

Poetry Project

NEWSLETTER



December / January 2001-02 Issue number 187

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The World Trade Center

by Siri Hustvedt

(This piece was read by the author on October 3, 2001 at The Poetry Project.)

As citizens of the world, not one of us is a stranger to horror. The century that is now over racked up a long list of crimes against human beings—sometimes dozens of people, sometimes hundreds, sometimes thousands, sometimes millions. There are times when an ideological term serves as shorthand for terror—as in “Collectivization,” and “The Cultural Revolution.” In Argentina the words “The Disappeared” came to signify countless murders, but many of these catastrophes are designated simply by place names. The place becomes the sign of the event, or as in “Auschwitz,” the figure for a larger and more sweeping monstrousness. We all recognize crimes in the names: The Belgian Congo, Cambodia, My Lai, Sarajevo, Rwanda. They are words engulfed by the unspeakable. Now we have The World Trade Center. All that once happened there, the people who came and went, worked, joked, ate lunch, and telephoned home are subsumed in a name that will always mean devastation and mass murder. For us who live in New York, the difference between the other names and this one is that on September 11, it happened down the street. This time, no matter where we live in the city, all we had to do was turn our heads toward the smoke.

It may be easy to say, “Burning bodies fell from the

windows of the World Trade Center,” but it isn't easy to embrace the reality of that sentence. On September 11, my sister, Asti, ran uptown with my niece, Juliette, in her arms, away from P.S. 234 as the towers burned behind them. Juliette's classroom faced north so she didn't see people jumping or the burned corpses falling from the buildings, but other second-graders, whose rooms faced south, did. They rushed to the window and looked up. A panicked child began to scream, “Is my mommy dead?” One of Juliette's friends won't leave her mother for an instant. When the mother sits on the toilet she has her daughter on her lap. At any mention of the World Trade Center, the little girl puts her hands over her ears. A boy in the north-facing classroom has taken to bragging about carnage he didn't see. Another swears that there were skeletons walking in the streets. A kindergarten boy won't go outside, because he doesn't want his feet to touch the ground. He says he's afraid of falling sticks. A third grader wets his bed every night. Other children wake up screaming, and many have taken to sharing a bed with their parents. These are the translations of horror when it enters the mind and the body, and they seem to speak more directly to the truth than the elegant phrases we have been hearing lately, both political and literary. We have to talk, but we should be careful with our words.

Susan Cataldo (September 15, 1952 - April 25, 2001)

Susan Cataldo was born in the Bronx. Growing up with some hard knocks, she ran away to the East Village in 1968. She eventually worked for Children's Meeting, one of the early day care centers in the neighborhood, while raising her son, Kris.

In 1978, her friend and neighbor, poet Susie Timmons, introduced her to The Poetry Project, where she took part in poetry workshops led by Ted Berrigan, Alice Notley and Harris Schiff, who became her mentors. Sensitive and warm with a fierce intelligence, wicked wit and exuberant humor, she wrote with authority, had a keen aesthetic ear and eye, and took artistic and emotional risks.

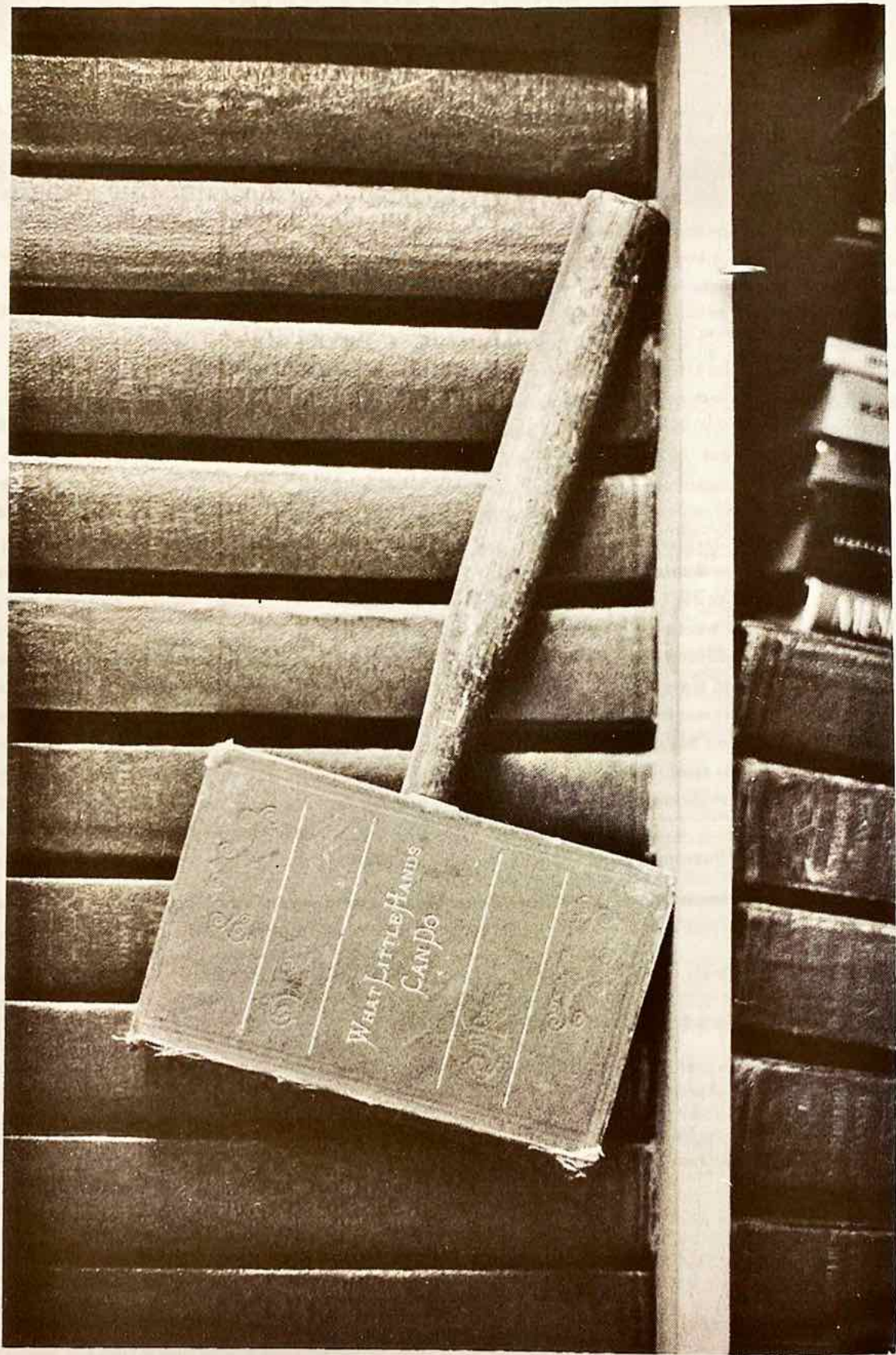
#16

best behavior him
for your mother
not you in your mindless knowledge
to retreat to the high road
you'll lose all the pals you have
to get laid
women. they're all alike.

