renee Gladman is currently working on a Master's degree from New College of California, and edits the magazine, *Glamour*. Her work has appeared in *Situation*, *Mass Ave*, *No Roses Review*, *Superflux*, *Mirage*, and *Proliferation*. *Arlem* was published as a chapbook by Idiom press. A long work, *Not Right Now*, is forthcoming from Second Story Press. Diane di Prima is one of the foremost women writers of the Beat Generation. She is the author of several books of poems including, most recently, *Pieces of a Song: Collected Poems (City Lights)*, *Zip Code (Coffee House Press)*, and *Loba (Penguin)*.

## 13 MONDAY

### Everton Sylvester & Lonnie Plaxico

Everton Sylvester is a graduate of the MFA in Poetry program at Brooklyn College and currently performs with his band, *Funk Essentials*. Lonnie Plaxico is a well-known bass player.

## 15 WEDNESDAY

### Heather Ramsdell & Lee Ann Brown

Heather Ramsdell is the author of *Lost Wax*, for which she recently won the National Poetry Series award. One of the editors of the on-line journal *The Transcendental Friend*, she is a graduate of Cooper Union School of Art and City College of New York. Lee Ann Brown's first book, *Polyverse (Sun and Moon)*, won the New American Poetry Prize. Her chapbooks include *Crush (Leave Books)*, and a *museme (Boog Literature)*. She currently lives in New York City where she is a teacher, editor, filmmaker, and poet.

## 17 FRIDAY

### Poetry, Comedy & Collaboration

Poetry, comedy & collaboration featuring: Helen Decker, the H in the H&D Reading Series at Snug Harbor Cultural Center on Staten Island. Gary Gullo is a blues guitar player and journal writer. Eddie Pepitone is a professional comedian who has toured with Chicago City Limits. Philip Good's latest book is *Corn*. Bernadette Mayer is the author of several books of poetry including the forthcoming volumes *Another Smashed Pinecone (United Artists)* and *The Studying Hungry Journals (Hard Press)*. (10:30 pm)

## 19 SUNDAY

### Tribute to Denise Levertov

books include *Lovingkindness: The Revolutionary Art of Happiness and A Heart as Wide as the World*. Since 1974, she has been leading meditation retreats worldwide. Mark Epstein is the author of *Thoughts Without a Thinker: Psychotherapy from a Buddhist Perspective* and is a consulting editor for *Tricycle: The Buddhist Review*. His new book, *Going to Pieces Without Falling Apart*, will be published this June by Broadway Books. (10:30 pm)

## 27 MONDAY

### Joe Wood & Thomas Lux

Joe Wood is the author of *Malcolm X. In Our Own Image* and an editor at *The New Press*. A former writer and editor for the *Village Voice*, he has published essays in *Esquire*. Thomas Lux is the author of *New and Selected Poems 1975-1995*, published by Houghton Mifflin. A former Guggenheim Fellow and the recipient of three NEA grants, Lux received the Kingsley Tufts Award for his book, *Split Horizon*.

## 29 WEDNESDAY

### Kevin Killian & Dodie Bellamy

Dodie Bellamy is the author of the long-awaited epistolary "novel," *The Letters of Mina Harker* (Hard Press, 1998). She is also the author of *Real* (with Sam D'Allesandro, Talisman House, 1995), and *Feminine Hijinx* (Hanuman, 1990). She lives in San Francisco where she's the director of Small Press Traffic Literary Arts Center. Kevin Killian is the author of two novels, a book of memoirs, twelve plays, a book of poetry and a book of stories. In May Wesleyan University Press will publish *Poet Be Like God* (written with Lewis Ellingham), the life of the poet Jack Spicer. Tonight Killian brings the SF Poets' Theater east with "Out," his one-act play, in a staged reading featuring D-L Alvarez, Bruce Andrews, Lee Ann Brown, Tim Davis, Kenward Elmslie, Eileen Myles, Sianne Ngai, Michelle Rollman, Eleni Sikelianos, Lynne Tillman, Laurie Weeks, Joe Westmoreland, and others.

## MAY 1 FRIDAY

### Kathy Acker Tribute

Featuring Michael Brownstein, C. Carr, Fielding Dawson, Morgan Entekin, John Giorno, Nan Goldin, Betty Gordon, Rob Hardin, Chris Kraus, Sylvère Lotringer, Patrick McGrath, Bette Marshall, Jonas Mecha, Brad Morrow, Betsy Sussler, Ira Silverberg, Lynne Tillman, Matias Viejener, and Hal Willner. (10:30 pm)

ing a volume of interrelated essays.

## 15 FRIDAY

### Information Outbursts from Autonomedia

Jim Fleming, the editor and publisher, will explain and comment on the Autonomedia project. Peter Lamborn Wilson, the author of *Pirate Utopias*, will speak on Moorish Pirates in Old New York. Dr. Jacob Rabinowitz will discuss his book, *The Rotting Goddess. Fly (aka Miss Information)*, author of the forthcoming *CHRON!C!R!O!T!S!P!A!S!M!*, will make her head explode. Jordan Zinowich, editor of *Semiotext(e)*, will speak on time travel. Luna Tarlo, mother of Guru Andrew Cohen and author of *Mother of God*, will speak about her book. Sylvia Federici, author of the forthcoming *Caliban and the Witches*, will make a presentation. (10:30 pm)

## 16 SATURDAY

### Tribute for Elio Schneeman

Readings and talks by John Godfrey, Vincent Katz, Greg Masters, Harris Schiff, Lewis Warsh, Mitch Highfill, Ron Padgett, Elinor Nauen, Simon Pettet, Lorna Smedman, Anselm Berrigan, Chuck Wachtel, Ethie Friend, Barbara Barg, and more. This event is free and open to the public. (2 pm)

## 18

### Nadine Mozon & Mehuman Jonson

Nadine Mozon is currently performing her one-woman show, *Confirming the Search: That Girl's Still Here Somewhere*, for which she received a Drama-Logue Award and an Audelco nomination. Other ongoing projects are an ensemble performance piece, *Overflow*, which was performed at the Knitting Factory, and a full-length play, *Saying Grace*. Singer/song-writer/guitarist Mehuman Jonson's latest release is *killing cain* on wacko magnet Records. At present, she performs with her trio and teaches music and meditation to New York City students. She has opened for and toured with Luka Bloom, Sheila-E, Laura Nyro, The Fugees, Meshell N'degeocello, and others.

## 20 WEDNESDAY

### Michael Ondaatje & Robert Creeley

Michael Ondaatje was born in Ceylon (now Sri Lanka), where he lived until he was eleven. He is the author of a number of novels, including *The Collected Works of Billy the Kid*, *Coming Through Slaughter*, *The English Patient* (for which he won the Booker Prize) and several books of poems, including *The Cinnamon Peeler* and *Rat Jelly*. Robert Creeley has been the recipient of several awards including two Guggenheim fellowships, the Shelley Memorial Award, and the Robert Frost Medal. He recently edited the *Selected Poems of Charles Olson and Robert Creeley*. His most recent collection is *Life & Death from New Directions*.



In conjunction with New Directions Books, the Poetry Project presents a tribute to the late Denise Levertov of whom Robert Creeley says, "She was a constantly defining presence in the world we shared, a remarkable and transforming poet for all of us." Participants include Paul Lacey, Levertov's literary executor; Deborah Larsen, the author of *Sitching Porcelain*; Chester Biscardi, composer, who collaborated with Levertov on their piece, *Gift of Life*; and many others. Judith Bettina, soprano, and James Goldworthy, pianist, will perform. The event is free and open to the public. [3 pm]

**20 MONDAY**

**Donald Jennings & Sarah Jones**

Donald Jennings has published work in the *Wayne Review*, *Green*, and *The South End*. He has read at *The Back Fence* and *Mona's*. Sara Jones is a poet and playwright currently working on her one-woman show, *Surface Transit*. She was the 1997 Nuyorican Grand Slam Champion.

