

poetry project

NEWSLETTER

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by Daniel Kane

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with a note by Ron Padgett

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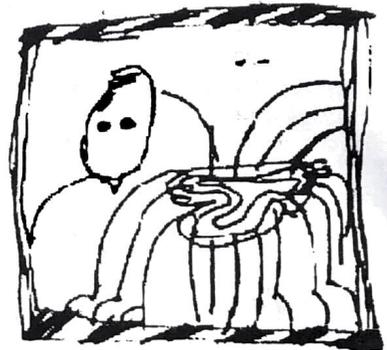
Bernadette Mayer

Kenneth Koch



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announcements

Thank You

The Poetry Project would like to thank all the volunteers who so generously helped make the 25th anniversary of our Annual New Year's Marathon such a success: Elena Alexander, Meg Arthurs, Teri Beck, Eddie Bell, Donna Brook, Jeffrey Burghauer, Peter Bushyeager, Jeff Butler, David Cameron, Donna Cartelli, Emilie Clark, Todd Colby, Jeff Conant, Jordan Davis, Tim Davis, Tom Devaney, Joe Elliot, John Fisk, Merry Fortune, Suzan Frecon, Atticus Fierman, Chris Funkhouser, Tim Griffin, Kimiko Hahn, Laird Hunt, Kimberly Isaksson, Deborah Jenks, Eliot Katz, Lee Klein, Eva Korzan, Wendy Kramer, Katy Lederer, Rachel Levitsky, Brendan Lorber, Shelley Marlow, Gena Mason, Gillian McCain, Josie McKee, Steve McNamara, Susan Mills, Ange Mlanko, Rebecca Moore, Bill Mullen, Elinor Nauen, Linda Neiberg, Paul Nocera, Richard O'Russa, Dael Orlandersmith, David Outhouse, Wanda Phipps, Lori Quillen, Stephen Rosenthal, Bob Rosenthal, Douglas Rothschild, Prageeta Sharma, Lytle Shaw, Emma Straub, Mary Sullivan, Erik Sweet, Edwin Torres, David Vogen, Eleanor Warner, Jo Ann Wasserman, Ian Wilder, James Wilk, Brad Will, Will Yaculik, and Liz Young. We would also like to thank the following vendors who donated refreshments: The Miracle Grill, Rectangles, Scot Paris Fine Desserts, Taylor's, The Telephone Bar & Grill, Veselka, and Vesuvio's.

Web Announcements

New works by Tonya Foster, Dan Machlin, Lisa Robertson, Jocelyn Saidenburg and Anthony Salerno are now up on the "Poets & Poems" section at the Project's web site (www.poetryproject.com). Mei-mei Berssenbrugge's "New Form," Jerome Rothenberg's "The History/Pre-History of the Poetry Project," and Lorenzo Thomas's "I Cudda Had a V-8: Poetry and the Vernacular" have been added to the "Project Papers." As ever, our links

are continually being updated, so if you have one, e-mail us at poproj@artomatic.com.

Grants and Awards

The Project would like to congratulate Barbara Guest, who was awarded the illustrious Frost Medal from the Poetry Society of America. Past recipients include Wallace Stevens, Elizabeth Bishop, Gwendolyn Brooks and John Ashbery.

Peter Gizzi, David Henderson, and Maureen Owen were recipients of grants from the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts, Inc. Thirteen grants were awarded to artists working individually and collaboratively in the United States and abroad, and 29 grants were awarded to U.S. arts organizations. An artist-supported organization, the Foundation was established through the efforts of John Cage and Jasper Johns.

Congratulations go out to yet another poet affiliated with the Poetry Project, Ed Roberson, who was awarded a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award.

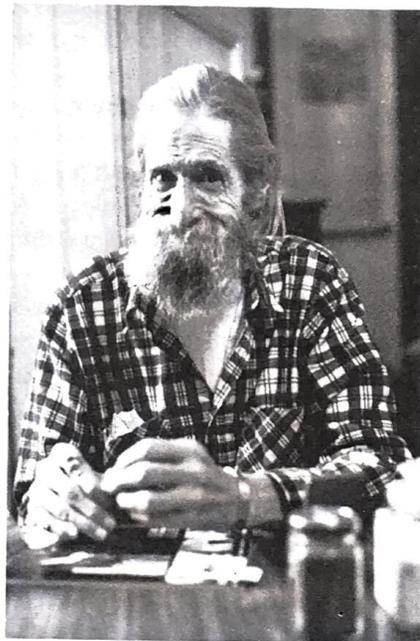
Readers/Performers Needed

For those who have a poetry or arts project to present, there is a performance/community space available at Dos Blocos, on East 9th Street between Avenues C and D. Please contact Brad Will at (212) 260-9754.

Submissions

Global City Review is currently seeking fiction, poetry, and nonfiction for the Fall 1999 Humor issue. "Provoke mirth. Arouse thoughtful amusement. Excite unrestrained hilarity. Poke fun, satirize, offend." Send manuscripts with S.A.S.E to Global City Review: Humor, Simon H. Rifkind Center

for the Humanities, City College/CUNY, Convent Ave. at 138th St., New York, NY 10031. Submissions must be postmarked by February 1, 1999.



© Allen Ginsberg Trust

Ray Bremser in Allen Ginsberg's kitchen East 12th Street, 2/21/95, taken the day before his last reading at the Project.

Ray Bremser 1934-1998

Ray Bremser died November 3 from natural causes in upstate New York. He was 64. More than 50 poets and friends attended his memorial service and many gave testament to his generosity. Bremser's work appeared in Don Allen's *Anthology of New American Poets*, and Bob Dylan acknowledged Bremser's influence on his work during the '50s coffeehouse scene. According to Bob Rosenthal, executor of the Allen Ginsberg Trust, Bremser had "the quintessential Beat voice." His recording of "Tree Ode" on *The World Record* (recorded at the Poetry Project in 1971) is a classic example of the reading style of the hipster poet. Allen Ginsberg included Bremser in the "Obscure Genius" edition of *Friction*. At their last reading together at the Village Vanguard, Ginsberg and Bremser switched poems, Ginsberg reading "Tree Ode" and Bremser reading "Sunflower Sutra." Bremser's latest book, *The Conquerors*, was published by Water Row Press (Sudbury, MA) in 1998. Poet Andy Clausen said that "Ray was not in good health, but [was] in good spirits...to the end."

regional updates

SALT LAKE CITY, UTAH

Across Main Street and down two or three blocks from the Zion Cooperative Mercantile Institute (the nation's first department store) is Sam Wellers, sitting in one of Salt Lake's dilapidated historic business blocks. A simple old-fashioned neon sign lights up the entrance: Zionist Bookstore. Tony Weller, grandson of the store's founder, runs it now. He's more interested in Zen than Mormonism, and wants to keep the store going for one more generation, just for people who like books. Prognostication's gloomy. Chain stores have set up alongside the Tabernacle and load their windows with bestsellers. Wellers keeps its old flavor but has broadened from its origins as a Mormon shop. By the entrance are employee suggestions, which this Christmas included books on New York avant-garde poets and wolf reintroduction efforts in Arizona. The store's strongest holdings are

Mormon history, western Americana, and Native American studies, but poetry, mysteries, and auto mechanics have surprisingly good sections. Three rambling floors, a cluttered basement with sound system where authors read and sign books, lots of funny corners and tiny staircases. If you ask, someone will take you into back rooms to see special collections. They have virtually every US Geological Survey monograph, hundreds of maps, water surveys, and mineralogical studies. Rare books on the West sit in a wild west bank vault—very atmospheric. There are numerous Bureau of American Ethnography titles including all the good Frances Densmore studies of Native American song & poetry. First editions of *The Wizard of Oz* and Ed Abbey. Real old-time booksellers, these folk are scholars and love books. They have compiled a collection (and careful bibliography) of first editions of *The Book of Mormon* in all languages.

Tony said they have one in Sanskrit, though he couldn't get his hands on it to show me.

— Andrew Schelling

COBBLE HILL, BROOKLYN

Here in the heart of Brooklyn yet another independent bookstore is under siege from a large chain that seems to be growing like an out of control fungal infection. Four blocks away there's a huge hole in the ground that will soon be filled by a super-store book chain. It's the typical David and Goliath scenario. But Bookcourt (163 Court Street) appears to be weathering the storm with the agility of a street fighter. Bookcourt continues to offer what the big boys can't: a staff that is actually passionate about books and owners who are actually in touch with the tastes and needs of the community they serve. While Bookcourt can't offer the enormous discounts that the super-stores can, it does offer generous discounts to teachers and schools who buy in volume while discounting paperbacks and hardcovers to the general customer. Bookcourt has served

writing workshops

Experimental Writing guided by Larry Fagin (Tuesday evenings, 7:45-9:45 pm; 10 sessions begin February 16)

Language on vacation. Writing & reading sans souci et sans pantalons, fiendishly winching every last model & maquette out of the muck-expressionistic, cubistic, futuristic, suprematistic, dadaistic, gertrudistic, surrealist, swingmatistic, lettristic, beatistic, projectivistic, situationistic, newyorkscholastic, spiceristic, oulipistic, coolidgistic, bernadettistic, languagistic, etceteristic. "Every breath is experimental." Buddah. Larry Fagin edited *Adventures in Poetry* and *Un Poco Loco*, guest edited *Shiny* #9/10, and wrote *Parade of the Caterpillars*, *I'll Be Seeing You*, *Stabs*, *Nuclear Neighborhood*, and *Dig & Delve* (Granary Books, forthcoming).

Poetry Workshop taught by Murat Nemet-Nejat (Friday evenings 7-9 PM; 10 sessions begin February 19)

In a poetic environment where the avant-garde is mainstream, how does one write truly new and adventurous poetry? Suspicious of the value of technique in the writing of original poems, the workshop will, hopefully, help each writer connect to his or her inner necessity for writing poetry, without which the process is useless. We will read Roland Barthes's North African journals of 1969, published posthumously under the title *Incidents*, describing his homosexual experiences mostly with boys in Morocco. Participants may read the text beforehand.

Murat Nemet-Nejat is presently working on a poem titled *Cyphers* and is preparing a selective anthology of 20th-century Turkish poetry to be published by Talisman in the year 2000.

Great Companions Poetry Workshop taught by Lisa Jarnot (Saturday afternoons 12-2 PM; 10 sessions begin February 20)

Dante said to Virgil "Thou art my master and my author." What poet would you name as Dante names Virgil? The focus of this workshop is poetic lineage, imitation and influence. We'll look at specific examples (Allen Ginsberg and William Blake, Frank O'Hara and Vladimir Mayakovsky, Bernadette Mayer and Catullus) and we'll also explore the ways that we might expand our own poetry by imitating various styles and forms. Lisa Jarnot is the author of *Sea Lyrics*, *Some Other Kind of Mission*, and *Heliopolis*. Her second full-length collection of poems, *Ring of Fire*, is forthcoming from Zoland Press.

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.

this neighborhood's book needs for over 15 years with author appearances and plan future reading series. The people who shop there have let it be known that no matter what fills that giant hole on Court Street they will continue to patronize the store. Let's hope so.

— Todd Colby

GUILFORD, VT

Since 1973, Longhouse has been working as one outfit, incorporating the building trades of stone work and carpentry while publishing limited edition books, pamphlets, broadsides, postcards and anthologies of poetry—nearly everything has been given away free. The idea of free is a good one, as it eliminates the capital structure and allows people to finally meet one another. Grants, subscriptions and all the rest will soon prove to be more nonsense than necessary for poetry—poets can't help themselves, they write poems all the time and read the books, and many go to great lengths to beg, borrow or steal a book. That's a good sign. Instead of goofing for grants and becoming a bureaucrat and not feeling exactly honest, the small press publisher can learn a trade, teach, grow a larger garden, drive a cab. Real people still do this. Watch this: in 1985 Longhouse took steps to sell books as a mail-order bookseller. What we sold directly spring-fed back to what Longhouse wished to publish. We joined arms with good friend Cid Gorman (Origin Press) in Japan and began working globally with poets and writers. Hardcase-backwoods types, we never gave computers or Internet access a thought until one day a friend brought us to cyber-earth and explained how booksellers in the middle of nowhere can sell books over the Internet to China, England and Des Moines. In many ways the system has the age old romantic quality of bookselling and reading: someone (us) wrapping the book and a reader (you) receiving the book as it slips out of the mailer and into your hands. Bull's-eye. This activity was once enjoyed only by eccentrics, scholars and island types, so hop aboard. It's a brave new world. Longhouse may be reached at www.sover.net/~poetry (website), poetry@sover.net (e-mail) or 1604 River

Road, Guilford, Vermont 05301.