(from *Brooklyn-Queens Day*)

In the early 1980's, Susan produced *Little Light*, a mimeo magazine, which published many downtown poets. Her book of poems, *Brooklyn-Queens Day*, was published in 1982 by Telephone Books. She gave readings at The Poetry Project, Re.Cher.Chez, Nuyorican Cafe and The Knitting Factory, among other venues. She taught poetry writing workshops at the Project for children, teens and adults. In addition, she organized readings at Re.Cher.Chez and at the Medicine Show's theater space in midtown. Susan brought passion and whole-hearted commitment toward all her endeavors, which included photography and drawing. Several of her photos were published, including those used for book jackets. She married Steve Spicehandler in 1981.

In the 1990's, she returned to college and graduated from Hunter College with Honors in Psychology. Throughout, she continued to write and work on several manuscripts. Attending a prestigious graduate program in Biopsychology at S.U.N.Y. Binghamton, her studies were interrupted in 1998 by the discovery that she had ovarian cancer. With the help of chemotherapy, alternative medicine, the programs at Gilda's Club New York, and the loving support of her many friends, her husband and family, she faced her illness, as she faced her life, with honesty and courage. With love, humor and openness, she continued to nourish her creative spirit and those around her until her last day.—Rochelle Kraut



Photograph by Susan Cataldo

News and Announcements

Hi Folks!

For the fifth edition of my infamous songbook, *Listen to the Mockingbird*, I am now seeking contributions from others besides my egomaniacal self. I want "Parasongs" (see definition below) on any subject. Parasongs tend to be parodic and/or humorous but need not be & do not have to follow the original lyrics at all. Please send lyrics to:

Tuli Kupferberg
160 6th Ave.
New York, NY 10013

or email to tuli@escape.com. Multithanks! Tuli

(Parasong: a song using new and original lyrics set to an older (generally a popular) melody. **Martin Luther** set many of his religious hymns to the popular songs of that period. His reasoning: "Why should the devil have the best of tunes?" And in our time, the **Wobblies** repaid the compliment by resetting many old hymns to new radical Labor anthems!)

Dear Readers of *The Poetry Project Newsletter* and Special Friends of **Kate, Sandy, and Ted Berrigan**:

In the fourteen years since Kate died so unexpectedly in an accident here in New York City, I have been thinking about how to make her memory live on in New York after people who knew her are no longer around. This spring I found out that a permanent city park purchased with money given by Bette Midler was in the making on 4th Street right next to the homestead that Kate and her husband David were preparing to live in. I have spoken to one of the members of the committee about a memorial there for Kate, and she responded that she already had in mind a section of the garden to be a Memorial Garden for people who have died. I would like to facilitate an arbor with a swing seat and flowers and shrubs and trees in Kate's memory. We are not sure of the cost or design yet. I would like a fantastic metal arbor (so it would be great in the winter too), but the park garden committee has to agree. One of my favorite memories is the

metal gateway or arch at the old Museum of Modern Art garden where I often brought my children.

This letter is to invite anyone interested in helping with this project to please contact me. As usual, money donations are welcome. But other skills might come in handy. If you would like to help, call me (sorry, no fax or email at this Luddite's establishment) early mornings or evenings at 707-937-0313. You can also send a check made out to El Jardin de Paraiso. This is a tax-deductible donation and may be sent to Sandy Berrigan, P.O. Box 607, Albion CA 95410.

With much love,
Sandy (Berrigan)

from Jackie Sheeler:

Looking for poetry readings, book sales, announcements, reviews, calls for submission or contests? Look no further than the **Poetz Monthly Update**, the friendly e-letter that delivers it to you the first week of every month. To sign up, send an email with the subject "Subscribe" to listings@poetz.com. You can also send notices of your own poetry readings to the same address. Wanna find out about every single poetry reading in NYC? Check www.poetz.com/calendar for the ultimate list, updated daily. With over 7,000 subscribers, we must be doing something right....

Kelsey Street Press announces a two-month period of open submissions—from November 1 to December 31, 2001. They are looking for unpublished book-length collections of poems or poetically-informed prose. They are especially interested in receiving submissions from younger or less established writers. Manuscripts will be selected in early 2002 and published in 2003.

Kelsey Street Press was founded in 1974 to publish experimental writing by women and has a history of publishing poets' collaborations with visual artists. Recent publications include *Juice*

by **Renee Gladman**, *Symbiosis* by **Barbara Guest** and **Laura Reid**, and *Tales of Horror* by **Laura Mullen**. Collaborations will not be accepted in this call for manuscripts.

For more information on the Press, go to their website at www.kelseyst.com. Letters of inquiry and/or manuscripts should be sent to Kelsey Street Press, attn. Tanya Erzen/Karla Nielsen, 50 Northgate Ave., Berkeley CA 94705.

Sunday, November 18 there will be a fund-raiser for **Jen Robinson** hosted by **Brendan Lorber** and **Douglas Rothschild** at Zinc Bar. Readers include **Todd Colby**, **Sharon Mesmer**, **Brandon Downing**, **Brenda Coultas**, **Greg Fuchs**, **Prageeta Sharma**, **Edwin Torres**, **Ava Chin**, **David Cameron**, **Marcella Durand** and others. Zinc Bar is at 90 West Houston Between LaGuardia & Thompson. For additional info: 212-533-9317 or 718-802-9575 or lungfull@rcn.com.