**22 WEDNESDAY**

**A Night with the Mystics**

An evening of story-telling and music including the Bill Laswell All-Stars, whose latest record is *Asana*. Willem Dafoe has appeared in over two dozen films, including *The Last Temptation of Christ*, *The English Patient*, and *Platoon*, for which he was nominated for an Academy Award as Best Supporting Actor. David Life & Sharon Gannon are the directors of the Jivamukti Yoga Center. Peter Lamborn Wilson is the author of *Scandal: Essays in Islamic Heresy* and *Pirate Utopias*. Emily XYZ's work has been featured in the PBS series, *The United States of Poetry*. Nicole Blackman has poems in *Verses That Hurt and Aloud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poets Café*. Krishna Das is a world-renowned singer of Indian devotional music. Christian X. Hunter is the Friday Night Series Coordinator for the Poetry Project and a kirtan-wallah (singer of devotional music). [This event costs \$12; \$7 for members and students]

**24 FRIDAY**

**Sharon Salzberg & Mark Epstein**

Sharon Salzberg is the founder of the Insight Meditation Society and the Barre Center for Buddhist Studies. Her

**Open Reading. sign-up at 7:30 pm [8 pm]**

**6 WEDNESDAY**

**Tim Atkins & Harry Mathews**

Tim Atkins was born in London, England, and is the author of *Folklore 1-25* and *Sonnets* (both from Heart Hammer Press). Recent work has appeared in *Boo*, *Arras* and *Tongue to Boot*. He currently co-runs the 5/10 series in London. Harry Mathews is currently at work on the archival *Oulipo Compendium* which will appear later this year. His most recent novel is *The Journalist*.

**7-10**

**Identity & Invention: The Annual Poetry Project Symposium**

Four days of readings, performances, lectures, discussions, and parties. [Look for a special poster mailing with a complete schedule in April!]

**11 MONDAY**

**André Salaam & La Bruja**

André Salaam, a guitarist and poet, performed with the Sister Circle in San Francisco. He is presently working on his first novel. La Bruja is a Puerto Rican poet who was raised in the Bronx. Her one-woman show, *La Brujeria*, was performed at the Nuyorican Poets' Cafe. She has also toured Europe and recorded a poetry soundtrack with Renaissance Man Productions.

**13 WEDNESDAY**

**C.S. Giscombe & Joan Retallack**

C.S. Giscombe is the author of several volumes of poetry, including *Giscombe Road* which is forthcoming from Dalkey Archive Press. He is currently an associate professor of English at Illinois State University. Joan Retallack's *How To Do Things With Words* will be out from Sun & Moon Press this Spring. She is the author of *AFTERRIMAGES* and *MUSICAGE*—both from Wesleyan University Press. *MUSICAGE* received the 1996 America Award for Belles-Lettres; her poetry sequence *Errata Suite* received the Columbia Book Award in 1994. She is currently complet-

**Spring Workshop Readings**

An evening of readings by members of the Poetry Project's Spring 1998 Writing Workshops. Workshop leaders are Charlotte Carter, Bernadette Mayer, and Tony Towle. [10:30 pm]

**27 WEDNESDAY**

**Elizabeth Willis & Yang Lian**

Yang Lian began writing poetry in China during the Cultural Revolution. Since then he has travelled throughout Europe and the United States, reading his work, and lecturing on Chinese literature. He is the author of several books of poetry, some of which have been translated into English, including *The Dead in Exile*, *Non-Person Singular*, and *Where the Sea Stands Still*. Elizabeth Willis is the author of *Second Law*, published by Avenue B in 1993; and *The Human Abstract*, which won the National Poetry Series in 1994. She teaches composition, literature, and creative writing and is poet-in-residence at Mills College.

**JUNE 1 MONDAY**

**A Reading by Kenneth Koch**

Kenneth Koch, a pre-eminent figure in American poetry and one of the original New York School poets, just published his latest book, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* with Scribner. He is the author of *Rose, Where Did You Get That Red?*; *Wishes, Lies, and Dreams: Teaching Children to Write Poetry*; *Ko, or A Season on Earth: Thanks You and Other Poems*; and many other books of poetry, fiction and prose. A recipient of the Bollingen Prize in poetry, he is now a Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

**3 WEDNESDAY**

**A Celebration of New (American) Poets**

A celebration of *An Anthology of New (American) Poets* which was published this year by Talisman House Press. Readers will include Eleni Sikelianos, Brenda Coultas, Jordan Davis, Lisa Jarnot, Chris Stroffolino, Leonard Schwartz, Heather Ramsdell, Garrett Kalleberg, Drew Gardner and others.

The Poetry Project is located at St. Mark's Church in the Bowery

131 East 10th Street, New York City 10003

<http://www.poetryproject.com>

All events are \$7 and begin at 8 PM unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change.

For information call 212 674-0910

mal closure—though becoming, in the words of the poem, an "underground classic" in the process—but which leaves more questions unanswered than unasked, resolution like prepositions dangling.

The fourth, final sentence of the quoted passage swirls in O'Hara-esque mockery/mock (O') heroisms, coming (nicely) to the death of "the author," caused by—what else?—"refinery smoke." Strofollino here is so fully aware of the double connotation of the word "refinery": the industrial landscape which he inherits, as well as the root, *refine*, suggesting a bourgeois conception of art as *délices*, or mere refinements which "the author" is supposed to proffer to those who can savor (afford) them. If such "refinery" has caused the death of "the author"/alter ego, then, in "Moods certain of uncertainty," Strofollino unravels our tendency toward a Bloomian (Oedipal) reading of his text, asserting that it is the (paternal?) "middleman," not "the author," whom he sees himself as. If such a comic assertion is as much a red herring as the result of a desire not to have his text psychoanalyzed, then it is part of the pleasure of reading Strofollino to have such comforts as the ability to psychoanalyze his text torn away from us so casually. Strofollino's poetry, though at first glance it seems familiar (one poem here for example is titled "September 31, 1992," a gesture which obviously recalls the lineage of O'Hara and Berrigan), in fact turns out to be something which we haven't quite expected: *an intellectual romanticism*. That is, while transposing Romantic alienation and sexuality to a contemporary urban landscape—much as the Beats before him—Strofollino does not share the anti-intellectualism which has become a cornerstone of the Romantic inheritance (despite the obvious intellectual abilities of figures like Blake, Coleridge, and Shelley). The speaker of Strofollino's poems, neurotic, amorous, and panic stricken, is undone by his own obsessions—the very force of what drives him to art. This drama, though, is constantly played out against the props not of a staged, tragic farce, but of how the poems are constituted by (and constitute) their philosophical assumptions—"The directions we misread each time we read/For meaning."

You have to do it to understand  
The directions. And once you do the directions  
Are useless. But we, who love to give the  
Worthless a shot, even if it means sacrificing  
Our center (if it's really our center, it'll  
return or seem to as now it seems to leave).  
Find new uses for it in finding no uses for it  
Since commodification can seep into just about  
Any water supply for the sake of a complication  
Not picky enough to be the clumsy commercials

Strofollino here is writing toward the language we use to understand ourselves decoding reality. Fully aware of words as signs, the poet is too tough and emotional to give up on the metaphorical/metaphysical "center" (a figure which reminds me of both Yeats' "the center cannot hold" and O'Hara's "the center of myself is never silent"). Thus, loving to "give the/Worthless a shot," and wary of

pollutant "commodification," he finds "new uses for it in finding no uses for it"—the "it" here charmingly ambiguous in its reference to "Our center," love, or perhaps an (unnamed) something other.