— Bob Arnold

THE CATSKILLS

"We serve the community, baby," says Mark Dorrity, owner of the Phlebus Bookshop. He and his wife Dana emigrated from the East Village in 1996 and founded this bookstore in the hamlet of Phoenicia. "Is there any threat from the chain bookstores?" I asked. "Our main problem is that Barnes & Noble teaches people they can go into any bookstore and throw the books on the floor," Mark replied. "And what is the economic status of the store?" I inquired. "Third World," Dana responded.

— Sparrow

ENGLAND

Secondhand (poetry) bookselling is, in England, a business in gradual decline: the demand for mildewed copies of Percy Shelley's *Collected Poems*, the chapbooks of Roger Pellet, or dog-eared copies of Gertrude Stein

isn't enough to keep the wolf from the door. The closure of Alan Halsey's (wonderful) Poetry Book-shop in Hay-on-Wye was terrible news to all—except Alan Halsey himself. "I couldn't stomach the sight of another Ted Hughes enthusiast," he is reported to have said. Its closure has meant that Peter Riley's bookshop in Cambridge (27 Sturton Street, Cambridge CB1 2QG) is now the only store in Britain to specialise in poetry alone. Andrew Sclanders (sclanders@beatbooks.com) produces about 3 catalogues a year & always has a rare and interesting selection of books on his webpage. Paul Green (booksend@learning-centre.demon.co.uk), SPD's (hermetic) representative in Britain, often stocks books that SPD no longer has, and Compendium Books in Camden Town continues its 25-year reign as the best (new) bookseller in London; and Gloucester Road Bookshop (123 Gloucester Road, London SW7) hasn't been the same since the disappearance of Thomas Evans.

— Tim Atkins

Now in print!

Reading at the Poetry Project

Flyers by Joe Brainard

Reading at the Poetry Project: Flyers by Joe Brainard
 A folio of 11 classic Brainard flyers and one full-length comic strip, with a special introduction by Bill Berkson. Printed in an limited edition of 250. 8 1/2 x 11 inches. Available from the Poetry Project. \$14.95.

An Interview with Kenneth Koch

by
Daniel Kane

ON OCTOBER 12, 1998, I interviewed Kenneth Koch in his apartment in Morningside Heights. I was especially interested in the role of poetry readings, and how readings helped to generate a sense of community on the Lower East Side in the '60s and '70s.

KK: Before you got here, I was trying to think of the best poetry reading I ever heard. I was driving in from Eastern Long Island, with John Ashbery in the car, and he read me "The Skaters." That's the best poetry reading I've ever heard. The second best reading I ever heard was one that Frank O'Hara gave at some gallery—in fact, this was the first time I heard him read. He read "Poem for the Chinese New Year." I heard something in Frank's voice, a kind of tone that clarified something for me, so that was a terrific reading for me. Those were the two best ones I ever heard.

DK: The first one was rather exclusive!

KK: Yes, I would say so! [laughs]

DK: On the Lower East Side reading scene, though, it seems that O'Hara was the main figure of the so-called New York School who was actively associated with other poets in that neighborhood. O'Hara lived on East 9th Street near Avenue A, he was friends with LeRoi Jones (now Amiri Baraka), Allen Ginsberg and other downtown poets.

KK: How many readings did Frank give in that neighborhood?

DK: Well, I know O'Hara read at least once or twice at the 5 Spot, and he certainly attended at least a couple of readings at the Le Metro series on 2nd Avenue. In



Portrait of Kenneth Koch (1970), by Fairfield Porter

1961, O'Hara also participated in a series of benefit readings for Amiri Baraka's and Diane di Prima's magazine, *The Floating Bear*.

KK: On the whole subject of poetry readings, I must admit I'm kind of skeptical, because I'm not sure that much has ever happened because of poetry readings. I like to read poems in books. Don't you?

DK: I do.

KK: More than you like to hear them?

DK: For the most part. Though sometimes hearing the poet read changes the way I think or "hear" the poem when I read it later in the book. The first time I saw John Ashbery read was before I had read much of his work. To be honest with you, I was bored beyond belief. Then I read a bunch of his stuff over the next few years, and started very slowly picking up on it. Then I saw him read again, and he read differently, I'm sure of it. It didn't have that much to do with the fact that I'd been reading him more carefully. The way he read the second time, the way he phrased certain lines, affected me enormously in terms of how I went on to read his poetry.

KK: I think the only time I had that experience was Frank's reading. There are very few people I like to read. I like to hear Ron Padgett read.

DK: I remember hearing Ann Lauterbach read before I ever read her poetry. As she was reading, her hands started moving and dancing in front of her—it seemed as if she were approximating the words visually by sculpting them in the air with her hands. I thought it was all quite thrilling. When she was done, I dashed off and bought her book *Clamor*.

KK: A reading that did have a big influence on me, I now remember, was one which was held up at Columbia University that Allen Ginsberg did, in the late 1960s, with John Hollander. It was during the Vietnam War, and I had not written a political poem since I was a teenager. I was impressed by Allen's straightforwardness, which is something I got from the reading I think even more than I could have from reading his poems on the page. In person, Allen displayed how straightforward he was about everything. He read a lot of "political" poems about the war, and I thought, "Why am I not writing about this war, which I object to so much?" And I didn't like what was happening to my students, what was happening to anybody, so I started to write my poem "The Pleasures of Peace" as a direct result of being inspired by that Ginsberg reading. I worked on this poem for more than a year, maybe two years. It was very hard for me to work on a poem about the war. You know sometimes your body rejects an artificial heart? Well, my poetry rejected everything about the war, everything that was about suffering. So it turned out to be a poem about the pleasures of the peace movement. That poem, though unlike Allen's poems, was due to his reading.

DK: I was looking through the reading lists for St. Mark's Poetry Project, from 1966 to 1971, and noticed the Project had all sorts of benefits for political causes. There were benefits for the Catonsville Nine, the Berkeley Defense Fund, various drug-bust release readings, and so on. Did you see your aesthetics, which for the most part do not include overtly political content, fitting in somehow with the political excitement going on at the Poetry Project?

KK: I remember being always willing to read my poetry for what I thought was a good cause, whether or not my poetry spoke about the cause. And it usually didn't. That's about it. I was happy to read against the war even before I wrote "The Pleasures of Peace." If people wanted me to read something about rollercoasters to show that poets were against the war, I would always do it. But I don't know much about the "scene" at St. Mark's. I was never really a part of that scene. By the time it got to be something that I took part in with any regularity I was

already sort of an old-timer.

DK: I do get the sense though that you and Ashbery and O'Hara and James Schuyler are seen, in a strange sort of way, as spiritual founding fathers of the Poetry Project.

KK: The Poetry Project didn't have anything to do with the formation of my poetry, or John's or Frank's or Jimmy's, so far as I know, though I have been inspired by reading there; I always like to read there. The audience is so smart. That is to say, they're smart in this particular way that they're up on what's going on in poetry. It's like being a scientist talking to other scientists, and you're excited because they have the same kind of laboratory you have. I was slightly afraid sometimes to read new work at the Poetry Project, because I was afraid things would be swiped. Everybody is on this high frequency there! I had a very funny time with Ted Berrigan about that. I read there one year—my series "In Bed," about a hundred short poems, all with "bed" in the title. So I read it at St. Mark's, and within a couple of months I got a little book from Ted Berrigan, and it had a little poem in it called "By the Seashore" or something like that. And the entire poem is "There is a crab/in my bed." And I thought, "Oh shit!" I didn't say anything to Ted, but I happened to be talking to Anne Waldman about something, and I mentioned this to her and she said "Oh!" She was very happy, she would get to reproach Ted with it. But I said, "Don't tell Ted," and she said "Oh, no no no." But she couldn't help but tell Ted. And Ted wrote me a letter assuring me that this was not true, that he'd written the poem four years before my "In Bed" poems. Alice Notley later told me "Kenneth, I know that for sure. I'm the crab!"

DK: What do you think the effect of the Don Allen anthology, *The New American Poetry*, was on your career, especially in the way it classified you, among others, as a "New York Poet"?

KK: I have no idea. I don't even know what my career is. I got a little, tiny bit famous for writing *Wishes, Lies and Dreams*. I got asked all around the country to talk about teaching children to write poetry, but my poetry... I don't know about my career. Poetry books in this country are sometimes reviewed and sometimes not. It's very hard to know what makes a career. The best thing that happened to me was having John Ashbery and Frank O'Hara as friends. To have two poets who delight you and scare you to death is the best thing that I ever got. I don't know what that anthology did for anyone's career. Frank's career, outside a small audience, seemed to start after his death. I don't think it did anything for my career, or Ashbery's.

Ashbery's big academic career started very oddly, with *Self-Portrait in a Convex Mirror*. All that glorious early work was more or less ignored. Very strange!

DK: *The New American Poetry* certainly had an enormous effect among the group of poets who looked towards you and your friends as superheros.

KK: Is that where Ted found out about us?

DK: Well, according to his journals and letters, Berrigan indicated that he came across your work initially through the Allen anthology, which he first read in Oklahoma. He said that he "came to O'Hara last," and then, from O'Hara, he read through the whole New York School group more carefully, and then he decided that the New York School section of that anthology was the most exciting section. I thought that was curious, especially when you consider all the class issues involved—a working-class, bearlike guy from Rhode Island and Oklahoma, living in low-rent Lower East Side, picking up on what seemed to be a relatively genteel, Harvard-educated, sophisticated Hamptons gang.

KK: I didn't understand anything you just said! What are you talking about, "Hamptons gang?"

DK: All right, forget it. I guess what I really want to know is: what does Berrigan have to do with creating this idea of a "second generation" New York School?

KK: You're asking me things I don't know anything about! The New York School has always been such a shadowy thing. I was aware that there were these terrific talented kids downtown who really liked John and Frank and me and particularly liked John and Frank. I was aware of that, and then after a while it seemed that Ted Berrigan was sort of the daddy of the downtown poets, taking care of everybody and showing them what it was like to be a poet. I taught a number of those guys in various places. I taught Ron here [at Columbia]. David Shapiro was my student too. At the New School I had Tony Towle as a student, and Bill Berkson, and then at Wagner College even Ted came as my student. Ted pointed out to me something very interesting. He said "Kenneth, do you know every time you mention Paul Valéry you go like this?" [puts his right hand on top of his head] I thought that was very astute of him. I was very embarrassed, so I stopped doing that. Joe Ceravolo was my student at the New School. That's a pleasure for a teacher, to have a brilliant student like that who had hardly written a poem before. I was interested in the existence of more New York School poets. I decided to teach at the New School

not only because I wanted a job, but I really thought I knew a *secret* about poetry that nobody knew except John and Frank and me. I knew about this new aesthetic, this new way to write poetry, and I wanted to spread it around, because I thought it was *dumb* to think that these other bad poets were writing poetry. I taught with a lot of enthusiasm...I really had a mission to make this aesthetic clear to people. I liked this idea of there being more New York poets.

DK: I notice you use the word "aesthetic" as in "I wanted to teach this aesthetic." I'm curious—how would you define that aesthetic?

KK: Well, let me tell you a few assignments I used at the New School. I had people read William Carlos Williams and imitate him. This was to get them rid of meter, rhyme, and fancy subject matter. Ordinary American language, spoken language. I had them write poems about their dreams. I had them write stream-of-consciousness...this was to get their unconscious stuff into their poetry. I had everybody write short plays, prose poems, transform an article in a newspaper into a poem, and I had them write sestinas. I wanted my students to break away from "poetry" poetry, and sort of... it was something I thought was French. I was very influenced by Max Jacob. Do you know his work? You should read him. From Jacob I learned how to be comic and lyrical at the same time. That was quite a discovery. It helped the determination to get rid of Eliot, and depression, and despair, and inky-dinky meter. I read a critic that I make fun of in my poem "Fresh Air" who said that iambic pentameter was the only "honest" English meter. So, getting back to your question of what is the New York School aesthetic...I don't know, just a lot of fresh air, to have fun with poetry, to use the unconscious, to use the spoken language, to pay attention to the surface of the language.

DK: Your poem "Fresh Air" seems to have set up a distinction between so-called "outsider" or "avant-garde" poetry and "academic" poetry. What is "academic" poetry?

KK: It changes. The academic poetry I was ridiculing then has mainly—but not entirely—gone away. Now there are new kinds of bad poetry that you could call "academic." The kind in "Fresh Air" is by now old-fashioned, like iceboxes—the new kinds of academic poetry are like bad refrigerators. The academic poetry that I made fun of in "Fresh Air" had a heavy dose of myth. It was all these American poets of the '40s and '50s who had gone through their Yeats shots and Eliot shots, and they all had the fever of the bone, the skeleton, Odysseus, all that

stuff. Now it's funny what academic poetry has turned into. I've always wanted to write more poems like "Fresh Air," but I didn't have the incentive. After a while, there didn't seem to be a discernible enemy. There were too many enemies. But bad poetry never goes away. Then there was this whole period—it's still with us, I think—of the whole "workshop" kind of poem. "Grandpa dies on the way to the garage," or "I'm having a love affair with a student," or something. At the time I wrote "Fresh Air," academic poetry was the poetry that was in Donald Hall, Robert Pack, and Louis Simpson's book *New British and American Poets*. It was Snodgrass, Giardi... That anthology was one of my major inspirations for writing my poem "Fresh Air." That's where I got the idea that all this poetry was about the myth, the missus and the mid-terms.