Poet Jen Robinson was hit by a car this summer and sustained serious injuries. The cost of surgery, a lengthy hospital stay and weeks of physical therapy is astronomical—and neither she nor the person who hit her had insurance. Jen is the author of numerous books including *For Conifer Fanatics* (Soft Skull Press, 1996), and will have work in the forthcoming *Split: Stories From A Generation Raised On Divorce* (Contemporary Books (McGraw-Hill), 2002). She is Puzzle Editor for *Lungfull!* magazine. If you can't make the fundraiser, but would like to contribute, checks should be made to Jen Robinson and sent to 23-03 43rd St., #10, Astoria, NY 11105.

"They were not asleep they were dreaming and all of a sudden there it was tumbling an airplane coming and before they knew they were there. And everybody said come out quick, take an umbrella call it a fence open it quickly and down you will come in the fog that is dense and it will be like soup in a minute and later then you will be awake just a minute" —**Gertrude Stein** (submitted by **Billy Mac Kay**)

Poem

Connie Deanovich:

Lover of Daylight (for Kenward Elmslie)

New York in winter is dark
as an unbuttoned soldier
so you leave these possibilities
and travel toward *better daylight*
which is *far far away*

the cover of your passport is Midnight Blue
and so are the fingertips of dawn
bruised in ripping up night crack by crack

you
like some birds
can go crazy now in the light
singing with joy that the day
is turning pink

you can even go fishing
with a Pink Poodle lure in honor of morning
its dyed virgin wool balls
overdosed by flamingo feathers

at noon when the yellow sun
is straight over head like an identifying arrow
it's time for lunch
gleaming green salad
dressed with the white marble snap of Caesar

the afternoon can hang on for hours
combing its luxuriant hair by a waterfall
and reading

then twilight
a glass of wine
"sunshine in a bottle"
and a long last look at the orange sky
which will soon simply be filled with starlight
and therefore no fun at all

Joe Brainard at PS1 & an Interview with Kenward Elmslie

by Kristin Prevallet

Anne Waldman: What's your favorite color?

Joe Brainard: Red.

AW: Why?

*JB: I would miss the chance to say 'red' for one thing.
I'd say 'red' even if it weren't my favorite color.*

Joe Brainard likes the word "red" and it also happens to be his favorite color. Walking through the retrospective of Brainard's work which is currently on view at P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center, the color red subtly blends in with the incredible variety of materials, shapes, and dimensions that comprise his work. Red pansies sprinkled in a dense garden of cut-out yellow, pink, blue, and orange flowers. The bottom triangle of a Cinzano ashtray, painted in 16 small squares, each with a different shade of red. The faded stripes of the American flag draped across a densely layered shrine draping with rosaries. A red butterfly suspended in the center of a collage around which there is a red carpet, red ladybugs, pinwheels, and two young girls, one smelling roses and one with a huge red heart.

"Red" is both a word and a color—and although Brainard is an artist, he is not interested in distinguishing between the two. In his work, words and materials are equal. The same could be said for beads, bottles, grates, and statues; for dried flowers, puzzle pieces, straw, and net. For Prell bottles, Tide boxes, 7-up logos, and rose tattoos. These are the materials—and the words—that came into Brainard's life at particular moments, and these are what he used to create his art. Brainard's work and life are so unique because the act of creating an art work is never priori-

tized over the act of writing a poem. The materials, the words as they appear, speak for themselves. As he says, "I don't ever have an idea. The material does it all."

Brainard blurs the boundary between art and writing because he approaches both in the same way. In answering a question about his collages he talks about why he could never plot a novel. In discussing whether or not he could sustain a character in a novel for over one hundred pages, he responds by talking about the ways in which lines extend or curve. "I'd never have a vision in my head of a line that went this way and curved. It simply wouldn't come to me, but it would come to me as a logical development from what I'd already done." This has everything to do with novels, and everything to do with art. It is for this reason that the P.S.1 retrospective of Brainard's work exists as a marvelous invitation: in being artworks that are inseparable from poetry, it is a show that asks to be both seen, and read.

John Yau writes about how Robert Creeley's collaborations with visual artists provoke a number of fundamental questions regarding the sources and / or inspirations of poetry and prose: where it comes from, and where it goes. "In addressing these issues, Creeley has subtly but forcefully connected poetry to the

larger place language and things, writing and art, have in our lives, not as separate entities, one to hang on the wall and the other to be kept on a shelf, but as fundamental to one's understanding of reality, both as the flux of now and as time passing." One may say the same of Brainard, switching the fundamental question to "what are the sources or inspirations of art?" And this question, which seems so abstract, is answered quite simply by the amazing range of work on the gallery wall.

What becomes apparent is that there are no ultimate ideas—only multiple ways to generate them. Inspiration is the process of sitting down and creating something using the materials that happen to be around. Inspiration is generated by the living presence of words and objects in the world. In Brainard's case, the two are indistinguishable, and work together like boats in water. Inspiration is not about waiting for strikes of brilliance, but about living with such attention to the details of the world that you can close your eyes and still be able to see:

I close my eyes. I see something copper. (A tea pot with missing lid.) And dried cornflowers in an earthenware pot. Against a brown velvet drape.
"Sniff": I can smell last week's clay still in the air.

(from "Ten Imaginary Still Lives")

Brainard was both a poet and an artist whose work was in constant conversation, both with the words and objects of the world and with the people in his life. Being a poet means entering into a web of texts and writers all talking to each other. Brainard's collaborations with other poets reflect the spirit of multiple minds. Awry metaphors and intentional metonymic disconnect between image and words evokes the spirit of spontaneity, play, and fun. Collages, book covers, portraits and comic strips were some of the forms Brainard's collaborations with other poets took. (For a great example of this, in case you can't make it to the show, Boston's literary magazine *Pressed Wafer* recently published an issue dedicated to Brainard, in which there are excellent reproductions of a series of collages made with Ron Padgett called *S*, portraits of Berrigan and Lewis Warsh from Warsh's collection, the comic strip "Recent Visitors" done with Bill Berkson, and a "Joe Album" series of collages assembled by Kenward Elmslie.)

Instead of simply summarizing Brainard's work, I thought it would be fitting to call in Ted Berrigan, one of Brainard's close friends and collaborators, in order to make the act of "looking" be another kind of collaboration. Walking with Ted Berrigan through his poem, "Things to Do in Providence" is one way to walk through the gallery reading Brainard. It is a great

poem, a testament to moodiness, and the emotional shifts that occur when life is really paid attention to. There are the short imperatives: "Crash, Sleep, Take Valium Dream & forget it." There are the fruitless moments when nothing is happening: "Sit watch TV draw blanks"; there are the moments when stories appear out of nowhere, like the seven young men on horses who die stupidly and then wonder what will happen next. There are the silly conversations: "Hello! I'm drunk & have no clothes on!" There are the books that are read with concentration, and the revelations that suddenly arise about family. It comes around, it goes around, and then it ends: "I can hear today's key sounds fading softly / & almost see opening sleep's epic novels."