The poem goes on, and the book ends—

In the bigtop that makes the sideshow possible  
Where we love each other so much our little  
Skit: "Why should I clean when I don't cook?"  
"You eat what I cook." "But you would've cooked  
It anyway."—will be put in the past on the  
Condition the past can be put in the present  
And I wait for a world, a woman who won't  
Call this cheating, to blow the gameboard  
Of my mind as the prayer for her could  
Be seen as acting from desire as much as fear.

Strofollino cheats us of easy answers, in conflating desire with fear, love with a "Skit" at which we sit politely, uncomfortably in attendance. This poet's work is truly "the bigtop that makes the sideshow possible"—but the spectacle is not about entertainment so much as about drowning out the noise of the Other/lover's absence. Putting the past in the present—that is, insisting we live at the nexus of memory and attention, even as his poems rush onward trying to escape the present in a heady buildup of subordinate clauses—Strofollino insists finally upon the discomfort of the spectacle, as well as upon the necessity of our attendance to it.

MARK DUCHARME

TED BERRIGAN

**On the Level Everyday: Selected Talks on Poetry and the Art of Living**

Edited with and introduction by Joel Lewis; Preface by Alice Notley, Talisman House (P.O. Box 3157, Jersey City, New Jersey, 07303-3157), 1997

LEONARD SCHWARTZ

**Words Before the Articulate: New and Selected Poems**

Talisman House, 1997

ROSMARIE WALDROP

**Another Language: Selected Poems**

Talisman House, 1997

It is said that a talisman protects its bearer from evil influences with magical powers. As different as these three new titles from Talisman House books are in terms of style, assumptions about audience and formal preferences, they all contain talismanic properties. Each conjures up strategies and tactics for writers and readers to help ward off spells cast by powerful cultural forces. And each practices a form of magic.

Remember that as a discipline, magic has often operated by way of counter-institutional strategies, whether the institution in question be religious or scientific. In place

of the institutional Mass, for example, magicians invent idiosyncratic, homemade rituals. And instead of the scientific method, they posit alchemical and psychological ones that you don't need a corporate-funded laboratory to experiment with. Thus, magic is *enabling*—offering free, do-it-yourself exercises, to obtain power *right-in-your-own-home*.

One of the reasons why a master magician like Ted Berrigan is so sorely missed on the poetry scene today is that, judging from the talks (from the 70s and 80s) collected in *On the Level Everyday*, one of his primary goals was to enable you. Over and over again, he echoes the sentiments of Lautremont and the surrealists in his belief that "everyone should write poetry", and that everyone has great poems in them (provided they "read about a hundred poems a week and write about a hundred poems a week for about seven or eight years"). But the legends of Berrigan's Whitmanic generosity are pretty well known by now, so I think what's more interesting to talk about is the overall strategy he offers for gaining the authority you need to even *try* to write a poem.


Literary culture often casts a spell of mystery over that subject position called "poet," and that form of cultural capital known as "poetry." It's a mystique not unlike the one bohemians of old treasured in regard to jazz: "if you don't know what it is, baby, I can't tell ya'." And the arts aren't the only field that is sometimes cloaked in mystery. Any profession that requires high degrees of expertise can seem pretty clouded to the uninitiated. This is because of, partly, the secretive, guarded nature of the expert himself. If the skill involved were too explainable *anybody could do it*—and the expert wouldn't be so expert anymore. There's power in secrecy; so the established, rather than clue you in on their tricks and techniques, often divert your attention with ideas like "personal intuition," "talent," "creativity" and "genius." Berrigan counsels us not to be intimidated by these spells cast by the institution of literature and its star practitioners. He remarks, bemusedly "...you can become a Black Mountain poet if you

wish. All you have to do is find out what a Black Mountain poet is. And you'll never find out by asking a Black Mountain poet. But you can find out."


Much of the humor in these talks arises precisely because Berrigan refuses to mystify poetry—making a point, instead, to explain it in terms you would use to talk about almost any other profession. "Poetry is my business" he says repeatedly, "I'm a professional poet." And there's a transgressive joy running throughout these talks because, metaphorically at least, they refuse to respect the cultural borderlines between art and commerce. As a result, one of the pleasures you get from reading *On the Level Everyday* is similar to those you'd get from reading an expose: it's like an insider's look at the vanities of Mt. Parnassus. More than that the book is, dare I say it, Promethean—what you have here is a manual, a self-help book really, full of the "secrets" by which the gods make poetic fire. Read it and you'll discover the joys of plagiarism, how to make the literary collage, to write the poem of advice, the diary poem— and be advised of the advantages of utterly misunderstanding—and even disrespecting—the intentions of your favorite poets. And most important of all, you'll be inspired to invent spells (forms) of your own.

If the Berrigan talisman is valuable for warding off the evil eyes of "Literature" (its institutions, saints and high-priests), the poetic spells in Leonard Schwartz's *Words Before the Articulate* seem designed to offer psychic protection against zomboidification. What I'm thinking of here are all those degenerative tendencies of modernism that go under the heading, in some circles, of "the violence of abstraction" (crude materialism, positivism, commercialism, standardization, disciplinary rationalism, etc., etc.)—tendencies which, if you ever fall under their spell, make you feel like a walking corpse.

The corpse, in fact, is the hero of one of the most powerful pieces in this collection. In "Tender Dissection," Schwartz muses over a film (made by Bogden Borkowski) which shows a body undergoing



how many holy metaphors, puns, cleverly worded language plays, sainted dangling participals, fully realized inconsistencies and misspelled lunacies can a wordsmith come up with to announce the blessed arrival of holy kid?



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"There are experimental poets...Torres may BE the experiment." Eleni Sikelianos, Poetry Project

autopsy, scored to an impassioned reading of Rimbaud's "Drunken Boat." The drunken poem in the film becomes a sign of resistance, to the frighteningly sober and rational scalpel, which treats the body as a mere piece of meat. As Schwartz comments, "Remove the sack of muscle that covers the heart, remove the heart itself; this voice continues. Remove the esophagus, the voice-box, the brain; this voice continues." As such, the piece is not only a defense of our "visceral awareness" of the body, against its abstractors, but one of the poem as well. Under the quantitative gaze of the modern, the poem, like the body in this piece, is essentially worthless (it can't turn a profit). As Schwartz comments, it is a "dead text"... "entombed, unread"... "between the pages of an anthology someplace." Yet, against all odds of commercial calculation, "this voice continues."

It would be selling these poems way short, though, to suggest that they propose the courting of old notions of "voice" or "presence" as a response

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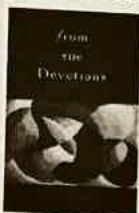
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Eamon Grennan

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to our spiraling experiences of alienation. Schwartz is not a sentimentalist, but a magician. He invokes specters, ghosts and arcane gods and goddesses in his flaneur-like strolls through the city and its markets. The ghost, of course, is an ambivalent figure—one that walks the weird line between being/nothingness, presence/disappearance. Schwartz's work shares this ambivalence, arising perhaps from the impossible choice between living illusion and dead truth. Thus, even at its most optimistic moments, those which insist that "the magic of language in its differential spell" would be constantly "brewing new tropes/if only we were receptive," Schwartz is aware of the infinitely sophisticated objections any attempt to reinstate an abundant, visionary aesthetic would meet with. It is his willingness to bear the weight of these objections that make his arguments for imaginative counter-measures to our Night-of-the-Living-Dead daily life finally convincing. He comments on such a poetic programme in the title piece of the collection:

That is the skill reserved for the immortals  
Who sing of a union between logos and song

Well beyond our broken abilities to build  
Union into our acts of art and love

So much to the margin of the central contradictions  
That mark our lives as ours.

And yet  
The stillness demands we offer ourselves to it

Risk the folly of moving to the music  
Of forwarding words before the articulate

Into the contaminated air that beats them...