DK: In the Donald Allen anthology, Allen stated that all the poets in the book shared a common debt to Pound and Williams. Why was Pound acceptable to so many of the "downtown" poets whereas Eliot, especially the later Eliot, wasn't?

KK: Particularly in *The Cantos*, when they're good, Pound has this very quirky way of talking, very conversational. He gives you all these pleasures—a very flat, spoken style mixed in with unexpected quotes and other languages. I think I and John and Frank were all influenced by Pound's way of referring to all kinds of things all at once. But Pound did it to make some kind of point, whereas I think we did it because we just liked the splash of it, having everything in. That's true for me, anyway—I liked having the whole world in my poems. Strangely enough, one can get that from Pound and from Eliot.

DK: The way you're talking about Pound reminds me of *The Pisan Cantos* when Pound brings in voices of the black soldiers, like in "Canto LXXX": "Ain' committed no federal crime, jes a slaight misdemeanor." I imagine that kind of incorporation of marginalized or "non-literary" speech—a practice which Pound shared with Williams—possibly made Pound especially interesting to the avant-garde poets living in New York during the 1960s.

KK: Even take a line in *The Cantos* like "Nancy, where art thou?" Or "white-chested martin, goddamnit!" Even if Pound's context is to say that civilization stinks, there's all this fun, lively language in it. As Frank said, "If you're not writing about the tremendous excitement and richness of life, you may as well not be doing it." Like O'Hara's poem "Second Avenue," whatever it's saying it's full of everything in the world. That's what is so great about it, so exciting about it.

DK: I wanted to ask you about the New School readings that you organized in the early to mid-1960s. I'm interested in these because they ran concurrently to Les Deux Mégots and Le Metro readings—two Lower East Side reading series which many poets feel were the real predecessors for the Poetry Project. The New School readings included many of the same readers who read regularly in the Lower East Side—John Weiners, who read at Le Metro a number of times, also read at the New School. Did you have an overall vision for the New School readings, and did you sense a shared purpose between your reading series and the series I've mentioned?

KK: I just tried to get the best poets I could, and the variety I wanted. I had Auden, and Marianne Moore, and then some of my guys. I wanted to mix them up. I just remembered I had Robert Lowell read at the New School, as well. I think that the Poetry Project at a certain point opened its gates to more people than I thought they would. They had a reading with Lowell and Ginsberg—why not?

DK: That was Larry Fagin's idea. In an interview with Bob Holman, Larry said, "A lot of the wacky imagery was via Ashbery-O'Hara-Koch to Padgett-Berrigan-Gallup (the *C* magazine crowd). They were the healthiest thing that came along. They took the earlier wackiness and made it even more contemporary. At times almost insipid, and at other times even more contemporary. Delirious swooning. Absolute drivel. There's no need for it now, it's been done." Does that make any sense to you?

KK: It makes sense as an utterance of Larry. He likes to sum things up! [laughs] I don't know what he means by "contemporary," and I also don't know whether chattiness or wackiness is no longer needed now. Does Larry mean that Frank O'Hara says "Wonderbread" and that Dick Gallup says "Wonderbread with raisins in it"?

DK: Perhaps some poets associated with the Second Generation are a little more inclusive of rough edges and behavior. For example, in many of Berrigan's poems we're privy to his really unhealthy eating habits. We know about his many Pepsis, his prodigious speed consumption, his milkshakes and hamburgers. This is opposed to the haute cuisine feel generated by an Ashbery or Schuyler poem—I'm thinking of lines from Schuyler's poems now, where he refers to "paté maison" and the "concord grape season." At the same time, Berrigan maintains a sense of lightness and sophistication that is often associated with the New York School aesthetic.

KK: Well, John and Frank and I went to Harvard. We

were all put on the assembly line to be proper fellows, and to get a good, solid, classical education and to be responsible citizens. Most of the downtown poets weren't on that track. That's another thing about their being younger than we were—we had something to react against that was very strong, and very total. What was going on in the literary magazines was absolutely awful, there weren't any good magazines around. But schools of poetry hardly matter—it's friendship and individual talent.

DK: Since you mentioned friendship, I'd like to talk about how writers like Ron Padgett and Ted Berrigan picked up on the magazine *Locus Solus*, particularly the issue you edited which was made up entirely of collaborations. What are your memories of that collaborative issue in terms of how people responded to it and in light of what we're discussing here regarding a kind of avant-garde tradition? Why collaborations?

KK: Ah! There's a question I can answer. I know that Ron and Ted liked to collaborate, and if their book *Bean Spasms* was in any way influenced by that issue of *Locus Solus*, then I'm very glad I did it. I love that book. I was very interested in collaborating because I had done a lot of collaborations with John Ashbery. We did a series of sestinas called "The Bestiary." We did a whole lot of poems in Paris and in Rome. We'd sit around in a lot of nice places like the garden of the Rodin Museum in Paris and write these poems with crazy rules. Like, there has to be something contrary to fact in every line, as well as the word "silver" and a small animal. I found the act of collaboration inspiring. It was something the French taught me—Breton, Eluard.

DK: I'm interested in collaboration especially when looking at the early

years of the Poetry Project. Everyone there seemed to be very much involved with ideas of anonymity, appropriation, and collaboration. Many of the earlier issues of *The World* are made up almost entirely of collaborations where the author is at best a shadowy figure. The question "who wrote what line" was often treated as a kind of game in these magazines. It's also interesting to look at the idea and implication of collaborations in the context of poetry in the 1950s and early 1960s. After all, this was a time where you had a "great poet" like Dylan Thomas presented to you on the radio, reading with that profoundly operatic voice of his. I mean, this was *Dylan Thomas*. It seems that your issue of *Locus Solus*, and the later collaborative activity coming out of the Poetry Project and writers like Padgett and Berrigan, really stood in opposition to that kind of presentation.

KK: There's a quote at the beginning of that issue—Harry Mathews found it—from Lautréamont: "La poésie doit être faite par tous. Non par un. Pauvre Hugo! Pauvre Racine! Pauvre Coppée! Pauvre Corneille! Pauvre Boileau! Pauvre Scarron! Tics, tics, et tics." [Poetry must be made by everybody. Not by one. Poor Hugo! Poor Racine! (etc.)]

DK: Do you think you were doing anything subversive by putting out this issue?

KK: Well, I felt that the teaching and this editing and all the writing I did were for the same interesting cause. Poetry should be exciting and interesting and beautiful and surprising—yes, I was uncomfortable with what poets were seemed to be supposed to do. Collaboration was certainly carried on at St. Mark's. I performed there with Allen Ginsberg, and we improvised sestinas, haiku, rhymed couplets, all kinds of things. That was

an event which could only be possible at St. Mark's.

DK: Why was that only possible at St. Mark's?

KK: Where else could it happen? Certain things can only happen at St. Mark's—I think the classiest things go on there, but totally without pretentiousness. Pretension does not seem to get into the church for one reason or another. It's always just poetry. It's a great place to read.

DK: Ted Berrigan, who read and socialized often at the Poetry Project, had taken classes with you and credited you with helping him move away from blatant O'Hara impersonations towards something else. In his diary, Berrigan wrote, "Frank opened all the doors for me. For a while he was a very bad influence on me, because I started getting too close, it was seeming too easy for me, and then Kenneth Koch kindly pointed out to me that Frank was being a very bad influence."

KK: I do remember saying at one point, when everybody seemed to be imitating Frank, that Frank invented this wonderful way of just putting down on paper everything that was going on in his head. This works very well if you have lots of interesting things in your head. But most of the people doing it, Berrigan not included, weren't as interesting, so that style could be a problem. I think I was thinking about some West Coast poets who wrote things like "It's 4:15/have to have a toke./Walk down the street,/look at a necktie." I mean, so what!

DK: You know, one thing I wanted to ask you about was your involvement with Ed Sanders, who was one of the kings of the Lower East Side; he edited the legendary *Fuck You/a maga-*

zine of the Arts, he ran the bookstore The Peace Eye, he formed the band The Fugs. Regarding Sanders' arrest on obscenity charges for distributing material including his own mimeograph magazine *Fuck You/a magazine of the Arts*, Sanders told me he remembered you and John Ashbery were character witnesses for him. You were called to testify on a day you were playing tennis, and apparently had to rush downtown and present your case on Sanders' behalf while holding onto your tennis-racket. Do you remember this?

KK: Ed Sanders was one of the good guys. How could anything be more absurd than being arrested because you have certain books in your bookstore? It was very funny because Ed called me up and asked me about being a character reference. *Fuck You/a magazine of the Arts* was not something I subscribed to but I read a lot of them and thought it was very funny. I remember Sanders distributed a great questionnaire which asked all the downtown poets about their bugging habits. I liked very much the magazine's big solicitation for people to volunteer for a filming of a Mongolian cluster fuck. This turned out to be a key issue of the trial. I was annoyed with the magazine a few times though, especially when I was on the list of people Gerard Malanga fucked—I certainly wasn't one of those people! John and I agreed to be character witnesses. The trial kept getting delayed. Ed had a civil liberties lawyer who kept on waiting to get a good judge. Every month or so I'd get a phone call saying, "This might be the day for your appearance. Be ready." I was told to wear a Brooks Brothers suit. On one particular day I was aware I might be called down to testify, but I was scheduled to play tennis. At the tennis court, a big announcement came over the loudspeakers on all the Central Park courts. "Kenneth Cock! Kenneth Cock!" I jumped into my gray flannel suit and grabbed my tennis racket. John Ashbery was already there. They were just starting the trial. They dismissed the case. Here's why. This was after the big *SCREW* magazine case, in which I think the decision had been made that obscenity could only be against the law if it encouraged other people to engage in it. So, our lawyer had sort of tricked the opposition lawyer into concentrating his case entirely on the solicitation of people to be filmed during *Mongolian Cluster Fuck*. Now, the judge was someone with a sense of humor and a brain, and our lawyer had explained to him, "You don't really believe that they're going to make a movie called *Mongolian Cluster Fuck*! What is that? Obviously, this is a joke, so this doesn't fall under the purview of the law." So the judge explained this to the other lawyer and dismissed the case. I had prepared a list of about

ten things I thought were socially redeeming about *Fuck You*, but I never got a chance to state what they were.

DK: I remember one of the first things I saw going through back issues of *Fuck You* was a form one could fill out indicating a willingness to participate in a "Fuck-In" against the Vietnam War. There was a box you were supposed to check adjacent to a line which read, "Yes, I will fuck-in." But you also had an option—you could check the line which read, "Preferring to eat dick, I will suck-in."

KK: [laughs] That's good!

DK: In *Out of This World*, Anne Waldman talks about the Poetry Project as a New York School center. In terms of the way the reading scene in that neighborhood changed, it seems that it had a lot to do with the poets in the younger crowd—many of whom you taught at Columbia and other places—taking responsibility for running readings at the Project, whereas in the past a slightly older crowd organized readings at places like Le Metro and the earlier reading series at Les Deux Mégots. You organized earlier reading series at places like the 5 Spot near Cooper Square.

KK: Larry Rivers organized the readings there—he knew a lot of jazz musicians. I thought reading poetry to jazz, which the Beat poets and Rexroth out on the West Coast were doing, was absolutely absurd because the beat of music is so much stronger than that of poetry that you could read the telephone book to music and it would sound good. I did that once. The other thing I thought was, "Hey, I want to do that too!"

DK: You read the telephone book to music at the 5 Spot?