This poem provides a structure for how to look at Brainard's work. There are the specifics of sleepy afternoons: the painting "Whippoorwill" (a white dog napping on a green couch). There are the moments in life that seem so epic but can only be described using the simplest, most universally acknowledged metaphors: Brainard's famous "Tattoo" (a man's torso covered with tattoos—the names of his lovers, four leaf clovers, chains, a snake, a rose, and hearts—that are simultaneously cliché and deeply personal). There are the times when nothing seems to come together, when everything is disconnected and out of place: Brainard's "Untitled 1972 collage" where all the objects—a naked man, a pop top, the corner torn from a dollar bill, a cracker, a raggedy feather, a Band-Aid, a torn envelope, and one half of a butterfly—lack synthesis and are out of sync. In Brainard's "Prell" (travel-sized shampoo bottles are transformed into pillars which hold up an ornate and elegant temple overgrown with grapes, encasing the Pieta), irony, reverence, and a perfect blend of color tones give a sense of the possibility of ritual even in the most mass-marketed plastic objects. "Living's a pleasure," writes Berrigan—although at the moment he is writing this he is thinking about his mother, and how she will inevitably pass away. The poem is a part of the cycle of life. It gets written over and over again, and like the art work that transforms the materials beyond their original intent—but never beyond the viewer—is constantly in flux and changing over time.

Art and poetry: to Brainard, one is not better than the other. There is no prioritizing of one over the other because of market value or a career path that identifies an artist with a particular aesthetic, a poet to a singular literary movement. One does not illustrate and the other explain, one is not bound by the borders of the paper and the other free to spill out beyond the frame. They move into each other's territory all the time, like horses running in a range without fences. And this freedom to roam the animate zone between words and materials is one of the great pleasures of reading (viewing) this retrospective of Brainard's work.

Sources:

Joe Brainard: A Retrospective, edited by Constance M. Lewallen. New York: Granary Books, 2001.

In Company: Robert Creeley's Collaborations, edited by Amy Cappellazzo and Elizabeth Licata. Buffalo, NY: Castellani Art Museum, 1999. 45-82.

Pressed Wafer #2 (March 2001). 9 Columbus Sq., Boston, MA 02116.

Joe Brainard: A Retrospective
September 30-November 25
P.S.1 Contemporary Art Center
22-25 Jackson Ave. at 46th Ave.
Long Island City, New York
718-784-2084

...

In 1963, Joe Brainard and Kenward Elmslie, poet, novelist, librettist and performance artist, became life partners and collaborators until Brainard's death in 1994. Of great importance to Brainard's work were the summers he spent at Poet's Corner, Elmslie's house in Calais, Vermont, where Brainard had a studio. According to Lewallen, he created most of his cut-outs, still lifes, and landscapes during this time. These times were also important to Elmslie, whose relationship with Brainard influenced his own work in many ways. Wanting to speak to Elmslie about the collaborative spirit of their relationship, and the atmosphere that fostered it, I interviewed him by telephone at his house in Vermont.

What is your connection to Vermont?

I came to Vermont in the 50s with John Latouche who had a crazy New York life which I shared. It was a way to find a quiet place away from the city.

What does the house look like?

It started out as a farmhouse, with lots of small windows. It uses every inch of its space. Downstairs is a biggish kitchen. A small front hallway leads, left, to a living room, and, right, to a so-called music room—phone (hooked up, finally, in the 70s) and an upright piano with an alternate "prepared" clinky sound. I used to think up and practice singing my poem songs, noodling away, solo—no one except chipmunks and deer to hear my experimental yowling and Sati-esque

chords. I added a wing on for Joe's studio. There is also a good-sized bathroom which the locals found astonishing. Back in the 50s there were guided tours to see this huge bathroom.

And the surrounding landscape?

They knew how to build back then, which in this case was around 1840—it was a farmhouse until the 1930s, situated on a hill above a hollow of ground which gradually edges up to form the woods. It's surrounded by forests. It was a brainstorm of John Latouche's to build a dam. A stream with a waterfall runs through this hollow. So we dammed it up and then the state found out about it by accident and it had to be taken out. Then it went back to land for awhile. Then beavers dammed up the stream...

And the state didn't mind the beavers?

The state didn't know about them until there was a flood. By then Joe and I were together. One day the state dam-man came by and said, "but this pond isn't on any aerial map!" This seemed to upset him deeply. So then there was another dam built to state specifications.

So now there's a lake?

There was a lake, but it vanished. Then it came back because of the beavers. Now it's there, and it's legal.

You have a view of it?

It's a strong, changeable presence, and a great solace, doing dishes. Unnamed to this day. Joe wanted to call it Veronica Lake, the name of the 40s blonde sexy movie star whose hair-do concealed one eye.

And Joe had a view of it?

Joe's studio fronts to the edge of the hill. He had the best view.

Can you tell me about your dog Whippoorwill?

I once saw a Jacques Tati movie in which dogs were very playful. So I got a dog.

Did Whippoorwill and Joe get along well?

Yes. Joe was very gentle about some things, first including dog hairs on his Armani suits, and then cat hairs. It was awful for him having to pick off the hairs.

He liked Armani suits?

(Cont. on page 11)

Fall 2001

burning deck



Oskar Pastior, *Many Glove Compartments*

[Dichten=, #5; trans. Harry Mathews, Christopher Middleton, Rosmarie Waldrop, with a guest appearance by John Yau]

Pastior is not interested in naming, in "Adam, that old Stalin of language," but in a metabolism where words and concepts are made flesh. He is the only German member of OULIPO.