Rosmarie Waldrop's selected poems—*Another Language*—offers such a rich compendium of counter-spells (against literary convention, certain types of historical narrative, even against boring senses of romance), that I need to do a little abstracting myself (but I hope not too violently) to highlight just one of its themes. I like to read some of my favorite pieces in this collection as strategic responses to the threats modern technology can place on a personal sense of agency.

Marshall McLuhan once wrote that "all new technologies bring on the cultural blues." This is because when technology enhances our powers, it also takes them away (after you use a calculator for while, it's hard to do math "on your own"). Perhaps one of the reasons why experimental writing has traditionally critiqued the personal narrative, is that in the age of electronic media such a mode is now impossible: we've already ceded our ability to tell stories about ourselves to TV, movies and the popular novel. As a result, any tale we might make up to organize our lives can seem imported, from a source that doesn't necessarily have our best interests in mind. At the same time, pragmatically speaking, it would seem you need to maintain some myth about yourself to make it through a bad day (let alone write). What fascinates me about some of the pieces in Waldrop's

book is that she not only takes on such problems, but offers solutions.

In a beautiful series of prose poems titled "Accelerating Frame", Waldrop confronts this dilemma head-on: "I badly wanted a story of my own," she writes, "as if there were proof in spelling. But what if my experience were the kind of snow that does not accumulate? A piling of instants that did not amount to a dimension?" I think what I've said justifies a rather literal reading of this sentiment. As a TV-addict, when I see references to "snow" and "flatness" I can't help but think of those terrifying moments when my set goes on the blink. Later in the poem, Waldrop elaborates on the impossibility of "story":

The concept of an inner picture is misleading. Like those on the screen, it takes the outer picture as a model, yet their uses are no more alike than statistics and bodies. Figures, we know, can proceed with-

out any regard for reality, no matter how thin the fabric. True, the missing pieces can be glued in, but if you look for the deep you won't frighten your vertigo away.

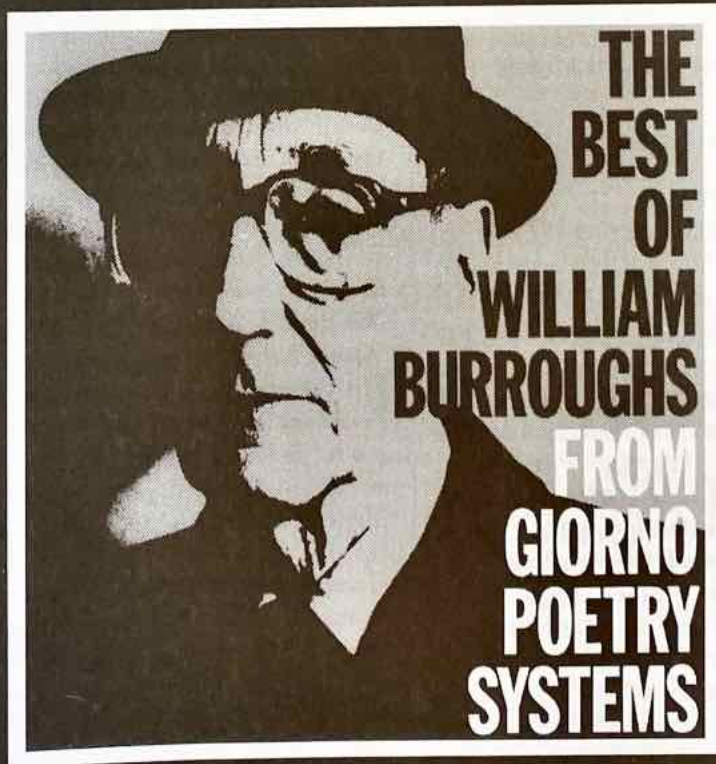
What contributes to this sense of vertigo, in my reading, is precisely the fact that our culture industry *does* generate statistical bodies; the look and shape of people on our TV and movie screens have been exactly calibrated for maximum effect through the various technologies of market research. Rather than base identity on such flimsy images, Waldrop remarks, "...I came to prefer the risk of falling to the arrogance of solid ground..." And what comes to her aid in this preference is *another* sort of technology—an older one—that of language itself: "...language is a passport to the fourth dimension," she writes, "which allows us to predict our future, matter of body..." Like a modern day magician who depends on older technologies (alchemy, etc.)

for a personal sense of power, perhaps it's the job of poets to experiment with the homegrown technology of language in order to discover the way to agency in the electronic age.

And there is another path to power these poems seem suggestive of. That's to forget about thinking of identity as single and subjective, and start thinking of the self as a "system" which *celebrates* (rather than panics over) its technological prostheses—and the extensions of agency they afford. One of the most exhilarating pieces in this collection, titled "The Road is Everywhere or Stop This Body", establishes a system of circulating charges between body-language-car, with a joy intense enough to make older versions of the American road epic seem passé. The syntax in this piece refuses to obey conventional boundaries and, as a result, each section becomes a total flow of unblocked energy—alchemically transforming identity into something that resembles "...cen-

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taurs/half car half man":

...shock of the "outside" at our  
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radiate a cone of attention  
through the steering wheel out into  
points of space my body  
haunts from inside  
the "world" is not ahead where I'm  
launched into the gap  
of mind ahead of body  
widens with the metal lining of  
my skin  
flaunts its refusal  
to harden into  
durability

Let's hope Talisman House books  
keeps manufacturing amulets like  
these!

JEROME SALA

TIM DUGOS

### **Powerless: Selected Poems 1973-1990**

Serpent's Tail/High Risk Books (180  
Varick Street, 10th Floor, New York,  
NY 10014), 1996, 115 pages, \$12.99.

Tim Dugos died in 1990 at the age of  
40. His books of poetry include  
*High There* (1973), *For Years*  
(1977), *A Fast Life* (1979, 1982), *Je  
Suis Ein Americano* (1979), *Entre  
Nous* (1982) and the posthumously  
published *Strong Place* (1992).

Before moving to Manhattan in  
the late seventies, Tim was actively  
involved in the so-called Washington  
School scene, a lively offshoot of the  
New York School which flourished in  
the early and mid-seventies in  
Washington, D.C. and which includ-  
ed a number of other extremely tal-  
ented poets: Michael Lally, Terence

Winch, Bernard Welt, Bruce Andrews  
and Diane Ward, among others.  
Three books by members of that  
group written during that period  
strike me as classics: Lally's *South  
Orange Sonnets*, Winch's *Irish  
Musicians* and Dlugos' *A Fast Life*.  
Tim admired Lally and Winch's work  
a great deal, and the work of all three  
shares in common a deadpan irony,  
flat conversational style, and wonder-  
ful anecdotal quality. (If you crossed  
the Charles Reznikoff of *Testimony*  
with Joe Brainard, and then filtered  
the result through a Catholic, Irish-  
American grid, you might end up  
with something approximating their  
work of this period.)

While Dlugos was also strongly  
influenced by poets of the New York  
School's first and second genera-  
tions, he was, I think, an original  
whose voice and signature styles were  
particularly his own. I have been  
reading and finding his work a source  
of inspiration for over 15 years; and  
so, I am delighted to report that  
David Trinidad has done an excellent  
job of editing Tim's *Selected Poems*.  
If I have one quibble with the selec-  
tion of Dlugos' work made in  
*Powerless*, which is otherwise on the  
money, it is that three long poems  
were not included: "A Fast Life,"  
"For Years" (each of which had been  
published as a chapbook) and "The  
Death of a President." I suspect,  
though, that constraints on the  
length of the book may have had  
something to do with their omission.