KK: Yes, just a little bit of it. Not the night Billie Holiday sang between my sets. That was another night. But John Ashbery never read there. And Frank disdained it—he may have read once, I don't remember. I was the one who had the most enthusiasm for the jazz-poetry nights. I read about three times. One night I read, and Larry was sitting with some painters, among them Mark Rothko. I read my poems, and Larry said, "What do you think?" Rothko replied, "Why don't these poets make any sense?" For the last two readings I had, Larry got Mal Waldron and his trio. These guys sort of objected to the setup. It was mainly funny things I read. I read my short play, "Bertha," a ten-minute play about the queen of Norway who's getting old and

THE DANSPACE PROJECT

Feb 26-28 Helena Franzén & Hetty King

Feb 27 DraftWork: Sarah Lawrence College

Mar 5-7 Food For Thought

Mar 11-14 Mark Jarecke

Mar 18-21 Ben Munisteri

Mar 20 DraftWork: Karen Bernard

Mar 26-28 Silver Series: Volume Two

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bored and decides that she'll conquer Norway again and liven things up. Larry said the jazz musicians were very serious, but he guaranteed them that they'd get their soul back after they stopped accompanying me. I had a lot of fun doing that, and I thought I'd achieve instant fame. Instead, after the second time I did it, Larry told me, "There's a guy in the back that wants to talk to you." He offered me a job as a master of ceremonies at a downtown gay nightclub. I said, "No, I don't think I can handle that." One night after a reading, the drummer said, "That was great man. Where do you get your material?" That was terrific. The last night I read, Billie Holiday came, because Mal was her accompanist. Billie was there at the bar. Mal introduced me to her, and she said to me, "Man, your stuff is just crazy!" I believed—or hoped—that meant "good." That night the audience prevailed upon Billie to sing—it was the night Frank O'Hara would write about in his poem "The Day Lady Died." She almost had no voice—it was like a great old wine that almost tastes like water. Then I got up and read again. The evening ended, except for Frank's poem. What a gift for the immediate! Frank could write fast—he could sit down in the middle of a party and write a poem, and if you went over and talked to him he'd put what you just said into the poem.

Amazing. I tried to do that but I had no success at all.

DK: Why were you and other writers associated with the New York Schools so fond of comic strip characters—Ashbery and his use of Popeye in the poem "Farm Implements and Rutabagas in a Landscape," or Joe Brainard's various Superman and Nancy drawings. Were cartoons part of the fresh air in art and poetry that we were talking about earlier?

KK: It was the main form of art in my life for 10 years—in Cincinnati, when I was growing up. I felt a lot closer to Popeye, the Gumps, Orphan Annie, than to other kinds of art. John and I were doing stuff with cartoon figures at least as early as Roy Lichtenstein did, but nobody knew that. That's because we were doing it with language, and Lichtenstein was doing it with visual images. *C* magazine had wonderful cartoon issues, with great Joe Brainard illustrations.

Before we stop talking, I'd like to ask you some things. To what extent does it seem to you that such interactions as were going on downtown then are going on there now? Are things made more difficult by factors like high rents and careerism among poets?

DK: Well, I suppose many people living downtown now can't afford to live without having to work forty or fifty hours a week, and even then it's really difficult. Also, maybe the poetry world nowadays is even more fragmented into competing schools and cliques than it was in the past. In the past, the Umbra group, which was composed primarily of black poets, was certainly an important part of the overall Lower East Side poetic community—Ishmael Reed, David Henderson, Lorenzo Thomas, all hanging out with people like Ted

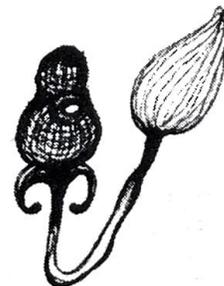
Berrigan, Ron Padgett, Taylor Mead and George Economou at Le Metro.

KK: I'm asking you what's going on now, though, because people come up to me and say "Oh, the '50s must have been so great, what's happening now?" And I don't know what's happening now.

DK: Maybe the kind of glamour and excitement around poetry is happening now, but we might need twenty or thirty years of mythologizing to recognize it. I am acquainted with the writing of very good poets who seem to be part of a social group that is somewhat centered around the Poetry Project and other reading series at places like the Zinc Bar on West Houston. Just looking at these poets and their publishing and reading practices, one can see that they're all helping each other, promoting each other, and so on. Does that mean that thirty years from now, critics and academics will write about these poets' small-press chapbooks, their on-line conversations, their romances? It will be curious to see what happens.

A review of Kenneth Koch's two new books, *Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry* and *Straits*, appears in the "Reviews" section of this Newsletter.

Daniel Kane has had poems published or forthcoming in *The Denver Quarterly*, *Exquisite Corpse*, *Hanging Loose*, and other journals.



TWO POEMS

Prageeta Sharma

WAY OUT HERE

Tree, o marry me, to the daring gravedigger.
I stave off the burnt offering of my demise,
lift me to the craft piece up in the sky
grafted onto the chart from the farmer
who made a tower out of tractor parts
and he loved animals loved them only for their
outside value—their ability to represent completely
the implication of sweet leaves, craw daddies, tarantulas
on paws. O soft paw, off the concrete, can you break
this bread for me? We are on a campground with a knife
but drama says you must not want me in that libidinal
way. No, you are not regular. Plant the fish into the dirt
and bury me while you're at it. I am through testifying
that it's okay to embellish nobility with granite, stone,
or carpenter's hands. I winced, flushed my promise in the
portals, but now having quite the mouthful, drank until
the burden lifted. The farmer carried away my fine meal.



Photo by Greg Fuchs

DEAR _____,

Dear _____,

Replication: n. I cannot dream of losing you so I will answer to your gesture until I have a word. I will utter this word again and again.
I cannot protect you or defend you. To mimic you is to dress you.
Dearest echo, please arrive here without fear but with confidence! But I love you now because together, and more than once, we have challenged the language of carriages. And although I have not thought of anything new, tomorrow, I will countersign the papers.
Today, I love the horse. Your vision has walked loosely onto the ranch. We think together, we copy each other. Reach for a narrow necked bottle bent, identical, and silver.
There I have written you, twice.

Yours,

First, Just Look:

A Note on James Schuyler's Writings on Art

THE FIRST OF JAMES SCHUYLER'S writings on art that I read was a one-paragraph review in *ArtNews* in the early 1960s. I read it not because I was interested in the artist, but because I was interested in James Schuyler, whom I had never met. I was halfway into the paragraph when a certain word rose up and dragged itself wetly across my face, as if I had been transported into the painting, into its very brushwork.

The next few sentences gently distanced me from the picture, and the review ended.

This somewhat mystical experience seemed even more remarkable insofar as it was prompted by a review written in clear, everyday language, with no references to a transcendental wisdom or an elevated aesthetic theory. The transparency of Jimmy's language allowed him to communicate not what he thought about the

artist, not what he knew about the artist, and not what place the artist occupied in the art world, but what the author saw when he stood in front of a painting and just looked. And what he saw was not only what was there, but how it got there. It was as if you, the reader, were able to ride on the artist's brush as it swooshed and veered along the canvas. Jimmy's descriptions of paintings often give the reader the simultaneous pleasures of participating in the painting and of learning how not to get in the way of oneself when looking at art. As for learning to write as well as Jimmy did, *jolé!* that is a different matter.

— Ron Padgett

22 December 1998



Man with Dog (Collage, 1955). by Alex Katz

from James Schuyler: Selected Art Writings

Alfred Leslie

ALFRED LESLIE (de Nagy; to November 9) crowns his show with a canvas (or rather, four assembled in one) 12 feet by 10. With bars and splatters, it is like a novel whose persons are seasons and places: at the lower right there is blue for swimming, there are snow storms and industrial black, an intense night-blue, an impossible green. One sees the sources of Leslie's style—particularly de Kooning—but the particular drama is his own. His pictures remind one again of the kinship between advanced painting and the performing arts: like a pianist who distorts the line without losing it, whose *rubato* is his signature. Leslie's energy exhilarates. In color, he has gone more toward subtle unpleasantness, meatier (so to speak) to the eye. The strokes that bend and pull the paint alternate between broad and fibrous. Leslie has elegance and fierceness: working together and apart, they leave an impression of a train-de-luxe tearing through the mountains at night, a mysterious maroon flash.

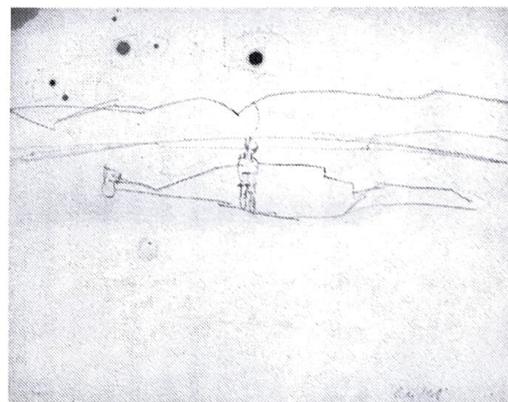
Art News, November 1957

Appearance and Reality

apparir del vero (Leopardi)

A Long Island beach in early September feels a fit place to make notes on this show: Fairfield Porter strides off saying, "I might make a sketch; just of nature."

Here, under a burnt out beach blue sky, into which leaps a wave, the heavy reds in JOHN BUTTONS' *Fire Escape* (reds more substantial, of more body, than the figures on it) are an urban echo to elms, privet, orchards, grasses.



Man with Green Spots (1955), by Alex Katz

Two women patiently wade with crabbing nets: ALEX KATZ might isolate one, sharply set in water (and paint) as a "cut-me-out" on a cereal box. Or the two black spaniels that wade and swim with them—a dog with each, or both with one, or romping off together: FAY LANSNER's Spencerian line would define a psychologically poetic metaphor, expounding a reality that is not a dream but with a Jungian awareness.

Dusty blue grey green, leaves before fall turning in a wind. BOWDEN, DASH, KOEHLER, BURCKHARDT, BUTTON, KATZ, PORTER, know the fogs and water of Maine and/or Sausalito: the new reality that abstract painters create they find already there, in changing light and weather; in seeing. No one of them is (I believe) a hard-shell *plein-air* painter, nor are the influences of their development less diverse than their ages, personalities, the places where they live.

A reality that a master like Joseph Cornell finds, they paint. They aren't against the grain of American painting, they're in it. If I were arbitrarily to choose one proto-typical American painting, a signpost pointing to the future that is theirs now, Edward Hopper's *Rooms by the Sea* would serve: tense walls, calm, fat furniture, a complex of shadows and apertures, the unregimentable arithmetic of the ocean.

James Schuyler, Bridgehampton

"Alfred Leslie" and "Appearance and Reality" published with permission of the estate of James Schuyler. "Man with Dog" and "Man with Green Spots" © Alex Katz, courtesy Marlborough Gallery, New York. *James Schuyler: Selected Art Writings*, edited by Simon Pettet, is due out from Black Sparrow Press this winter.

poetry project calendar

events

FEBRUARY

1 MONDAY

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

3 WEDNESDAY

Leslie Scalapino & Zhang Er

Leslie Scalapino has two books forthcoming from Wesleyan this spring: *New Time* and *The Public World/ Syntactically Impermanence*. Zhang Er's book of poetry, *Winter Garden*, was published by Goats & Compasses last year. Her new book, *Verses on Bird*, is forthcoming next year. She is the co-editor of both *Poetry Currents* and *First Line*, and has translated a number of American poets into Chinese, including John Ashbery, Denise Levertov and Gustaf Sobin.

5 FRIDAY

Pre-Valentine's Day Erotic Reading

With Thaddeus Rutkowski, Anselm Berrigan, Tsaarah Litsky, Laurie Stone and others. Thaddeus Rutkowski's novel, *Roughhouse*, will be published by Kaya. Anselm Berrigan's book of poetry, *Integrity & Dramatic Life*, was published by Edge Books this year. Tsaarah Litsky's stories have appeared in *Penthouse* and *Best American Erotica*. Laurie Stone is the author of *Close to the Bone* and *Laughing in the Dark*. [10:30 p.m.]

6 SATURDAY

Word Virus Reading

A celebration of the publication of *Word Virus: The William S. Burroughs Reader*, with readings by Bruce Andrews, Penny Arcade, Barbara Barg, Bruce Benderson, Victor Bockris, Jim Carroll, Larry Clark, Todd Colby, Ann Douglas, Maggie Estep, Ed Friedman, John Giorno, Brad Gooch, James Grauerholz, Tim Griffin, John S. Hall, Richard Hell, Lenny Kaye, Jackson Mac Low, Gillian McCain, Taylor Mead, Sharon Mesmer, Stewart Meyer, Bob Mould, Eileen Myles, Ron Padgett, Simon Pettet, Wanda Phipps, Bob Rosenthal, Barney Rosset, Richard Seaver, Ira Silverberg, Laurie Stone, Lynne Tillman, Edwin Torres, David Trinidad, Paul Viola, Lewis Warsh, Hal Willner, Emily XYZ, John Yau, Nick Zedd and others. [1 pm]

8 MONDAY

Chim Nwabueze & Marco Villalobos

Chim Nwabueze is the author of *Experiments and Drafts*, recently published by USU Press. His poems have appeared in *Object/Torque*, *Psalm 151*, and *cartoon arts review*. Marco Villalobos has had poems published in *Intense*, *Tortilla*, *Spectrum*, and *The Brooklyn Review*. He currently teaches English at the New School.

10 WEDNESDAY

Claudia Rankine & John Ashbery

Claudia Rankine was born in Jamaica and currently teaches at Barnard. Her book of poems, *The End of the Alphabet*, was just published by Grove Press. John Ashbery is an older, mid-career poet. His favorite flower is the ranunculus. His latest book, just published by Farrar, Straus, Giroux, is *Wakefulness*.