"A Pastior-poem is like life. As soon as you think you've got hold of it, it has already moved ahead by the fraction of a hair."—*Frankfurter Rundschau*. "Pastior's humor is the only legitimate kind beside black humor which of course also darkly lights up here"—*Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*

Poems, 120 pages, offset, smyth-sewn, ISBN 1-886224-44-7, original paperback \$10

Pascal Quignard, *On Wooden Tablets: Apronemia Avitia*

[Série d'écriture, #15; trans. Bruce X]

At the end of the 4th century, a Roman Patrician Matron writes notes, somewhat in the manner of Sei Shonagon's Pillow Book. She notes erotic souvenirs, jokes, scenes that have touched her, but also accounts, lists of things to do. For 20 years, Apronemia Avitia keeps this journal without mentioning, except in passing, the ruinous events she witnesses: the Roman Empire is crumbling, invaded by the "Barbarians" from the North as well as infiltrated from within by the Christian "party." Perhaps she does not see. Perhaps she does not want to see.

Quignard, author of *Little Treatises* and many novels, is one of the most noted French avantgarde writers. Erudite and playful, he has redefined historical fiction as both hoax and enigma.

Novel, 112 pages, offset, smyth-sewn, ISBN 1-886224-45-5 \$10

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—Anne Waldman



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(Cont. from page 9)

Yes. Not always, but he sort of "went Armani" at a certain point. He had two, but every so often he'd get a new one.

Would he just wear them around the house?

No, they were for going out. But a pet in the same place as an Armani...hairs just float around mercilessly and gravitate towards such suits.

That reminds me of the painting of Whippoorwill on the green sofa (*Whippoorwill*, 1974)—the sofa looks kind of plush and velvety and I can just imagine a sea of white fur on the couch after the dog gets up. That happened.

Where do you keep that painting in your house?

I generally keep it over the fireplace, opposite the same sofa, so you get a kind of double image.

In an interview Joe said, "I don't ever have an idea. The material does it all." Do think that is possible?

Yes—that's pretty much the way I work as well. Several of the collaborations I did with Joe obviously came from ideas, but I don't remember the process. Our first collaboration was a take-off on baby books: *Baby's First Word*, *First Dream*, feeding sked, and so forth. A relationship joke, too, ta-da! "Our" *Baby*, ha-ha. At an art world dinner, we collected blurbs for a tiny ad in the *Village Voice*. Frank O'Hara: "The most peculiar book I've ever read." Andy Warhol: "Fantastic! Fantastic!" It was self-published by Boke Press, our very own press. So was there an initial idea to do a take off on baby books? I really don't know.

So was it that the baby books happened to just appear in your life at some point?

Yes, Joe loved to shop at antique shops and probably picked up a couple antique baby books. He used a lot of the antique store finds for ideas. He would go through books and just tear the little tiny drawings out from dictionaries. I still find torn places in dictionaries, and know Joe tore them out. So you see, getting ideas wasn't at all cerebral.

It's such a strong statement to say "I never have an idea."

It's perhaps too strong. Ideas maybe slid in sideways, like a home run in a baseball game. They didn't announce themselves, nor were they searched for. They just happened.

Is that what inspires writing?

Oh gosh—that's hard to answer because so many different things inspire writing.

But if you could answer.

Sometimes it's a word that I've become fond of, or sometimes it's a memory of the daily round. Because my memory is so terrible, sometimes I want to write about a certain part of the daily round so I won't forget about it. Like a survival technique, perhaps. But then that bounds to other things, like dreams, or poems by somebody else. It becomes a sort of network of influence. It's a series of moves through mind, memory, time and space.

What inspired Joe?

That got strange. When he began to read books—he didn't stop art, he stopped working with his gallery.

Ideas maybe slid in sideways, like a home run in a baseball game. They didn't announce themselves, nor were they searched for. They just happened.

but he still did art for friends, people he cared about. It was part of the friendship. In the summer when he supposedly stopped art, he did all of the drawings for my poems in *Sung Sex*, published by Kulchur Foundation in 1989. One drawing per poem page, 65 drawings! A different style, spare, Japanese-y. Most elegant naked boy odalisques...

That's a clarification, then, of what Ashbery writes, that in the last decade of his life he "abandoned art altogether...consecrating his time to his two favorite hobbies, smoking and reading Victorian novels." Hopefully, not a clarification—a debunking of a total myth, a most misleading oversimplification. Joe read and read, not just Victorian novels—Barbara Pym was his favorite—and he also sneaked art work in. He worked and worked and worked.

(Cont. on page 18)

Lewis Warsh interviewed by Peter Bushyeager

Lewis Warsh has written poetry and fiction for decades. He has continually reinvented his work and remained prolific, which has been dramatically demonstrated in recent months: between May and the end of the year, four new Warsh books will appear. Three of the publications—*Touch of the Whip*, *The Origin of the World* and *Debtor's Prison* (a collaboration with video artist Julie Harrison)—offer new fiction and poetry.

His long-standing reputation as a laser-eyed editor is documented in the fourth: *The Angel Hair Anthology* published by Granary Books. The *Anthology's* some 600 pages offer a generous sampling of work he and Anne Waldman published during their legendary 1966-1975 stint as co-editors of *Angel Hair Magazine* and *Angel Hair Books*. The publication also includes a detailed bibliography, vintage photos, and memoirs from many of the writers included in the collection.

During a mild July afternoon at the Orlin Cafe on St. Mark's Place, we talked about two of the new publications: *The Origin of the World*, a collection of jump-cut collage poems published by Creative Arts Book Company, and *Touch of the Whip* from Singing Horse Press, which features poems and short fictions.

PB: Let's talk first about *The Origin of the World*, a suite of 17 poems with a very particular structure: prose-like segments strung together in a non-linear way to create energy-charged mosaics. This is different from your earlier work. When did you start working with this structure?

LW: In 1990. The first poem I wrote using this method was "Travelogue," which appears in *Avenue of Escape* but not in *The Origin of The World*.

PB: What's the genesis of this style?

LW: I had all these interesting lines in my notebook and it

occurred to me that I could work with them in a way that would engage both my fiction-writer and poet sensibilities. And that's how the poems work. The individual sections are made up of sentences, so they're prose. But they're also lines of poetry. You can have it both ways.

PB: How do you write these poems?

LW: I wait until I have around 150 or so lines. Then I stand back and take a look at them and begin creating a structure, which is similar to what I do when I write fiction. I usually end up discarding around 50 of the lines, but I hold onto them for future use. I'm a recycler, constantly going over old discarded work to see if there's something that makes sense.

PB: I would think that assemblage/collage engages a very different part of the brain.