To my mind, Dlugos' poems from  
the mid and late seventies like  
"Gilligan's Island," "A Fast Life,"  
"Great Books of the 1950's," "Je Suis  
Ein Americano," "The Death of a  
President" and "For Years" establish a  
model for a signature Dlugos poem:  
an elliptical montage comprised of  
distinct but parallel narrative strands  
set off by ironic juxtapositions.  
Generally, the lines are long and  
prose-like, and, as in "Gilligan's  
Island," the individual narrative units  
are discrete and contained within  
separate paragraph-like stanzas.  
Occasionally, as in "For Years," the  
narrative threads run into and up  
against one another without any stan-  
za break or transition, intentionally  
blurring and confusing the distinc-

tion between separate narratives.  
The results, in each case, are surpris-  
ing and exciting. The subject matter  
within a poem is usually consistent;  
either events from Tim's life—often  
personal, occasionally embarrassing,  
and typically humorous—and dreams,  
or, in the alternative, popular cul-  
ture.

The montage strategies that  
inform Dlugos' earlier work give way  
in *Powerless* to the moving and pow-  
erful work that he wrote during the  
last two years of his life (and towards  
which he had worked during the  
middle period of his poetic output),  
in particular the stunning long poem  
"G-9" written when he was suffering  
from AIDS—a long rumination on  
his life near its end. Like  
"Powerless," Tim's reflection on his  
recovery from alcoholism, "G-9" is a  
column-like poem in appearance  
comprised of relatively short lines  
that continue without stanza breaks,  
and is written in a discursive, medi-  
tative mode (not unlike that of James  
Schuyler's "The Morning of the  
Poem" and "A Few Days" and  
Michael Lally's *Hollywood Magic  
and Cant Be Wrong*). While Tim's  
trademark wit, humorous anecdotes  
about himself and his friends and  
characteristically deft and playful use  
of cliché are all present, the poem  
derives tremendous power from the  
directness of its observations and  
recollections, the simplicity and clar-  
ity of its language and its relaxed,  
meandering pace.

In the mid-eighties Tim had  
begun writing poems in this discurs-  
ive mode—in particular, his long  
poem "King of the Wood," a section  
of which ("Dear Heart...") is includ-  
ed in *Powerless*. By the time he  
wrote "G-9" he had, I think, mas-  
tered this form in a way that enabled  
him to bring all of his considerable  
talents to bear.

MICHAEL FRIEDMAN

CHRIS KRAUS  
*I Love Dick*

Semiotext(e) (522 Philosophy Hall,  
Columbia University, New York,  
New York 10027), 1997, 275 pages,  
\$8.00.

*I Love Dick* is as dazzling as a build-

ing on fire: its beauty is inseparable from the destruction of forms and realities that occurs in it, in an atmosphere made unstable by love. The object, a more radical understanding of things, or a shift in understanding through the simple philosophic device of deciding to see everything. Chris Kraus makes it clear that if she's on the losing end of a thwarted love and a failed career as a filmmaker, and it seems like a personal problem, it's not (p.201): "No matter how dispassionate or large a vision of the world a woman formulates, whenever it includes her own experience and emotion, the telescope's turned back on her. Because emotion's just so terrifying the world refuses to believe it can be pursued as discipline, as form. Dear Dick, I want to make the world more interesting than my problems. Therefore, I have to make my problems social." And of course in the end she doesn't lose. The book is an assurance against that because this time around, in love and in art, failure would become an object of contemplation, like a loved one. In an interview this January over the phone she said "I thought *Gravity and Grace* (her most recent film) was a total encapsulation of everything I'd done before that. Nobody cared. Why had everything short-circuited and aborted? That had to become the subject. I consciously promised myself that I wasn't going to make any more art until I investigated why my art wasn't better received. My films had been layered, referential. Now it would be utterly explicit. It's a great freedom once you realize your life is over and it doesn't matter what you say, then you can say anything."

The love story goes something like this: after a stay overnight at Dick's house, Dick is approached by Sylvere, Chris's husband of nine years, at Chris's urgent request. Dick responds, but blankly, and his main offense throughout the book is that of not giving or taking anything, while Chris is coming with everything. Sylvere, for his part, remains in some kind of love with Chris by changing with the warping changes in the book. He accepts the invitation "to play," as painful as that becomes, and so avoids the fate of becoming another Dick, that is, a legend reduced to a person reduced to a literary device and finally left behind, a tar baby who won't speak or move.

Oddly, Chris seems to have launched herself into this love almost deliberately, and for reasons she can clearly enumerate, and yet she suffers its pangs as deeply as any lover, only with an added awareness she calls irony (Kierkegaard's Third Remove), or performative philosophy. From the interview:

"Performative philosophy is when you recognize situations in your life and move with them. You see it in the work of Hannah Wilke, Penny Arcade, Carolee Schneeman. When I met Dick, I saw the two of us falling into the quintessential adolescent rock & roll romance seduction, and I wanted us to play it out together as grownups. He didn't want to, but he also never said he didn't want to, so I took that as permission to play.... The smug take on irony discounts emotion, but when you take an ironic situation seriously you experience the full weight of the emotions and simultaneously recognize the frame of them. It's the willingness to see your life as material, and this is the great tradition of poetry, which I learned

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from New York School poetry, from my years at the Poetry Project." (She was Monday night coordinator at St. Mark's for two years in the early 80s.)

The book is epistolary in form until the letters, in the second half of the book, have become full-fledged essays, fast and brilliant, still addressed "Dear Dick," though Dick, still beloved, is now the intimate, nearly imaginary reader more than the ideal lover. In a sense we're all Dicks who remain outside the book, that is, who remain in a reality in which the staggering failure it describes is not an irresistible paradox, a door to be walked through. A failure that doggedly follows the most splendid efforts and the fullest conceptions has to be taken finally as revelation. This seems to be the turn of events that caused the oversaturated blossoming of *I Love Dick*.

The ideas in the later essays are never isolated or considered entirely intact in the abstract. They are always part of some other thought, some

event; they usually arrive in connection with a person. In fact they happen, like anything else in the book, in a totally contingent and partial way. You won't find an unattached idea, or an unchanging one, in the book, thus they stay alive. They are actions (performative philosophy). This is both the energy and the rigor of *I Love Dick*. It's a breakthrough volume because it is what it's about and it's under pressure. It seems to have been born out of necessity, out of accumulated blind spots in existing writing that had become intolerable. She had to do it this way because the other way-giving ideas, however daring and adventurous, some security or integrity-wasn't working at all. The "marketplace of ideas" was a privilege not extended to her and other women artists; she mostly suffered insult and suppression under it. This new way of writing made things click. "Embracing you and failure's changed all that cause now I know I'm no one. And there's a lot to say..." (p.228)

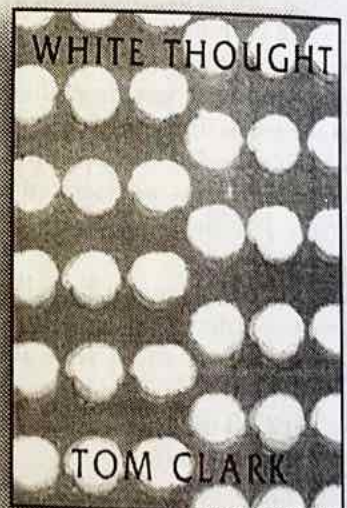
It may be this urgency that gives *I Love Dick* its pace, which is like water-skiing in that a certain velocity is required to stay up in it. She is enviably fast, focused and associative, with razor-sharp written-colloquial maneuvers that sound like a new New York School voice in prose. To take a sample pretty much at random, (p.228): "I want to write to you about schizophrenia even though I haven't got a wooden leg to stand on in relation to this subject, having never studied it or experienced it firsthand. But I'm using you to create a certain schizophrenic atmosphere, OR, love is schizophrenia, OR, I felt a schizophrenic trigger in our confluence of interests-who's crazier than who? Schizophrenia's a state that I've been drawn to like a faghag since age 16. 'Why are all the people I love crazy?' went a punk rock song sung by Ann Rower. For years I was the best friend, confidante, of schizophrenics. I lived through them, they talked to me." You could call it action writing. The articulations are so profuse that to dwell on any one seems as wrong as looking at a movie frame by frame. It's wall-to-wall

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-Kit Robinson

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Clark has produced a cycle of poetic meditations on death and mourning occasioned in part by the death of his mother. Expressed as brilliant, lyrical rhapsodies, these poems are raised as a bulwark against despair and a heroic reminder that poetry can give answers to the most abiding questions of meaning.



ideas. You realize that it's not so much getting the thoughts across as getting across the thoughts that constitute what the book does to you or leaves you with. I Love Dick seems to seek displacement, and ideas are the medium that happens in. It is one of very few novels that has given me such a strong sense that my head was being rearranged. To me that's a sign of contemporaneity, that the book and I are doing something as yet undescribed.