15 MONDAY

Dawn Michelle Baude & Sam Truitt

Dawn Michelle Baude's most recent books are *Selections from the Book of One Hand* (Liancourt Press, 1998) and *Gaffiot Exquis* (Arkadin, 1997). She has a new volume of poetry based on her experiences in Egypt forthcoming from Post-Apollo Press. Sam Truitt's first book-with-a-spine, *Anamorphosis Eisenhower*, was published by Lost Roads Publishers last spring.

17 WEDNESDAY

Camille Roy & Kit Robinson

Poet, playwright, and performer Camille Roy's most recent book is *Swarm*, published by Black Star Series. Her previous

books include *The Rosy Medallions* (Kelsey St. Press) and *Cold Heaven* (O Books). Kit Robinson has just published *Democracy Boulevard* (Roof Books). His book, *Cloud Eight* (collaborations with Alan Bernheimer, 1971-1998) is forthcoming from Sound & Language. His other books include *Balance Sheet* and *Ice Cubes*, *The Champagne of Concrete*, and a translation of Russian poet Ilya Kutik, *Ode on Visiting the Belosaraik Spit on the Sea of Azov*.

19 FRIDAY

Shamanic Chants/Epic Songs

Traditional Buryat songs, chants, and original poetry by Sayan and Erzhena Zhambolov premiere artists from the Buryat National Theatre in Siberia; Ukrainian dumas by singer and bandurist Julian Kytasty; American folksongs by Stephan Smith, and more. [10:30 pm]

22 MONDAY

Yedda Morrison & Brian Lucas

Yedda Morrison lives in San Francisco, where she edits *tripwire*, a journal of poetics. Her chapbook, *The Marriage of the Well-Built Head*, was published by Double Lucy Books. Brian Lucas is the author of *The Trustees in Spite of Themselves* (Neko Buildings, 1998) and the editor of *Angle/Angle Press*. He is presently at work on a dictionary for the Society of Synchronists and a new manuscript, *Light House*.

24 WEDNESDAY

Diane Williams & Mac Wellman

Diane Williams's books of short fiction include *this is about the body, the mind, the soul, the world, time and fate*, and *some sexual success stories in which God might choose to appear*. More recent books are *The Stupefaction* from Knopf and *Excitability*, just out from Dalkey. She is the founder of *Noon*, a literary annual which will debut in the year 2000. Mac Wellman's plays have won four OBIEs, and he was the recipient of a Lila Wallace-Reader's Digest Writers' Award. He recently coedited, with Douglas Messerli, *From the Other Side of the Century II: New American Drama 1960-1995*. His most recent book, the novel *Annie Salem*, was published in 1996 by Sun & Moon.

MARCH

1 MONDAY

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

3 WEDNESDAY

Joanne Kyger & Gerrit Lansing

Joanne Kyger's most recent book is *Pazcuaro*. Her other books include *Just Space* and *All of This Everyday*. She studied with Hugh Kenner and now lives on the coast of California. Gerrit Lansing, who studied arcana with Count Walewski, is the author of *Heavenly Tree/Soluble Forest* (Talisman). Born in Albany, he now lives in Gloucester.

5 FRIDAY

Poetry & Music: Poets Who Rock and More

Poetry at home in a variety of musical genres from rock to pop to vocal performance art, featuring the poetry and rock duo Alice B. Talkless & Amy Mayhem; Ed Friedman, author of *Mao & Matisse*; Knitting Factory Works recording artist Rebecca Moore; singer-songwriter David Greenberg of the rock band Pen Pal; and composer, vocalist and performance artist Lisa Karrer, whose latest CD with her partner David Simons is *The Birth of George*. [10:30 pm]

8 MONDAY

Bill Berkson

Poet and art critic Bill Berkson is the author of 10 books and pamphlets of poetry, including *Saturday Night: Poems 1960-61*, *Enigma Variations*, and, most

recently, *Lush Life*. From 1971-78, he was the editor and publisher of *Big Sky* magazine and books, and is currently a corresponding editor for *Art in America*. He is now the director of Letters & Science at the San Francisco Art Institute.

10 WEDNESDAY

Sherman Alexie & U Sam Oeur

Sherman Alexie's 11 books include *The Business of Fancydancing*, *Reservation Blues*, and *Indian Killer*. He co-wrote the screenplay for *Smoke Signals* which was based on his collection of stories, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*. A survivor of the Khmer Rouge's concentration camps, Cambodian poet U Sam Oeur, author of *Sacred Vows*, survived by feigning illiteracy. Arun Gandhi calls *Sacred Vows*, published last year by Coffee House Press, "a book all peace makers must read." Ken McCullough, the author of *Travelling Light*, will read English translations of U Sam Oeur's poems.

15 MONDAY

Gena Mason & Anthony Salerno

Gena Mason is a singer, musician and songwriter, and is currently working on her first book. She has performed at the Zinc Bar and Don Hill's. Born in Chicago, she currently lives in Manhattan. Anthony Salerno's poems can be found in *Talisman* and *Kinesis*, as well as on the Poetry Project web site. He is the author of *Invisible Still Life*, published by Time Release Press, and is currently working on a thesis on Robert Duncan.

17 WEDNESDAY

Barrett Watten & Ilya Kutik

Barrett Watten is the author of, most recently, *Bad History* and the co-editor of *Poetics Journal* with Lyn Hejinian. His collection, *Frame: 1971-1990*, which brings together seven earlier collections, came out from Sun & Moon Press in 1997. He currently teaches at Wayne State University in Detroit. Born in Lvov, West Ukraine, Ilya Kutik is one of the founders of the poetic movement of Metarealism. He is also the author of *Ode*, *The Pentathlon of Senses*, and other books of poetry and criticism.

19 FRIDAY

Harold Goldberg & Nick Tosches

Harold Goldberg is a journalist and fiction writer whose work has appeared in *The New York Times*, *Vanity Fair*, *Rolling Stone*, and other magazines. He also recently produced the spoken word CD *Blue Eyes and Exit Wounds*, featuring the work of Hubert Selby Jr. and Nick Tosches. Nick Tosches has worked as a paste-up artist for the *Loveable Underwear Company* and as a snake-hunter in Miami. He is also the author of *Hellfire* (a biography of Jerry Lee Lewis), *Unsung Heroes of Rock 'n' Roll*, *Dino*, *Cut Numbers*, and *Trinities*.

22 MONDAY

Hoang Nguyen & Dale Smith

Hoang Nguyen lives in Austin, Texas, where she teaches creative writing at an arts and cultural center. Her book, *Dark*, was published this year by Mike & Dale's Press. Her second book, *Hood*, is forthcoming from Buck Down Books. Nguyen and Dale Smith edit the literary magazine *Skanky Possum*. Smith also co-edited with Michael Price *Mike & Dale's Younger Poets*. *Texas Crude*, his most recent collection of poems, was published earlier this year by Blue Press.

24 WEDNESDAY

Jocelyn Saldenberg & Ann Lauterbach

Jocelyn Saldenberg is the author of the just-published *Mortal City* from Parentheses Writing Series. She is also the editor and co-founder of *KRUPSKAYA*, a collective press dedicated to publishing experimental poetry and prose. She works as a lecturer in English at San Francisco State University. Ann Lauterbach has been writing an ongoing column on poetics and ethics for the *American Poetry Review* called "The Night Sky." She is the author of, most recently, *On a Stair*, and is the recipient of a MacArthur Fellowship.

26 FRIDAY

Inappropriate Behavior: Legs McNeil & Gillian McCain

Legs McNeil, the co-founder of *Punk* magazine, will read from his new book, *Inappropriate Behavior: The Uncensored Oral History of the Adult Film Industry* with Gillian McCain, the co-author with McNeil of *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. Gillian McCain is a former Program Coordinator for the Poetry Project, and author of *Tilt*, published by Hard Press.

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book reviews

KENWARD ELSMLIE

Routine Disruptions: Selected Poems & Lyrics 1960-98
Coffee House Press (Minneapolis, MN), 1998, 256 pages, \$15.95.

Contemplating writing this review of *Routine Disruptions: Selected Poems & Lyrics* by Kenward Elmslie—an excellent collection—I've been unable to dislodge a picture from my mind. It is of Elmslie during a reading several years ago, with a large "hat" on, made by an artist, that used as its primary image a large brassiere. A man reading poetry with a brassiere on his head! This is an icon, for me, of Elmslie's work, its wild funniness, theatricality, brazenness, its love of art and objects. Cleanly



designed strange or beautiful objects, as in poems as poems, words as objects, but... this is not a doctrine, and the face below the bra-hat, Kenward Elmslie's pleased bemused own, never disappears. *Disruptions*, as the title says, things never being the way they're supposed to be, stories never turning out the way they're supposed to. Upset expectations. Gender upsets, but isn't the idea of "gender" rather mild compared to the wearing of this hat? It isn't gender, it's the gratuity of everything we participate in, as invented, e.g., the wearing of hats; it's also the gratuity of life's real givens, its natural forms—heads and breasts are weird. Elmslie has never done what he was supposed to, and after the nearly forty years this book represents, his poetry can be seen to be unique. You do keep reading the poems, not because they're part of an ongoing discussion as to What Poetry Should Be Right Now, but because they continue to be unpredictable and unlike (other poetry) and life-like (weird, patterned, tender).

Much of Elmslie's work has been in the form of librettos and lyrics, words for songs. Thus two things might be mentioned: a sense of a poem as not so much a drama as a small theater, with a stage to be enlivened, and a sound/metric influenced by popular

song (as well as by something Beat-poetry-like, in that use of the articleless pronounless word pileup characteristic of people born in the '20s.)

When I say an Elmslie poem may be theatrical I mean that people, objects, and words themselves often seem to be onstage or perhaps on a psychic stage, lit in any of the varieties of stage lightings, not just spotlight. The poet makes a speech, or the poet is in a setting, or the poet himself isn't the poem this time; but there is a distance involved, which isn't impersonal but full of regard—looking—and the desire to make something happen. What happens emerges from the singular imagination of Elmslie, or out of words themselves coming alive and making things happen:

and I've been traveling ever since,
so let's go find an open glade
like the ones in sporting prints,
(betrayed, delayed, afraid)

where we'll lie among the air-plants
in a perfect amphitheater in a soft pink afterglow.
How those handsome birds can prance,
ah...unattainable tableau.

Let's scratch the ground clean,
remove all stones and trash,
I mean open dance halls in the forest, I mean
where the earth's packed smooth and hard. Crash.

It's the Tale of the Creation. The whip cracks.

—"Feathered Dancers"

Ché is so trusting re "Truth and Consequences." Too Yanquified. He has dreams of pressing flesh with Nixon in native village. They go in one, light toke, just sit there. Pow! Nixon is converted! He brings the brass, light toke. They're converted! Big Ten Day Speech to the U.S.A. Must stop "exploiting" etc. Impeached, natch. Chaos! Village? Corpse smoke rises from distant chimney. Bumblebees crawling around the empty Bumblebee tuna can.

—"Tropicalism"

Kinky gentry into ransom crud used up.
Holding our own in flustery weather used up.
Many restful oases here in Hat City,
same old snappy salutes at the roadblocks
where om-like hum of shoot-out traffic
of scant interest to us fine-eared hold-outs,
honed to love outcries in the painted desert,
shrieks from humanoid wind tunnels.

—"Communications Equipment"

Notice how the references to Ché and Nixon have

not dated; persons and things in such a "light" are not in time. As for the song-like metric, I can hear it throughout the book. Further I find it hard to distinguish "songs" from "poems," since Elmslie has achieved the Campionesque feat of writing songs which are also exactly poems on the page; they often have fancy, page-oriented layouts. "Bio" is classified as a "poem song" in the "Poem Songs" section:

Never saw "action" ransacked my dance act
Came up with a nance act

Trek aids
Sped up the decades

Loved ones
Re-re-re-re-re-re-re-reruns

On the page it looks a bit like concrete poetry. "Girl Machine," which was also set to music, looks a lot like concrete poetry. A more "ordinary" song like "Brazil" (with the refrain "No extradition! Nya Nya Nya Nya Nya...") which is included in a section entitled "Song Lyrics I," displays the repetitions that song ordinarily includes and which permeate Elmslie's works called "poems." A work called "Kitchen," which is ostensibly a prose poem and which is composed of paragraphs designed to accompany black-and-white artwork by Joe Brainard, also sounds like an Elmslie song:

The faucetry demo has 4 4 X 4s. Subtexts. Food Love. It's a Moviola. Sex Love. Paired up like wed. Money Love. Moviola. ?eat? TV gameshow veer, Vanna batwings on rollerskates, humps the pristine blanks. Lingo frottage. Th, tirechain, on wintry country lane, her first diphthong. Th. Th. Th. Death Love, you big lummoX! Th. Th. Death Love Moviola 4 X 4.