LW: It's a different way of working that comes from a different place than "regular" writing. It's extremely liberating and, in fact, has influenced me outside the realm of poetry. In the mid-90s, after I'd been making this kind of poem for awhile, I began creating collage artworks, which is something I'd never done before. Now I do them all the time. Not too long ago, I made a series of 24 small collages and titled each one after a John Donne poem. They appeared in a limited-edition artist's book and the original collages are now in the collection at the University of California at San Diego.

PB: One of your collages appears on the cover of *The Origin of the World*.

LW: Yes. The cover is a kind of mirror for what I was doing in the book.

PB: *The Origin of the World* has a relentless quality, along with a somewhat disaffected, flat tone. That's a curious combination.

LW: I'm in a totally cool state when I'm ordering one of these poems. I'm aiming for a fragmented narrative and I use different voices to create dialogue. In other words, when you read "I," it's not necessarily Lewis Warsh speaking.

PB: There are different dictions, too.

LW: I don't want to create a "whole." The excitement for me is that I can include anything without thinking too hard about how it's going to all add up. I want to learn how to put each poem together as I'm doing it. I'm not a handy person in real life, so this is my way of building a kind of house. The lines are a lot like bricks, one on top of the other.

The world is fragmented, history in general is fragmented, my personal history is fragmented. A lot of the lines relate to memories from different periods in my life. I don't know what's happening from line to line when I'm putting together one of these works. In a way, these poems are similar to what I did in an earlier book, *Methods of Birth Control*, which involved ordering "found" material.

PB: For me, *The Origin of the World* is monolithic. It's like the mysterious plinth that appears in the movie *2001*, dark, monumental and impenetrable.

I don't want to create a "whole." The excitement for me is that I can include anything without thinking too hard about how it's going to all add up.

LW: I like impenetrability. Past a certain point, this book simply exists. What more can you say about it?

PB: Well, it's important to note that the poems are very fresh, but they're also part of a tradition.

LW: Yes, there are a number of precedents: Ezra Pound's *Cantos*, which linked disparate lines and cultures, and encoded numerous historical threads, and Ted Berrigan's

Sonnets, which worked with a variety of material including "found" text. I don't mean to imply a lineage, but both these works are inspiring sources. There's also a connection with Pascal's work, and Wittgenstein's, the way they build a philosophical essay from numbered statements. I consciously kept them in mind—and Edmond Jabès as well—as possible models.

PB: Did you try for a certain flow when you were deciding about the order in which the poems appear? That could be a challenge with this type of work.

LW: For the most part, the poems appear in chronological order. But there's one exception. I wanted to end with "The Secret Police," which is different from the other poems because it goes back and forth between several distinct narratives. The final section of the poem has a nostalgic feel that's created through the oceanic imagery. I was thinking about looking out at the ocean during the time I lived in Bolinas, California, during the late 1960s. Also, the final line is a good way of ending the book: "This is the time I like best, late evening, when the sun disappears, & there are no secrets."

PB: Do you plan to continue creating poems in this mode?

LW: I don't like repeating myself—but I still think there's something new inside this structure that can keep me interested. I currently have several hundred lines, but I haven't assembled them yet. Of course, I'm also writing other poems too—poems that aren't built on this structure.

PB: Let's talk about *Touch of the Whip*. It's a good companion to *The Origin of the World*. Both books explore some of the same themes—particularly dislocation—but they feel quite different from each other. *Origin* is concentrated and intense.

Touch of the Whip's combination of poetry and short fiction is more expansive and welcoming in its approach.

LW: That may be because of the prose. When you're presenting fictional characters with specifics attached to them, people who have some resemblance to "real" people, you create a different context than the one you find in poetry. You're dealing with a kind of reality that is hopefully avail-

able to everyone. Fictional characters help you meet the reader halfway.

PB: I thought the blend of prose and poetry worked very well. Did you set out to make a book mixing the two?

LW: I have to thank Gil Ott, the publisher and editor of Singing Horse Press, for shaping the book's final form. We began corresponding after the publication of my book of short stories, *Money Under the Table*. Gil liked that book and

said he wanted to publish new work. So I sent him a short-fiction manuscript modeled after *Money Under the Table*.

After he read the manuscript he called me and made a radical request. He asked that I take out the longest story and substitute other work that would make the manuscript more diverse. I breathed deeply, decided to take his suggestion, and began to make a different kind of book.

PB: Was it difficult to accept his feedback?

LW: Only for a minute. Gil is a dedicated, experienced editor and I trusted him. He wasn't suggesting I rewrite any of the work, just restructure the book. In the long run, his comments gave me permission to break the mold—I was trying to write a sequel which maybe wasn't a very interesting idea—and create something new. That's what good editors do.

PB: The book begins with "G & A," a fictionalized account of the Georgia O'Keeffe/Alfred Stieglitz relationship that reads like biography. Why did you write about them?

LW: I'd seen Stieglitz's nude photos of O'Keeffe, which communicate both Georgia's vulnerability and incredibly focused strength. I was interested in the great age difference between Georgia and Alfred, and about Paul Strand and Leah Harris, who also loved O'Keeffe.

I wanted to write a story about people making choices and the transactional aspects of relationships. The moment when the photos were taken is the focal point for all of this.

PB: It's interesting that you mention "transactions." *Touch of the Whip* often portrays relationships as transactions. People make deals with each other in order to connect in some way, but the connections don't seem to change them. By starting with a piece that could easily be considered non-fiction, you give the whole book a particular edge—as if it's a collection of true, amazing stories. Be honest. Aren't at least some of the prose pieces transcriptions from your life?

LW: I'm a fiction writer and that involves taking bits of my life as jumping-off points for the narrative. But there's a lot of embroidering, expanding, a lot of fictionalizing, if that's a word. So the stories aren't directly based on real experiences, although I hope they have the ring of truth. The one exception is "The Line Up." I was mugged on the streets of Boulder, Colorado in the late 1950s, and the story hinges on my memories of all that.

PB: *Touch of the Whip* has two family-themed stories that appear back to back: "Family Romance" and "Anonymous Donor."

LW: Everyone has family fantasies—this is Freud's idea—

because many people are dissatisfied with their real parents and need to transform them into different people. He called this the "family romance." Families are either too mundane, too conventional, too inattentive, too smothering. In these two stories I created some family fantasies. But not a word is true.

PB: Too bad! I wanted to hear more about your grandfather, his prison term, and his relationships with much younger women.

LW: Sorry to disappoint you!