JIM FLETCHER

KEVIN OPSTEDAL  
**Sand in the Vaseline**

Mike & Dale's Press (San Francisco and Austin), 1997,  
42 pages, \$10.

Poet, editor and illustrator Kevin Opstedal has been a lone voice of poetic dissent for most of the 90s, launching nine issues of the influential and combustible magazine *GAS* from his home in the heart of modern Rome: silicon valley. His new book of poems, *Sand in the Vaseline*, is a bittersweet collection of lyrical meditations on themes of loss and predatory hunger. Like his hero, Ted Berrigan, Opstedal sieves through the sludge of cultural sediment to create strange, evocative poems of a lean and rare quality. His frank observances regarding the peculiarities of human emotional drama interrupt the polite routines with an urgency that is familiar only to those whose pain or contempt outgrow the commonplace manners of society.

The predatory theme is established early in the book in the poem, "With Talons Outstretched," where Opstedal writes:

There are nights when I soar above the scenes of betrayal  
With my talons outstretched  
Wanting blood  
To mark the burning bridges  
You've left as brutal testaments

To the love I thought inviolate.

Predatory urges are conflicted, however, with self-conscious attempts to accept fate and to learn the courage of forgiveness. In "Send 50 Beers," Opstedal contemplates the human difficulty of resisting the dangerous impulses sparked by betrayal. "I don't want to kill anyone anymore / well, maybe just one guy / & maybe not even kill just maimā / you see I'm nearly a bodhisattva / pounding at the door of unending compassion / with a sledgehammer." For Opstedal, a kind of salvation can be found only by engaging the fear that exists in uneasy proximity to self-awareness.

What saves these poems from narrative melodrama is a sense of humor that exposes the nerve-source of pain. Opstedal possesses the curious ability to reveal his emotional flux within a greater cultural context of noire-ish ethical infections. At times, his own psychic trauma blends into the greater cultural fabric of the world he perceives. One example of this lyric attention to materi-

al detail is found in the poem, "Standing At The Edge Of Myself (Ready To Leap)":

I learn to live thru each dizzy morning's rinky dink tragedies  
like the vibrating green lipstick embalmed in a smile  
Life goes out to get some psychosomatic coffee  
shaking off those concrete slab premonitions  
amazing fuck-ups I'll cop to in a minute  
like the other night when I passed out on the floor & woke  
confused at 4 a.m. wondering how the jungle got wall-to-  
wall carpeting .

Evocative and humorous, these lines layer a collection of social debris that has been distorted through an individual awareness. Opstedal sublimates these fragmented impressions into a talisman of awareness, resisting the urge of sleep, or of a surrealist dream, in order to present a lyric realism compounded with the conflicting impulses of destruction and preservation.

Few younger poets today explore the potential of the lyric as a kind of graffiti. Opstedal's verse carries that sort of streetwise and vigorous ethic of confrontation and territorial marking to a high level of artistic sophistication. *Sand in the Vaseline* is one of those rare books that reveals the powerful sensations of contemporary life through an isolation that only intensifies perception. For all its irreverent humor and pleasure in pop sensation, these poems form a moving portrait of personal values conflicted by aggressive survival skills. *Sand in the Vaseline* proves that this poet is indeed "impelled toward his fate by exterior forces beyond his power & interior forces beyond his control."

DALE SMITH

ELENI SIKELIANOS  
**The Book of Tendons**

The Post-Apollo Press (35 Marie Street, Sausalito,  
California 94965), 1997, 33 pages.

Eleni Sikelianos is a demon-driver clearing the weeds from the words in love's thicket—pruner of an Eden gone to seed: "I'll pull out all the little trees/ to keep from being choked." *The Book of Tendons*, a handy little volume just issued by the Post-Apollo Press (part of a series of small poetry books that already includes titles by Claude Royet-Journoud and Keith Waldrop), will knock your breath away. Sikelianos is a big poet who specializes in small appearances.

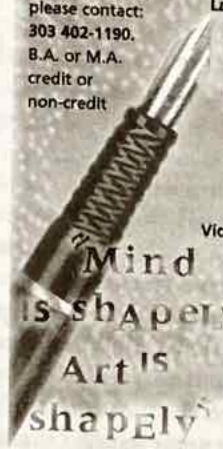
This latest, published and handsomely laid out by Simone Fattal, brings us two series—the title piece, and "Gold Trout." In both Sikelianos explores seams of the space between, welds of bone to blood: "the bone-wedded graft/ between blood-stone." Book meets body, homologous containers housing words ("elements"): "The four-fold cabinet folding/ from each season inside."

To open *The Book of Tendons* is like holding a scalpel to an incision for the first time—the discovery is sudden, bright, and unnerving. But these tendons are exposed without touchiness, cleared for inspection with no detach-

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ment: the leverage, slide & pull of syntax unhampered by exploratory cuts—"to see men converse with quotes/ & a basket of figs// heaven or hell in what-/ ever I'm wearing." Her craft—"how can a little boat"—shimmers, from line-binding letter to the page-length stresses of argument. Sikelianos' breaks make way for prepositions, conjunctions, articles (the "little words") which, thus cleared, frankly articulate—"In the River's cream.../ at June's door.../ off the eye-corners..."—about shapely centers. Verbs hammer down the spine: "walked... turned... fished... opened... exploded." If the openly assonated sounds & lines hark back to Niedecker, in twos here rather than threes, Sikelianos' use of the page as unit of composition seems to roll prosodic dice with Olson or, perhaps, the more vertiginous Albiach—"& light's intention to light." We find "Sun" (radiating out to "dust," "stone" and "on") holding its own at

the middle of a page, Gold Trout's high noon.

This sun has teeth: a series of love poems whereby Sikelianos follows light's sometimes violent trajectories, its investment and extraction, as we get and lose bits of ourselves. (In the epigraph to "Gold Trout," Basutos warns: a crocodile can kill you by dragging your reflection down.) Desire's limitless energy lurks in the sun considered as source of our flesh: "(flesh) of teeth (teeth) of sun (sun)." (Had Catherine Blake not had so much Milton drummed in, she might have written poems such as these.) "Gold Trout" demonstrates that, "the courageous soul... may be proved by faith in sex, and by disdaining concessions." (Whitman) Here marrow ("gold") is sought, but not without a clear view of the complications, the contradictions of discovery. Gold is the light inside, "the unlit lit" and, when discovered, is luminous greed. Its unknowns harbor displacement:

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"Because of gold I am surrounded by strangers." Sikelianos saddles her Gold Rush with an impetuous sexuality, while American History is gallstone to this immigrant: "the left kidney makes/ an emerald/ fist/ the right/ repeats/ 7,000 mule-miles/ twice." She embraces our West frankly, & swims in excess of discovery, unearthed gold the nation flaunts, at the same time that she pools caution: "from now on I shall be/ attentive// to all my teeth."