Experience becomes songlike, also patterned, both at once, aural and visual; though one of Elmslie's poem titles, "Visual Radios," also suggests the overall effect of his works. Something you hear and see but finally you hear more than see, because that's what poetry's like, it occurs between words where their sounds meet. A songwriter usually works on the premise that the "music" takes care of the between-words part; a poet can't. Elmslie is a poet in both forms, poetry and lyrics.

As for the Elmslie narrative, here is the plot summary of a poem called "Japanese City." It is Melville's centennial so there is an appropriate celebration in that priests (!) release whale balloons, there are whale floats etc. (Where are we?) "I" is in a hotel room and phones room service for ice water. There are cattle in the streets. (Cattle?) A Mexican seamstress keeps bringing I's clothes to him because he sweats a lot. (Is he in Mexico?) She

tells him about some green caves which are cool. Description of the "other travelers'" hairs around the washbasin, what these hairs smell like. (Hairs? Hairs' smells?) Suddenly Jim the Salesman and his friends are massaging I's feet. Jim plays a card game and there is reference to (is it the card game?) red even numbers and green even numbers (no odd numbers) and their associations (!). Talk. About fish hatcheries and a disease one contracts from working in them called "the gills" (!). Ice water. Speculations about the evening. More Melville celebration. Jim and his friends leave. What does this tropical story have to do with the title, which refers to a very large construction by Joe Brainard, called "Japanese City," that fell apart after approximately two years? I'm not sure. Elmslie never spells out his connections; they aren't really bizarre but are unexpected because of lack of conventional transition: "but mine, how perverse! Form a hoop, you there. Mine,/mine smell like old apples in a drawer. Jim the Salesman/and his cohorts are massaging my feet: a real treadmill example." The "mine" refers to the hairs around the washbasin, and it's quite possible that the earlier word "washbasin" has triggered the words "Jim the Salesman" and that's how Jim gets to be there, and so suddenly, for that's the first mention of him, midline as if we must have expected it. In an Elmslie fiction I can never figure out how much to "believe," I mean was Elmslie once, at least, in a room in, say, Mexico? I don't know. I like not knowing. Why? I don't know. And not knowing feels more profound than knowing.

Behind all this invention the personal Kenward looms and he sometimes shows himself quite nakedly. Works that relate to Joe Brainard, Elmslie's long-time lover, partner, collaborator until Brainard's death in 1994, are especially revelatory. Elmslie's "One Hundred I Remembers," inspired by Brainard's book-length work, is extraordinary even though he didn't invent the form (any good form can be reused, that's what it's for). "I Remember my father, in the middle of the night, waking me up to tell me my mother had died. The last thing she told him, so he said, was Be Kind. For a long time this stuck in my mind, as if it were an admonition of gigantic importance that applied to me too." "I Remember shitting, and very tiny gold balls began racing around the blue linoleum bathroom floor. Then suddenly they stopped and vanished. I never saw them again, much to my relief, for there was no 'rational explanation' for them." "Bare Bones," an account of Elmslie's life with Brainard, is what the title implies, a plain honest narrative, but also it implies the physical starkness of death from AIDS, described with a tact equal to Brainard's own. "Bare Bones" is preceded here by the violent "Champ

Dust," quite a contrast. They are the two longest pieces in the last section, "Poems 1991-98" and make it a very powerful section. Such power implies future promise, even with sorrow around and even after so many years. The last poem in the book is called "Happy Re>Returns" and ends in a deeply satisfying insouciance: "Me, um, no deadbeat despite laughing stock enjambments./I did pay for my own sieve hoax, traumatized awful, by La Boo./Diaphanous Frenchie swamp goo-goo Gods curl me up fatal./Die alone. Orphan fate, whomped. I meant: curl me up fetal./How to downsize as co-waifs. Swing and sway and we'll do OK,/Light years apart. Inches away—the schtick of eons,/Afflatus deconstructed. Post-moderns, besnouted, gaze at us./Rest in peace, shitheads. Springtime births great bone decor."

—Alice Notley

Alice Notley's most recent book is *Mysteries of Small Houses*, from Penguin. She co-edits, with Douglas Oliver, the Paris-based magazine *Gare du Nord*.



photo by George Evans

WANDA COLEMAN

Bath Water Wine

Black Sparrow Press (Santa Rosa, CA), 1998, 288 pages, \$15.00.

Who are the Black avant-garde, the insurgents whose personal visions are submerged in and subversive of a historicized notion of blackness, of an essentialist mass identity? There exists a body of work by African American writers produced from a critical consciousness, from a

multiplicitious gaze that is distinctively African American and yet, by its subjectivity, challenges the notion of what is permissible to speak. Wanda Coleman certainly is one of those insurgents. Coleman is a prolific writer who has produced an amazing body of work (10 books of poetry and fiction) between roughly 1979 and now. Coleman's writing (like that of the playwright Adrienne Kennedy or the poets Harryette Mullen and Michele T. Clinton) opens a viable third space of possibility, a space (or many spaces) which transcends the traditionally celebratory impulse within much of African American writing, and the anti-form declamatory, which is too often devoid of self-critical, ironic truth-telling. So the African American insurgent poet is placed, where? This is only one of many critical questions Coleman raises in her most recent work, *Bath Water Wine*:

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i have broken and entered poetry's
house. where have they
hidden the valuables? there is no safe. the refrigerator
is empty and something covered in green-gray fuzz
stings my nose...

—"Intruder"

Coleman's poetry is a comfortable angry. She isn't searching for acceptance and she isn't afraid to eloquently rage about her own invisibility. Some of the poems in *Bath Water Wine* are seeped in the dialect(s) and sensibilities of blackness, yet the work is fiercely anti-homogenous, existing within a language-/image-making that is distinctly the voice of this particular poet, who writes out of the mythomemories of place, which for Coleman specifically is Los Angeles—Watts, West Hollywood, Santa Monica—all of those nebulous yet firmly entrenched demarcations of L.A.:

playing the central avenue tour guide, i say,
"dis here corner was where dat ol' chocolate chicken hawk
used to swoop for guinea hens," as if i knew
a goddamned thang. then I describe the counter across
the street where The Black Assassins used to hang
as if I knew it intimately, having eaten at
Mama Washington's only twice or thrice, having been
by her house on a couple of scoots....

—"Dream 1225"

Much of *Bath Water Wine* is divine madness, pulsing with a rawness that still manages to pay attention to detail. It is within the cadence and nuances of detail that the poet's power lie:

now once billie holiday starts jonesing around
in your blood, and you're turning
the colors of her moods
there's nuthin' you can do about the itch in your ears
and you must forget about those gold sequins that keep
blitzing the inner screen of your eyeballs....

—"what to do about billie holiday: the answer"

In *Bath Water Wine* the poet is no less angry or personal than in earlier work, but there is a certain reflectiveness that runs through these poems, like a thunderous gentle weeping. A long poem for the poet's father works in free verse and epistolary fragments as an homage:

father, i stretch these hands to reach you. i clean your granite
marker with my tears. it cost me two plane flights and a wound to
the ego. i don't have the cash for flowers this time...
so today i bring memories of your walk
and two minutes of militant silence.

—"father, stretching his arms to thee"

The poems pose a critical investigation of the communal self, of Black identity, offering a fresh reading with a surreal tongue:

i am the one you must become to free me from
the tyranny of oatmeal. my memory is a blend of
confusions. therefore, if we must talk it under

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—"frick fro"

Coleman is willing to transcend boundaries, to go past the surface of language into a realm of complex imagery and agency, as in "CLOWN MEDITATION": "i am unsure. i go about the endless dream/of grave faces. who are we? what neighborhood/is this? why am i lost here? is this the/intersection of last night's dream and this/morning's reality? sister, where are we?/can there be space without boundaries?"

—Akilah Oliver

Akilah Oliver is on faculty at the Naropa Institute and is the author of the forthcoming book of poems, *the she said dialogues*.**GARRETT KALLEBERG****Limbic Odes**Heart Hammer (106 Ridge Street 2D, New York, NY 10002), 1997, 32 pages, \$5.00. Or online at the Small Press Collective Website at SUNY Buffalo: <http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc> (click on "SPC" link).

In Garrett Kalleberg's *Limbic Odes*, what constitutes "the poem" remains an open question. These poems challenge us to negotiate where we are with respect to them and where they are with respect to us. They enter a placeless or virtual place, a house being drawn upon a blank slate, to remind us of daily ambiguities within our own lives—how our tumultuous relationship with language is essentially a struggle to locate ourselves in the world: "You and the other/you divide until/you become them and they/eat their way through the gall/to reach the outer world, and their former/presence is then revealed/by exit holes riddled/and riddled through-out."

As Kalleberg plays with essential dichotomies that frame our reality, our mind-body relationship, our view of sickness and health, life and death, he distills these either/ors for us as constructs, as necessary narratives or tragicomic masques. Meanwhile, behind these masques we sense the ghostly presence of the unsaid, what language cannot contain, the hidden messiness of experience. It is this failure of language to contain which constitutes the poem's original sin. But "the poem" will not go gentle into that good night—it persists despite its own futility, reveling in candid moments, jokes, the purrrrr/of the line break and, most of all, the beauty of process. "Cellular regeneration lost/'spleen-lung-sorry-heart,' reading clockwise, the alarm/is set, are you ready?"

Limbic is an adjective denoting edge or border. It bears kinship to Limbo (as in Dante, that lesser Hell of pre-Christian

philosophers and poets) and contains a medical/scientific nuance through its relationship to "limb" and to the limbic lobes of the brain. The ode's stateliness seems a fitting match for such late-Empire or pre-millennium musings. Kalleberg seems extremely comfortable with the ode's timeless mask of formality—its starched white shirt—and understands how to exploit the satirical tradition housed in that stateliness. By titling these poems *Limbic Odes*, he highlights their edgy diplomacy, their down-to-earth approachability despite the atmosphere of serious metaphysical inquiry.

Limbic Odes constantly tests our expectations of what a poem is and should look and sound like as it travels. As poems erupt and subside into new shapes and forms, we encounter fresh suggestions constructed from the found materials of poetry past and present: abstractions, more traditional "I" narratives and fragmented experimental mind fields—a poetic language reduced to a kind of programming code. Each model of language houses its own world of associated narratives and contradictions. With computer programming, it is the violence of encountering the "ugliness" of code as aesthetic object. With the blocks of straightforward first-person narrative, it seems the too-easy catharsis we garner from this rest-area of the poem. In the end, the poems seem less any one of these portals than the artful noise of possibilities.

Each one of the odes sets a new stage, makes a fresh start, frames the story (in the loosest sense) of the poem in a new way, but then resolves like a wacky jazz chord into something else entirely. Yet, the odes are very much interconnected. We sense voices leaking from one poem to the next, whether they represent a single narrator or several.

But what makes the poem such an enjoyable read is the genuine sense of play and subtle humor at the heart of its inquiry, the license that the poem gives itself to explore. It entitles itself to meander from the path before it and get lost, something like the alternating bewilderment, false starts, boredom and frustration that we see in Beckett's *Godot*.

As *Limbic Odes* attempts to reveal the gap between "real" and "written," it poses the parallel question of what language, if anything, can be imagined to do. Should language conduct metaphysical investigations of the spirit, or instead, reveal metaphysical investigation and all else as simply another language game? In the end, whether it forms building blocks in a system of meaning or the building blocks of code for our electronic tower of Babel, our continued dialogue with language seems not unlike that between Yeat's "Self" and "Soul." Here pushed almost to primitive utterance: "I whose/hand, not/keep/not/cry/not/late/not/yet."

Another central metaphor is that of the poetic body. Throughout the *Odes*, poetic frustrations are tied to such concerns as chronic illness, surgery or health. As the poem develops, we sense an increasing frustration in the speaker(s) with the limits of poetry and language, with the frailty of the human body, its constraints. Eventually the poem exclaims, with a mixture of disgust and despair "Take this body away!//Remove the bastard, tear off his arms and legs."

But Kalleberg complicates this metaphor of the body poetic, by drawing attention to what it shares with technological and scientific dialects. In "Advance Proxy and Reverse Proxy" the infiltration of these voices seems akin to voices entering the mind of a schizophrenic; or else they represent the onslaught of electronic media, an onslaught threatening all nostalgia for Wordsworth's ideal of recollection in tranquillity.

A fitting meeting ground for these dialects is the supposedly benevolent terror of surgery—here imagined as a kind of linguistic battle field, where the fear of dismemberment parallels grammatical distortion.