...office jobs where people spend hours repressing themselves in the interest of being responsible.... How do they break out of this world?

PB: The book's title work, the poem "Touch of the Whip," is one of my favorites. I have a distinct memory of hearing you read it and being impressed by its power.

LW: I was fascinated with the story, in the early 1990s, of the couple who kidnapped the Exxon executive and buried him in a box in New Jersey. That was the starting point. The poem is built around a collage—a layering—of longer diverse pieces of writing. Even the title is a kind of alchemical mix of other book titles: Philip Lamantia's *Touch of the Marvelous* and Robert Creeley's *The Whip*. For some reason these titles were echoing in my head when I was writing.

PB: You're good at closing your books with the perfect piece. *Touch of the Whip* ends with the story "She Was Working." The main character, a young woman working a minimal sort of job, is bored and restless in a passive way.

LW: I'm talking about the standard job situation in this story, office jobs where people spend hours repressing themselves and their sexuality in the interest of being responsible. I dealt with the same idea in my story "Crack," the opening story in *Money Under the Table*. How do people spend these hours? What are they thinking when they're there? How do they break out of this world?

PB: The character certainly finds a way to break out, although it's a bit appalling. Her decision seems effortless, pragmatic and completely logical, which makes it all that more disturbing. But I won't give the ending away for the *Newsletter* readers.

This interview has focused on the present—specifically, your brand-new books. But sometimes history becomes part

of the present, as it has with the publication of *The Angel Hair Anthology*. Is your history a burden? How do you feel about the past?

LW: Well, the impulse is to close the door on it all and embrace it at the same time. There are all these voices in your head, all these feelings for people who are no longer a part of your immediate present, all these places where you used to live. They keep coming back and doing battle with the adamant present. So you're living a kind of double life and it's a constant struggle, but there's a lot of positive energy generated from the tension.

The Angel Hair Anthology brings together various communities of writers from the late '60s and '70s when Anne Waldman and I were editing the magazine and books. It's a testament to all the inter-related friendships from that time when most of the contributors were fairly young. The book includes the early works of a lot of people who are still going strong. Steve Clay, the publisher of *Granary*, is the person responsible for initiating this project. He has a beautiful feel for making sense of literary history in our own time, and that's what the anthology is about.

A collection of Peter Bushyeager's poetry is forthcoming from Ten Pell Books. His work will also appear in the anthology *Help Yourself!*, published by Autonomedia.

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at the POETRY PROJECT

DECEMBER 3, MONDAY

Open Reading

Sign-up at 7:30 p.m. [8:00 p.m.]

DECEMBER 5, WEDNESDAY

Rae Armantrout and Marjorie Welsh

Rae Armantrout is the author of *Veil: New and Selected Poems* just recently out from the Wesleyan Poetry Series. *Veil* includes work from seven previous collections. *Publishers Weekly* notes: "Those who haven't discovered the superb poems of *Necromance* and *Made to Seem* will find their unsettling vignettes utterly compelling, alert to the vagest shades of postmodern subjecthood." Marjorie Welsh's books include *The Annotated "Here" and Selected Poems* (Coffee House Press) which was a finalist for the 2001 Lenore Marshall Poetry Prize, and a book of art criticism, *Signifying Art: Essays on Art after 1960* (Cambridge University Press). Her art criticism has been featured in *Bomb* and *Artforum*. [8:00 pm]

DECEMBER 7, FRIDAY

Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader

The Friday Late-Night Events Series presents readings from the new anthology *Back in No Time: The Brion Gysin Reader* with Ira Cohen, Genesis P-Orridge, José Ferez Kuri, Marshall Reese, Ellen Zweig, Terry Winters, Pierre Joris, Jason Weiss, Ondi McMaster, and Gerard Pas. The anthology is edited by Jason Weiss, a Brooklyn-based writer, and author of *Writing at Risk: Interviews in Paris with Uncommon Writers* (Iowa, 1991) and *The Lights of Home: A Century of Latin American Writers in Paris*, forthcoming from Routledge in 2002. He is the translator of Luisa Futoransky's *The Duration of the Voyage: Selected Poems* (Junction, 1997) and Marcel Cohen's *Mirrors* (Green Integer, 1998). [10:30 pm]

DECEMBER 10, MONDAY

Suzanne Wise and Rebecca Wee

Suzanne Wise is the author of the poetry collection *The Kingdom of the Subjunctive* (Alice James Books, 2000). Her writing also appears in *American Poetry: The Next Generation* (Carnegie Mellon, 2000). "I love Suzanne Wise's poems because they're droll and cavalier, magnificent and terrified all at once," writes Eileen Myles. Rebecca Wee received her MFA in poetry in 1992 from

1986. Denizé Lature is a poet and short story author who writes in Creole, English and French. Bob Lapierre is a poet and actor who has also written for the theatre, and has published poetry books and plays in both English and Creole. Pierre-Richard Narcisse is a poet who is working towards the renewal of Haitian Creole poetry. His poetry books *Déy ak lesoua* (1979) and *Depale* (1980) have been well received by critics. [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 1, 2002 TUESDAY

28th Annual New Year's Day Marathon Reading

Spend the first day of the new year with the best of downtown poetry, performance, dance, music, and multimedia with over 100 performers and readers. \$15, \$12 for Poetry Project members, students & seniors. [2 pm-past midnight]

JANUARY 7, MONDAY

Open Reading

Sign-up at 7:30 p.m. [8:00 p.m.]