Whatever Sikelianos' argument, it remains abstract, hidden from view. Rather, these tendons seem to offer themselves for a body, anybody, who would assume their significant stress. It is as if meaning only begins to accumulate when the words have been pulled tight and true—that the body (and Olson's GOLD TROUT swims here) is initially a field of tensions, closer to light: "The Book of Her Tendons/ Built By a Hammer of Light." A certain Greek ecstasy can be found in these poems, a rage at the flesh more Cretan than Hellenic—true to the spirit of Sikelianos' great-grandfather, the poet Angelos Sikelianos: "I rain I rage & so/what—" but this is blood held in check by an "exact knowledge of bodies." And such exact knowledge or science—books of biology stacked with books of poetry—leads to the recognition of another life, the life of the cell—"For my body does not have the same ideas I do." (Unbridled) Sikelianos' argument "vacillates"—"between de- &/ un- (sire)"—only because it holds out for a space between lives. Her pronoun-trouncing declaration at the poem's close—"I have// cleared myself away/ of all materials/ I am not—" may be premature, but not by much.

Tendons might get torn—on the one hand, by this scientific exploration whose discoveries threaten selfhood ("we are chemical, older than ourselves,") or, on the other hand, by an erotic yearning for/ sexing of god, in the spirit of St. John-of-the-Cross or Sor Juana—if it weren't for the human tenderness, the love that so steadily informs these poems: "And I want therefore to touch the liver of whosoever speaks to me." It is a love of worlds that trans-

## THE TRANSCENDENTAL FRIEND

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lates to words, an exact attention. (It is hard to separate the body words in these poems, from the tenderness possessing them. That the body is also language seems, for once, in evidence: "turned cart/ wheels to unclose/ legs & pull/ each muscle apart.") Again, rarely does an ear hold so true to our consonant-vowel bedrock, circulated from the Saxons through Arnaut Daniel back to Bunting, Niedecker and others: "—touched the bone button/—brought/—the whole row-house down/ in a bevy of flame." More importantly, it is an international ear—crossing borders French, German, Italian, Spanish, Japanese, modern or ancient: "We were curious, coureurs du bois,/ with a de resurrectione carnis under the table." For we can listen further back, to "a woman of Lesbos too, who wrote want only, and so gracefully that she reconciles us to the strangeness of her dialect by the sweetness of her songs." (Apuleius, on Sappho, Apol. 9). Indeed, Eleni Sikelianos is a Sappho to rehabilitate our times, sent down to unchasten "language," bound with a more unruly garland of passions: "Venus' fingers/ cracked off// in (my) cunt (in) my/ mouth."

Sikelianos does not shrink from the demand, as Zukofsky called it, for rhythms which, "inevitably carry... in contexts that do not falsify the function of words as speech probing the possibilities and attractions of existence." This inevitableness, the frankness of the forms, contribute to a feel at once classic, and wildly abstract. Sometimes, especially in "The Book of Tendons"—the more exploratory of

the two series—verbal deftness can lull to a spell one does not (yet) hold the key to, & the book, one realizes, is secret: "(words) un-/ lucid behaviour, & so what's looked for/ the heart." This poetry begins in thickets of sound—the sound of the sea in Homer—& weeds through images, pre-exploded (such that Neruda's seem painterly), into the difficulty of pronouns (dates, names). "You might be that dust/ who cheats me at hounds & jackals... see Friday/ through a hole in Monday." But if Sikelianos is a surrealist butterfly, she twists through Precambrian rock. An hymnal discipline, almost Dickensonian, steadies these lines, and her hyphenated word-fuses evoke Celan: "the spiked-pod of crisis I picked/ up."

We should commend The Post-Apollo Press for taking the lead—as it has done in so many cases (almost our sole venue for the work of the important Lebanese poet Etel Adnan, and alone with Awede Press in representing Anne-Marie Albiach to American readers)—in bringing forward this strong poet. Let us hope for more, and in the very near future, from Sikelianos. (Look for *The Lovers' Numbers*, due out in 1998, from Seeing Eye Books.) *The Book of Tendons*, thankfully, will not be quiet: "once a man/ set out to [eat] a bird but found instead// they're better heard."

JONATHAN SKINNER

TREVOR WINKFIELD  
Pageant

Hard Press (P.O. Box 184, West  
Stockbridge, Massachusetts, 01266),  
1997, 48 pages, \$20.

This is the first monograph on the work of painter Trevor Winkfield. To my mind, it is at least a decade tardy. I have an unstable stack of magazines, books and gallery cards making do while I await his *Collected Works*. Until then, here is a gathering of 17 paintings (six of which were included in a recent show at Tibor de Nagy), and seven black and white drawings. There are also "Twelve Daubs Unillustrated," tiny prose poems Winkfield wrote describing earlier paintings not reproduced here. John Ashbery contributes an introduction and Jed Perl a longish essay. Both have valuable things to say about Winkfield's work. (Though I would argue with Perl's assertion that Winkfield's move from paper to canvas was "critical.") In addition to his look at the paintings, Perl glosses Winkfield's literary side: friend and publisher of the first generation New York Nexus poets, translator and editor of works by Raymond Roussel and others. Ashbery points out the paintings' affinities with musical scores. My own impulse is to say that these two are shattering genius into pieces. It would be better to make common cause with Winkfield's example, to combine seemingly disparate (literary and musical) elements and view his works as complex *lieder*. (Racercars and sung canons too have parallels to Winkfield's work.) And each individual image in a Winkfield painting, if

isolated and hung by itself, would certainly have the same beauty as a single, perfectly pitched word from a complex lyric.

But the images are of course not meant to be read individually. Perl quotes Winkfield as admiring: "the pinball machine effect of Duchamp's *Large Glass*—how one object leads to another, and in so doing activates it." Winkfield's work shows no obvious debt to Duchamp (there are in fact no navels visible in his work) but his paintings do proceed in a similar way. In a 1986 interview, he explained how one image decided upon for a painting will "call forth" the next, and so forth until there is a chain, "illogically logical" in its perfection. But if we had to choose a machine metaphor to displace the musical, it would not be the pinball machine but the printed circuit. As with printed circuits on any component board, looking at the paintings gives the viewer no clue as to what they are doing, or how they do it. The display either lights up for you, or it doesn't.

The images Winkfield employs—figures even Transformers could never become, inverted clocks, shimmering fish, platoons of droplets, burnt matches, any number of indecipherables—may at first appear to have come together as accidentally as clutter on a flea market table. But Winkfield's arrangements are no accidents. He creates his work with such care that he describes himself as a "seasonal painter," his rebus-like circuits each taking some three months to gel and be painted. Winkfield wrote of A.P. Ryder that he "seems never to have stopped researching into how to build a painting, a research that no doubt also

accounts for the extraordinarily strong tectonics of the pictures. Concomitant with this obvious slowness...is the amount of time it gave him to lavish affection on every object, or sliver of landscape..." Winkfield, too, is a master of tectonics, and he clearly lavishes much attention on each of his objects—though they often are no easier to identify for the crispness of detail. (Jean Cocteau said "Mystery exists only in precise things.")

It is important to note that some of Winkfield's images recur from work to work. Limitless invention, perpetual novelty would be truly inhuman, or, at best, incomprehensible. If the paintings showed no repetition of images from one work to another, this would suggest that all are arbitrary, not a true vocabulary, which is naturally limited. We would have no faith that what we see has any real meaning. But images do recur from painting to painting: Catherine wheels abounded for a time, and still appear at intervals; a face in the print "Balance" is to be found in the painting "Tripoli"; Moon-ish golf balls appear in the book *Piccadilly or Paradise* and on the sides of fish in the painting *Pond Concert with Blank Cards*, and float free in *At Home in the Crab Nebula*. And there are more. Clearly, some kind of personal Enigma encoding machine exists in Winkfield's mind, and it's operational rules are non-random. (In this sense, Winkfield is very much a realist painter, painting accurate portraits of his own psychological profile.) To return to our *lieder*: Winkfield is singing exactly what he wants to sing, if in a language known only to him.