In "Melancholy Test Machine" we may find quiet, but in a cold steely place, a place where emotions seem less the product of any series of events than of a complex computer program. Is the poet programming his own mind to accept his unfettered emotions and filter them through the processor of language? As the machine, the poem, for a fleeting instant, teases us into thinking it a "real world" object, an object with a direct relationship to the reader. What is this machine? Instead of the Ancient Mariner's ghost ship, there is a ghost computer. Underneath every keystroke is the ghost of

another action—the submerged forces of emotions and desires bubbling beneath our workaday world.

Kalleberg ties the deterioration of language in the poem with a sense of deepening depression. Yet something vital connects the fractured pieces of the puzzle. Kalleberg is successful at maintaining a compelling continuity to it all, in imbuing his poetic plasma with life. Even when these odes elude category, they are living breathing organisms; even through the most brittle and tortured of vocabularies, there is an essential yearning to express. Worlds and vocabularies intersect to defy category and yet still coalesce to maintain the semblance of narrative.

In the end, these passages move us because they summon up the ghost of tradition and yet elude that tradition. The work as a whole thrives because it is fiercely independent—able to create its own rules of engagement with poetic history, as well as with the poetic present. Throughout the poem, we are reminded that defining the meaning of one's life at any given moment means doing so within a temporal, changing body. Equally difficult is the task of making one's poetic mark within a language that is never stagnant, but always shifting, finding new uses, constantly remaking its relationship to individuals and to the world in which those individuals live. It is in this context that the process of both personal and poetic growth can be looked back upon, as if through a prism, years refracted back gothically into an instant.

—Dan Machlin

Dan Machlin is the author of *IN REM* and has poems recently in *Talisman*, *Murmur*, and forthcoming in *Explosive* and on the Poetry Project Website.

CHIM NWABUEZE

Experiments & Drafts

USU Press (67A rue Gagnon Hull, Quebec J8X1Y3), 1998, 112 pages, \$10.00.

This extended poem or series of poems examines and retrieves language for all of its possibilities, origins, and appearances. Early on, after tearing "hands from the sea of light/then my ships/the shards/the scream that rose concentric/from the depth..." the poem retrieves a flower "asleep in the water." Nwabueze sustains his own vernacular examining a range of complexities embedded in the poem's utterance and intention. He states in his prologue that these poems were a first attempt at reorienting the voice and "thus in the language of a voice trying to root itself more and more in its source..." Nwabueze says, "...Anyone...knows language is an act, the act of creating new correspondence for life..."

One imagines the poems to be a correspondence—written to a beloved or to a transforming or “new” self. As he puts it, “Like a key you’ve taught your mind to turn.” Nwabueze’s poems address the possibility of the mind to “turn” and to change shape. Nwabueze’s language is bittersweet and sharp, seeming to follow and resist the unexamined compliance between one’s habitat, mind, and body. And in his delicate lines, he articulates a type of mindful removal from a confusing landscape to a lucid and meticulous account of memory’s desires. It is in this epistolary of sorts, his draft of offerings and experiments, that he asks, “Why would I draw from the stillness of hours?” And yet, he does draw from the stillness—and captures its exquisite formations.

But there’s also a notion of both separating oneself from a landscape and becoming wounded by its absence. “In the wound of sea,” Nwabueze wrestles with the inevitable journey, “[i]n search of clairvoyant negation.” This is the activity of the voice—and is how Nwabueze is able to cast away the materialism imbued in an organic condition of the outside. He dresses desire attributed to the body and undresses the outer landscape with another “turn”: “the sky above the city/is an ornament/of that other sky/carried by the body.” In these “burning eternal spaces,” Nwabueze forges on with new materials—reorienting the poem’s climate to an altogether weathered and dreamt voice.

—Prageeta Sharma

Prageeta Sharma lives in Brooklyn. Her book *Bliss to Fill* is forthcoming from subpress this Spring.

BERNADETTE MAYER

Two Haloed Mourners

Granary Books (New York, NY), 1998, 42 pages, \$12.00.

I’m trying to remember the early 1980s. It’s important because I’ve just read *Two Haloed Mourners*, which was written then but has just been published for the first time in a special limited edition from Granary Books. The book starts out dense, vagrant, proceeding on a combination of automatic writing and methodical structural repetitions. It picks up speed, changes gears from poetry to prose and back again, tries out a sestina where both beginning and ending words recur. Then something explodes midway through the book, as though all this formal experimentation was the rumbling and smoldering of Mt. Saint Helens erupting over the circumstances of Bernadette Mayer’s move back to the Lower East Side from New Hampshire, where what was menace in the air of rural America is met head-on in the

new New York of Reagan and Wall Street. *Two Haloed Mourners* is a memoir of fear and loathing as the seventies somersault into the eighties. It’s also about *not shutting down*, as a person, in the midst of that.

Is it dubious to speak of loathing in the poetry of Bernadette Mayer, whose works coax and badger love so famously? As they say in acting class, every strong emotion is present in its opposite. Even O’Hara felt “Hatred”:

I have a terrible age and I part
my name at the seams of the beast
in a country of robbers who prepare meals
for a velvet church green with stammerers

“I would give/up America,” he declared. And when in “Memorial Verboten Sprinkles,” the fifth poem in *Two Haloed Mourners*, we are given an America in which, on Memorial Day and under the threat of Mt. Saint Helens, an overweight family drives up to the ice cream stand “greedy to consume giant bomb-shaped cones of viscous dairy-style ice cream white with chocolate sprinkles dipped in volcanic ash,” who even buy “back-up cones,” a bolt of loathing galvanizes the circumnavigating loops of Mayer’s sentences, sentences which mimic the aimless driving this family is doing on Memorial Day, cranky kids and all, “using up gasoline which is made out of something.” Faking ignorance, American-style, of the miraculous gasoline that allows us to drive with impunity turns the loathing back on Mayer herself, a catharsis of the sort described in her exquisite “poetics statement,” *The Obfuscated Poem* (in *Postmodern American Poetry*, edited by Paul Hoover): “The obfuscated poem...is an experiment conducted by a person (who may have something to hide). There’s something that isn’t learned or even known yet.” Here is that moment when the experiment yields what was hidden.

There are no barriers to the emotional states that follow. After the claustrophobia of a frustrated American family trapped in a car trapped in a holiday, a day off that is no day off at all, the twilight apotheosis of this “Memorial Day” is a stream of horrible images: “the full moon’s nearly cooked,” “I wept while I fixed the chicken,” “besides being massacred the American Indians massacred each other too,” “I collapsed after dinner & awoke with a dream of holocausts, not the thing but the word, what can I make of this distinction?” America’s collective memories rain down on Mayer as she prepares to feed her family. All live under a cloud of fear as smothering as the cloud of real ash from the volcanic eruption, overtly described in the concrete poem “Two Haloed Mourners.” It is shaped into a triangle and hollowed out (wiping out text) to proclaim “two haloed mourners” in its absent circle.

Unquestionably a disturbing caligramme, it is restored to its original context after looking out of place in *Proper Name and Other Stories*.

The sense of discombobulation in the American landscape is attempted in a lighter vein in "Farmers Exchange." Parodying laconic New England-speak, Mayer drops her g's and long sentences and tells a mundane anecdote:

I went in for some soil. The guy looked at me I had the baby too, and he said after a long while, "pottin seri?" They had nice petunias out front. I said yes pottin soil. I need a lot of it. He said how much. I said I don't know how much, what sizes are the bags.

Another couple drives up, but unlike the poet, they have "what I would call a real conversation with the other guy, not like the one I'd had." Like a New England change of weather, forlornness blows up

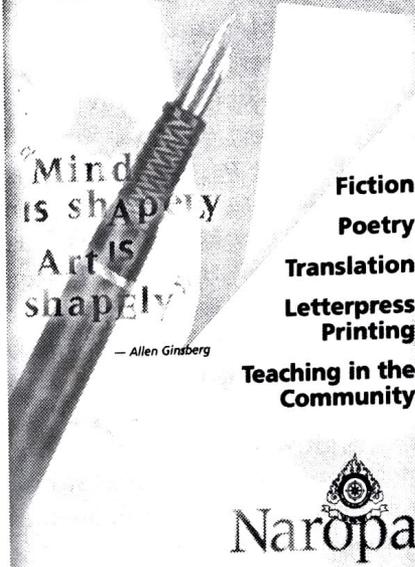
from the south. The fear that nothing will grow because volcanic ash in the sky will cause environmental havoc returns Mayer to her sentences. Another young mother walks down the street with her kids acting up and there's again the heart-pounding claustrophobia, families and small towns with pharmacists and Little League and Love Canal and car accidents.

The move from country to city powers the distracted, digressive anxiety of "Lazuli Bunting," the tour de force of the book: "he said the feeling/On the streets has changed hard bad and there was no apartment/New generation 80s grenades love."

"Lazuli Bunting" is frenzied with information. Everybody's name gets mentioned, gossip gets repeated, inventories are taken, money is exchanged. At the exhausted end "In the ransacked haloed broker poem/ We're willing to pay anything." The alterna-

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tive is homelessness. The homelessness in "Memorial Verboten Sprinkles" was spiritual; in "Lazuli Bunting," the threat is real as the family travels across Long Island to a friend's home, then back, in the middle of apartment hunting. Meanwhile, "the volcano erupted again."

Sometimes Mayer makes the connection between the latent flame in the volcano and the poem waiting to explode. A kind of counter-magic to this building pressure is invoked in the figures of the book's title, two haloed mourners. At first the image or symbol of two haloed mourners, or sometimes just haloed mourners, is abstract and seems like a device by which to keep writing; later they seem to represent her and her husband, and then we discover that they come from an illustration on a postcard a friend sent her (reproduced for us on the cover): a medieval icon of two men with bowed heads, clasped hands, downcast eyes, and of course haloes, painted by Aretino Spinello. They are the guardian angels of the chaos wrestled in these pages: each poem mentions them, not abstractly after all, but like a refrain in a psalm. Although Mayer rails against their acquiescent mourning, they alone oppose the volcano; she needs their grace as much as she needs the anticipatory thrill of the disaster.

Mayer refers to Concord, New Hampshire as Conquered (pop. 30,400 in 1980). In "I Have One

More of This," she says she'll never write a poem again, it's too much trouble. And it occurs to me just what a monumental undertaking it was to document this journey. Entropy has been overcome; but heroic gestures against shutting down exact the usual pound of flesh.

The sense of having to conquer something explains why this is not an easy book. I myself only remember that time period in snatches: Mt. Saint Helens on the cover of *Newsweek*, the assassination attempts and shellshock from various crises. Though I can only retrieve the barest outlines of these stories, I can strongly recall the atmosphere of unease. Against this backdrop, *Two Haloed Mourners* sheds its obscurity. It is a religious text, an ember in a social and cultural ashheap. Its difficulty is that difficulty.

—Ange Mlinko

Ange Mlinko is the author of *Matinées*, forthcoming from Zoland Books in the Spring.

BERNADETTE MAYER

Another Smashed Pinecone

United Artists Books (Brooklyn, NY), 1998, 83 pages, \$10.00.

Another Smashed Pinecone is Bernadette Mayer's 16th poetry book in 30 years. The title poem resembles a kind of game played in a car in which observations and details inside and outside the car

are listed as the trip proceeds, all the while shouting out at the spotting of "another smashed pinecone." The poems collected here, written mostly in the mid-70s through mid-80s, imitate that game, forming a sequence that alternates locations between New York City and the Berkshires, "now that poems've got everything in them." And everything turns out to be quite a lot, particularly under the scrutiny of this poet's eyes: physiology (menstruation), economics (or, the relationships between people—including comparative fruit prices, the ugly head of gentrification, and the threat of utilities being cut off by the gas company), political activism (tenant organizing), literature and art ("we were watching *Stoszek/So German* a film, the notebook fell/With a Teutonic thud under the seat").

Mayer's poems are exciting not only for their robust content, too frequently lacking in much of today's poetry, but because the energy of the poems transcends the mere presence of interesting thematics. It's one thing to bitch about the state of things in a poem and quite another to do so while affirming one's love for things (four times each) all in the same poem ("What's Meant for Pleasure"). It is yet another thing to do all of this and also retain an energy throughout each poem that can cause an adrenaline riot in the reader while the poems push far past mere novel communication.

There is a genuine, startling fearlessness in Mayer's poetry, a courage and hope that are astounding because courage and hope are obvious and tried elements of art and only a great amount of sincerity is needed to pull them off successfully. Mayer is never cautious about letting emotion run too high, be it affection ("it's raining good for the corn/and pitter patter good for

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children/and good for the cloud's to get it
 ("g"), vitriol seasoned with righteousness ("all
 struggle/for their incomes/to pay the landlords/
 else suck their cocks/once again/for the rent"),
 casm ("Hold up the bloody sponge!/For all to
 !"), love, always much love ("On this inaugura-
 n day of the most hateful/Ideals I like to think
 stalgically of fruits/And vegetables because the
 ght of them gives/ Pleasure"), or hope ("we feel
 e've gotta do this"). These things seem at times so
 obvious in poetry; so obvious that they are omitted
 on a regular basis.

"The Men from Modernistic" is one of the most
 striking poems here. A narrative, flat as a carpet, it
 unrolls down the corridor of injustice like the
 angry, hyperbolic (but accurate) testimony of an
 indignant and wronged person. This poem is impas-
 sioned and straightforward, telling the story of a
 tenant who is struggling with her landlord and
 struggling with her neighbors to join her in the
 fight. "Most preferred to join/the tenants organiza-
 tion/& pay fifty dollars each/for a lawyer/to stop the
 red herring plan/& then at the meetings/they'd be
 afraid to criticize the super/who's the landlord's
 pimp/because they think of the landlord as a father/
 or the president or something/& don't wanna make
 him mad/lest he should be mad at them." Emotions
 border on despair but never completely surrender
 to it. The poem may momentarily prostrate itself to
 wonderful ranting but rebounds back, always, to its
 delightful first intention: evocative thought and
 emotion, communicating an experience. It reminds
 me of the fiery prose of Elizabeth Gurley Flynn, or
 Mary E. Marcy, or even Emma Goldman, three rad-
 icals poetry would do well to discover.

Mayer's mastery of language—its evocative power
 and freshness—is evident in nearly every line. You
 never know what's coming around the next corner.
 Everything is folded into the poem. Mayer creates a
 plausible cohesion through the spin of imagination
 in conjunction with the cataloguing of dailiness
 precluding mere occasion. Sometimes, however, the
 words may falter in their mission of refreshment or
 stimulation. A word like "periphrastic" in "Generic
 Elbows" is found elsewhere (before composition
 perhaps) and noted for future poetic incorporation.
 The scars of this type of tree surgery are readily vis-
 ible and the sapling graft will never be strong. On
 the other hand, "concatenate vowels, leaking alche-
 my" from the same poem, or phrases like "the incip-
 iently leaving trees" or "your utopic green-tree
 mushroom prick" (both from "Lost Spatula") are
 already sturdy, mature—fit for hanging a child's
 swing from. Is this, then, not mastery?
 Experimental poetry can include its failures because
 the strength of the larger project supercedes them.

The reading delight received by the young poets
 whose blurbs appear on the book's back cover attests
 to Mayer's heavy influence on writers almost half
 her age. It's wonderfully eerie that such a presence
 is felt in the otherwise amiable and placid conven-
 tion hall which seems to capture the spirit of much
 poetry today, where emotions run neither terribly
 high nor low about the work of contemporaries,
 peers, and dignitaries alike. Mayer is taking a
 unique place, whether she likes it or not, as a
 revered elder, one whose poems are a rich source of
 vitality and renewal, whose books leave you wanting
 more when you must put them down.

—Daniel Bouchard

Daniel Bouchard has poems forthcoming in *Bivouac*.

KENNETH KOCH

*Making Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading
 and Writing Poetry*

Scribner, 1998, 318 pages, \$27.50.

Straits

Knopf, 1998, 89 pages, \$22.00.

Any critical text runs the risk of deadening its
 subject, of rendering it obscure, obsolete, and
 somehow secluded from the stuff of actual living.
 Poetry is no exception, as poems and the people who
 write them are often transformed into weighted
 studies with loaded script. (Situated well outside the
 economic mainstream and mass-media spotlight,
 poetry is perhaps the artistic subject most suscepti-
 ble to such isolation.) They become petrified his-
 torical occasions and ordained figures instead of
 active, real participants in culture. As Kenneth
 Koch observes in an opening sentence of his *Making
 Your Own Days: The Pleasures of Reading and Writing Poetry*,
 "Poetry, because it stirs such strong feelings and
 because great examples of it are so rare, has often
 been written about in ways that make it seem more
 difficult, mysterious, more specialized, and more
 remote than it actually is—it is written about as a
 mystery, as a sort of intellectual/aesthetic code that
 has to be broken, as an example of some aspect of
 history or philosophy."

It's against the grain of such a dualistic percep-
 tion of the written and lived that Koch composes
Making Your Own Days. As in any number of books on
 poetry, chapters guide readers through poetry's
 most basic formal aspects, ranging from meter to
 rhyme to stanzas and on. But Koch's text, like so
 many of his poems, thrives on its immediacy—as
 when the poet incorporates ordinary, seemingly
 "non-poetic" words to demonstrate the rhythmical-

ity of even the plainest and most familiar language, or divides the prose of his own essay into lines in order to explore line division's effect of heightening one's attention to tone and sound. The entire second half of the volume is comprised of selected works by poets from Homer to Ceravolo, each one followed by short analyses employing Koch's earlier observations. Providing a concrete vocabulary for an approach to poetry, he eases readers into the experience of language as both medium and material—into the recognition of poetry as what Valéry calls the "language within a language."

Koch calls this idea of poetry as a kind of "separate language" the book's most innovative point. Yet *Making Your Own Days* is most compelling for his remarkably accessible descriptions of the experience of writing poetry, of how, for instance, the very play of music among a chain of words might lead a poet to write something that does not make rational sense. (It is significant that Koch chooses the word "pleasures" for the book's title.) In effect, he humanizes the poetic process and, to an extent, history itself. To this end he includes a reproduction of a marked-up O'Hara manuscript. And in an ambitious chapter on "Inspiration," Koch recalls that Yeats was inspired to write "The Isle Lake of Innisfree" by the sound of tiny waterfall's dropping water in a window display, and that Mayakowsky first came upon the phrase "cloud in trousers" in casual conversation with a friend. Poetry arises out of everyday experience, regardless of period, it seems. And general changes in style may reflect as much, as in the aesthetic decline of end rhymes in modern poetry. "The very virtues of rhyme, the things it accomplishes best," Koch writes, "were what was wrong with it: its 'beautiffulness' and its 'efficiency,' its capacity for organizing poems and for making what they said convincing and precise (the world didn't seem so beautiful, so well ordered, or so understandable)."

Ostensible education here becomes a subtle defense of poetry as a contemporary mode of engaging elements of experience—ones that exist but often elude articulation—and where the origin of poetry's emotive power is relocated in the world itself. "The appeal of non-traditional poetry," Koch writes, explaining the rise of certain strains in 20th-century poetry (in which he has played a part), "was its seeming more 'natural'..., more 'modern'...; and connected to this uncertainty, the 'metaphysical' interest of not knowing whether or not it is 'really poetry,' i.e., the pleasure of living, as it were, on the edge of art." The observation recalls Koch's comment regarding his close friend and fellow poet Frank O'Hara, quoted recently in *The Last Avant-Garde*: "Something Frank had that none of the other

writers and artists I know had to the same degree was a way of feeling and acting as though being an artist were the most natural thing in the world." It is this idea that poetry is entirely natural, however brilliant or inspired or neatly formed, that emanates from *Making Your Own Days*. If Koch espouses any poetics, it is one of lived poetry.

So it's no wonder that Koch's poetry-making in *Straits*, his latest book of poems, is saturated with poetics—that his intellectualism and historical knowledge outlined in *Making Your Own Days* are regular tools to illuminate and recast the ordinary. Koch's "My Olivetti Speaks," for example, is an aphoristic prose poem on poetry, offering insights like "That person in the corner has published poems!—A marvel for youth." His love of bringing form to contemporary scenes (Koch mentions in *Making Your Own Days* his desire to write sestinas whenever he reads a great sestina) is evidenced by poems like "The Seasons," a cycle in iambic pentameter with such phrases as "The world delicious as a lemon rind/In a martini, serve it to us straight/This tactile joy of autumn, when the skin/Of arbors reddens, flushed with bliss of change." So many poems feature the entrances and exits of magnificent personages, too. "Currency," for example, profiles Koch's experiences in '50s Paris, with appearances by Michaux and Giacometti in a bookstore and café, respectively. The title poem "Straits" even features actual lines by Viktor Shklovsky woven in seamlessly; perhaps one is "Mayakowsky was sure of himself as long as he was in action," or perhaps, "The idea of installing a telephone booth to some seemed central."

In Koch's poetry, ordinary objects like a telephone seem marvelous. If any poetic code needs cracking, he seems to propose, it is the one keeping artistic perception sealed off from everything (and everybody) else. Indeed, where do many poems in *Straits* come from? A look down the list of their original appearances reveals that many were first published with music by composers Ned Rorem and Virgil Thomson, or in artist's book collaborations with French artist Bertrand Dorny. Koch's poetry is in sync with an outside world, continually reaching out into realms of objects, images, and sounds, out across artistic fields to lose itself in life—an example to follow for poets and readers alike.

—Tim Griffin

Tim Griffin is the editor of *ArtByte* magazine.

books received.

GEORGE ALBON

Empire Life
Littoral Books (Los Angeles, CA), 1998, 72 pages.

MEI-MEI BERSENBRUGGE

Four Year Old Girl,
Kelsey St. Press (Berkeley, CA), 1998, 78 pages.
\$12.00.

DONALD BRECKENRIDGE

Rockaway Wherein
Red Dust (P.O. Box 630, New York, NY 10028), 1998, 30 pages, \$6.95.

WILLIAM BRONK

Some Words
Talisman (Jersey City, NJ), 1998, 70 pages.
\$9.95.

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Sewing Her Hand to the Face of the Fleeting
Quale Press (P.O. Box 363, Haydenville, MA 01039), 1998, 28 pages, \$4.00.

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So There: Poems 1976-83
New Directions, 1998, 248 pages, \$14.95.

PATRICK F. DURGIN

Pundits Scribes Pupils
Potes & Poets Press (181 Edgemoor Ave, Elmwood, CT 06110), \$7.00.

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The Art of Walt Disney
Damfino Productions (1745 Curtiss St, Berkeley, CA 94702), 1998, 24 pages.

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ED ROBERSON

Just In: Word of Navigational Challenges: New and Selected Work
Talisman, 1998, 144 pages, \$14.95.

SUSAN M. SCHULTZ

Addenda
Meow Press (P. O. Box 527, Buffalo, NY 14226), 36 pages.

LEONARD SCHWARTZ

A Flicker at the Edge of Things: Essays Towards a Poetics: 1987-1997
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Sojourner, So to Speak
La Alameda Press (Albuquerque, NM), 1998, 98 pages, \$12.00.

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Silk and The Ragpicker's Grandson
Red Dust, 1998, 47 pages, \$6.95.

DAVID TRINIDAD

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Thorngate Road (Campus Box 4240, English Dept, Illinois State University, Normal, IL 61790), 1998, 20 pages.

BILL VARTNAW

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PAUL VIOLI

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pages, \$13.00.

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C.D. WRIGHT

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BARBARA TRAN, MONIQUE T.D. TRUONG & LUU TRONG KHOI, Eds.

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The Asian American Writers' Workshop, 1998, 227 pages.

MAGAZINES

American Letters & Commentary Tenth Anniversary Issue

Editors: Jeanne Marie Beaumont & Anna Rabinowitz (850 Park Ave., Suite 5B, New York, NY 10021), 1998, 259 pages, \$6.00.

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American Poetry Review Jan/Feb

Editors: Stephen Berg, David Bonanno, Arthur

Vogelsang, 22 pages, \$3.95. Contributors: Ann Lauterbach, Tran Vang Sao, Robin Becker, others.

An Avec Sampler Two

Avec Books (Penngrove, CA), 1998, 161 pages, \$12.95. Contributors: Michael Palmer, Ann Lauterbach, Charles Borkhuis, others.

Crab Creek Review

Editors: Kimberly Allison (7265 S 128th St., Seattle, WA 98178), 1998, 89 pages, \$6.00. Contributors: Elizabeth Aoki, Jonas Brown, Sharon Chmielarz, others.

Explosive #6

Editor: Katy Lederer (PO Box 250648, Columbia University Station, New York, NY 10025), 1998, 96 pages, \$5.00. Contributors: Camille Guthrie, Anselm Berrigan, Dale Smith, Magdalena Zurawski, others.

Kalliope [Volume XX]

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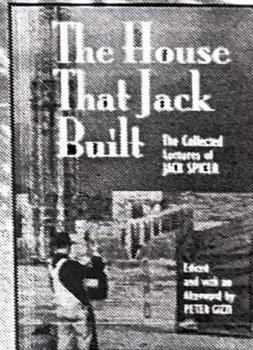
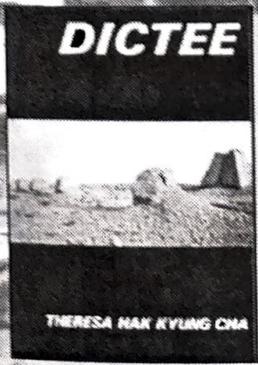
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