Which brings up one of the larger questions about Winkfield (and about artists as diverse as H. Bosch and J. Johns). Why are we so attracted to something which is so puzzling? A poet who wrote me about the recent show offered this: "To tune into the Winkfield cosmos is daunting, frustrating/satisfying—always out of reach, but also—deeply pleasurable, to know that an 'order' is 'out there'..." However independent we imagine ourselves to be,

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some part of us is always seeking the comfort of order. And we find particularly attractive the idea of cracking open some mysterious order, cracking it open so that we might climb in and join with it. The lure of clubs and codes and secret hideouts is available to us in Winkfield's work, without our having to feel embarrassed or childish.

Winkfield's enthusiasm for comics and "boy's book" art is an unembarrassed one, as well. His works have often borrowed images from such sources, but there is none of that apparent here. What does remain is that surface manner Winkfield lifted from these sources (like rewetting a decal to lift it off a model) and modified to help bind his paintings together. Comics strip their subjects—faces, animals, landscapes—to the minimum number of lines that allow character to be suggested, and exaggerate what might otherwise be missed. Tonal elements may be left out and eyes and pets and lampshades exaggerated to carry the message the lack of drafting subtleties might mute. And while Winkfield often paints a convincingly realistic human face, even these are flattened by the use of color both tonally inappropriate (yellow or gummy blue faces) and uninflected. All this helps solve the problem of how to harmonize wildly disparate elements. Imagine, for instance, all the identifiable pieces of a painting reproduced here such as *Pond Concert with Blank Cards*—or even just the fish, the brushes and the lyre—being painted true to their sources. The cartoonish (because cartoons are their source) elements—the figures, some padlocks—would certainly seem less serious, less "important" somehow than the more realistically expressive elements. Winkfield needs control of each element, and uses comic-style flattening to help achieve this. If he limited himself to realistic portrayals, he would be severely limiting which elements he could include in a given composition—prohibiting himself whole chunks of his personal vocabulary.

Winkfield has, on the contrary, been steadily increasing the complexity of his paintings. The earliest works included here, *A Thirty-six Page Rodent* (1989) and *In the Vicinity of a Grocer* (1993), are almost too sym-

metrical, like the beads of an abacus at rest. 1994 paintings such as *I Will Not Tolerate Such Insubordination from My Pets* and *At Home in the Crab Nebula* (the most out-and-out beautiful painting here, as graceful as the well-turned ankles it includes) are looser and more spacious. *I Will Not Tolerate* includes what is either a framed landscape or a window looking out. Two other paintings here include similar windows. Winkfield is selectively breaking out of the six-inch-deep box which has long been his self-imposed work space.

If Winkfield's images are indeed like sung words, the paintings since 1995 are more densely polyphonic than ever before, like a baroque choir singing Ornette Coleman. (Earlier paintings like *Cottage Industries* and *Odor Pantry*, which seemed so complex 15 years ago, are now revealed to have had a plainsong spareness all along.) Beginning with the 1995 paintings, both in and out of the *Voyage* series, narrow bars of color, like slates escaping one of Bucky Fuller's tensegrity toys, disrupt calm areas with a visual clatter like the view through a picket fence. Springs and chains of repeated shapes jangle in front of the eye. *Voyage III* and *IV* are so eventful that (like many a busy vacation day) it is difficult fun to sort them out at all.

There is a narrative within each of the paintings, but there is also a progression from one of the series to the next. Blacks against dark blue and greens give *Voyage I* a 30s-deco feel, like an aviatrix's compact. With its wringing hands, yellow hooves, and about-to-arrive propeller, the painting evokes the ordered rush of loading and departure. *Voyage II* is clearly nautical. (Interestingly, Ashbery sees this painting as moving toward the right, like a musical score, while Perl sees it as moving leftward.) *Voyage III* shows us land once again—a cow, an elephant, chocolate-colored mountains. *IV* may be about Thailand—or are those Siamese fighting fish just red herrings?

Winkfield has painted one *Voyage* work since the book went to press, and doesn't know if there will be more. It is hard to imagine him filling his pictures with more than he does in these recent works, and one

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wonders where he will go from here. The windows in several of the paintings here may be a clue: imagine something with the deep perspective of a classic landscape or the sleight-or-space of an Escher as constructed by Winkfield. Or, he could choose to investigate and amplify the emotional charge which is (inexplicably but undeniably) present in the best of his works.

But if we can't foresee *where*, we can certainly see *how* he will proceed, by way of *The Painter and His Muse*, which is placed immediately before the *Voyages* begin. The painting is distinctly confrontational. The muse is a sour-apple-faced judge holding up a geometrically perfect template as he gazes at the painter. The disapproving muse bristles with threatening razor edges, the dark windows of some marble academy can be seen just behind him, and looking over his shoulder is a disapproving parrot. For his part, the painter is busily painting—with four hands at once. This is a Winkfield, so we know that the artist is not desperately trying to match the template's perfection. He is simply soldiering on, ignoring academy, bullying muse, and parrots of all ilks.

It is to be hoped that more publications like this slim, beautiful book will appear now and then, to allow us to track Winkfield's wonderfully oblivious progress.

W. C. BAMBERGER

# books received.

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**Towards The Primeval Lightning Field**  
O Books (Berkeley), 1998, 116 pages,  
\$10.50.

**SULTAN BAHU**  
**Death Before Dying**  
Translated by Jamal J. Elias, University  
of California Press (Berkeley, CA),  
1998, 154 pages, \$14.95.

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**Wagers of Synthesis**  
Zasterle Press (APDO 167 La Laguna,  
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Spain), 35 pages.

**JENNIFER BLOWDRYER**  
**White Trash Debutante**  
Galhatten Press (270 East 10th Street,  
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**ALISON BUNDY**  
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Burning Deck Press (71 Elmgrove  
Avenue, Providence, Rhode Island  
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**The Book of Giving Back**  
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**Save Twilight: Selected Poems**  
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Lights Books (San Francisco, CA),  
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**Edwin Denby Reading**  
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Mouth Almighty/Mercury Records CD,  
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Equipage (c/o Rod Mengham, Jesus  
College, Cambridge, CB5 8BL,  
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## Magazines

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Winter 1997, 200 pages, \$10.00.

**Crazyhorse #53**  
Fall 1997, Little Rock, Arkansas, 140  
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**Explosive Magazine #4**  
Spring 1998, Iowa City, Iowa, 84 pages,  
\$5.00.

**Hanging Loose #71**  
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**Long Shot**  
Volume 20, 1998, Hoboken, New  
Jersey, 176 pages, \$7.00

**Key Satch(el)**  
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Haydenville, MA, 24 pages, \$3.00.

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**Mike and Dale's Younger Poets # 7**  
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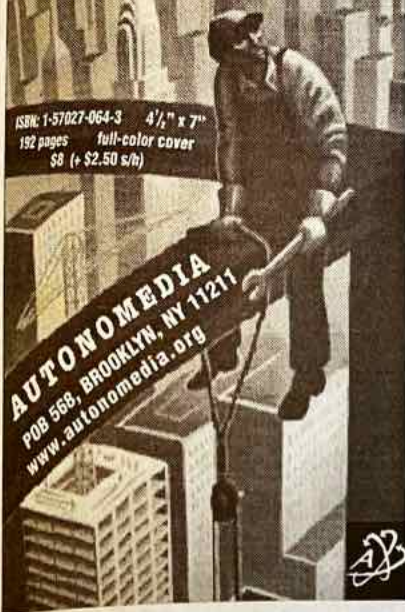
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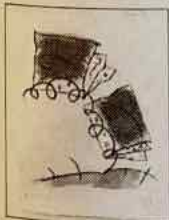
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