JANUARY 9, WEDNESDAY

Marcella Durand and Betsy Fagin

Marcella Durand's newest collection of poems, *Western Capital Rhapsodies*, is just out from Faux Press. Her previous publications include two chapbooks, *City of Ports* and *Lapsus Linguae*, both from Situations Press. She is an editor for a new website, www.dou-blechange.com, devoted to contemporary French and American poetries and is the poetry editor for Erato Press. Her title, *The Geometrics*, will be published this winter by Beautiful Swimmer Press. Betsy Fagin is the editor and founder of the Web zine and press *Blue Press(f)*. Recent work appears in or is forthcoming from *The East Village Poetry Web*, *Five Fingers Review*, *Brooklyn Review*, *Kenning* and *Fence*. [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 11, FRIDAY

Michael Shulman and The Future Pill

An evening of music led by Monte Arnold and Brendan O'Shea. Michael Shulman plays and often tours with the Trans-Siberian Orchestra. He is a virtuoso avant-garde-gardist feature solo on electric and acoustic violin. Brendan O'Shea's roots are firmly planted in County Kerry on The South Western coast of Ireland. He has shared the stage with and opened for 10,000 Maniacs, The Walls, and

Monica Ferrell is a 2001 Discovery/*The Nation* winner. Her poems have been published in *The Paris Review*, *The Boston Review*, and *Tin House*, and have been featured in audio format on Salon.com. A current Van Lier Fellow of the AAWW, she teaches writing at Brooklyn College. Mark Nickels grew up in western Michigan. He lives and works in New York City. His most recent publication is *Cicada*, a volume of poems from Rattapallax Press. [10:30 pm]

JANUARY 21, MONDAY

Arnie Siegel and Brian Blanchfield

Arnie Siegel is a poet and film and video artist. Her first book, *The Waking Life*, was published by North Atlantic Books (Berkeley, CA). Siegel's films and videos have shown at museums and festivals including the Whitney Museum of American Art, Pacific Film Archive, Filmforum LA and San Francisco Cinematheque. A graduate of Bard College and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago, she lives in New York City. Juliana Spahr wrote about her book "These poems are rivers, always moving, always changing. They are expansive, lyrical and knowing." Brian Blanchfield has published poems in *Volt*, *Swerve*, *Seneca Review*, *Ploughshares*, *The Literary Review*, *Fence*, *Agni*, and other journals. He lives in Brooklyn and is newly the editor of Tibor de Nagy Editions. A poem of his is being adapted by filmmaker Daniel Kleinfield for a video short, which will premier at The Poetry Project in the spring. His sly witty poems create uncomfortable landscapes that blur the boundaries between time and space, self and other. [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 23, WEDNESDAY

Donna Brook and Hayan Charara

Donna Brook's previous books include *A History of the Afghan*, *Notes on Space/Time*, and *What Being Responsible Means to Me*. A book for young readers, *The Journey of English*, appeared in 1998. Her most recent collection, *A More Human Face*, from Hanging Loose Press, has received high praise. Hayan Charara's first book is out this year from Hanging Loose Press. Currently the editor of *Graffiti Rag*, an annual literary anthology, he has published work in *Chelsea*, *Hanging Loose*, *The Kenyon Review*, and numerous other journals and anthologies. He has recently published *The Alchemist's Diary* with Hanging Loose Press. [8:00 pm]

County Kerry on the south western coast of Ireland. He has shared the stage with and opened for 10,000 Maniacs, The Walls, and Cowboy Junkies. This singer/songwriter on guitar, will be accompanied by drums, double bass, and cello. [10:30 pm]

JANUARY 14, MONDAY

Cecilia Woloch and Kazim Ali
A resident of Los Angeles since 1979, Cecilia Woloch has been active as a poet-in-the-schools and a teacher of creative writing workshops. Her first book, *Sacrifice*, was published in 1997, and a new book is forthcoming from BOA. Kazim Ali is a poet, painter, and performance artist. For many years he was a full-time organizer working for various social change organizations and training student activists through the United States Student Association's Grass Roots Organizing Weekends project. His poems combine and connect an interest in politics with a feel for the physical nature of language—both controlled and uncontrollable. [8:00 pm]

DECEMBER 12, WEDNESDAY

70th Birthday Celebration for Jerome Rothenberg
This promises to be a major gathering of the avant garde to celebrate one of its most prominent members. Jerome Rothenberg is a poet, performer, translator, teacher, and editor of ground-breaking anthologies. With readings and performances by David Antin, Burt Turetsky, Judith Malina and Hannon Reznikov, Charles Bernstein, Charlie Marrow and Steve Clay, Eleanor Antin, Ed Friedman, Sten Hanson, Alison Knowles and Carolee Schneemann, Jackson Mac Low and Anne Tardos, Jerome Rothenberg, Pierre Joris and Nicole Joris, a band, and more! [8:00 pm]

DECEMBER 14, FRIDAY

City of Fiction
With readings by Victor D. LaValle, John Keene, Maggie Estep and Alan Goldsher. Victor D. LaValle's debut book is a collection of stories titled *Slapboxing With Jesus*. John Keene is the author of *Annotations from New Directions*. Maggie Estep, MTV performance artist, is the author of *Diary of an Emotional Idiot*, and the darkly funny collection of interconnected stories, *Soft Maniacs* (Simon & Schuster). Alan Goldsher's works include *Hard Bob Academy: The Sidemen of Art Blakey's Jazz Messengers* and his debut novel *Jam*. [10:30 pm]

DECEMBER 17, MONDAY

Joshua Beckman and Leslie Davis
Joshua Beckman has published two books of poetry: *Things are Happening* (Copper Canyon / APR first book prize) and *Something I Expected to be Different* (Verse Press). Leslie Davis is the author of *Lucky Pup*, published by Skanky Possum Press. [8:00 pm]

DECEMBER 19, WEDNESDAY

Open Gate: An Anthology of Haitian Creole Poetry
With readings by Paul Laroque, Denizé Lautre, Bob Lapiere, and Pierre-Richard Narcisse. *Open Gate*, edited by Paul Laroque and Jack Hirschman, is the first bilingual collection of modern Haitian Creole poetry available to English readers. Paul Laroque, winner of the Casas de las Americas Poetry Prize in French, was Secretary General of the Association of Haitian Writers Abroad from 1979-

The Semi-Annual Workshop Reading

Featuring readers from the three fall workshops.

JANUARY 28, MONDAY

Michael Clune and Marco Villalobos

Michael Clune was born in Dublin on July 4, 1975, moving to the U.S. when he was 8. He drives a Pontiac Grand Prix, and writes poems that still manages to create a space for contemplation in the midst of extreme emotion, sex, violence, and sci-fi antics. Marco Villalobos's poetry is featured in recent publications of the *Brooklyn Review* and *SPAWN*, a not-for-profit literary arts journal that seeks to nourish the work of young writers. Most recently he's been featured in *Step into A World: A Global Anthology of the New Black Literature*, as well as the forthcoming *Bumrush the Page: A Def Poetry Jam*. [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 30, WEDNESDAY

Mark McMorris and Juliana Spahr

Mark McMorris is the author of four books of poetry: *Palinurus Suite* (paradigm, 1992), *Figures for a Hypothesis* (Leave, 1995), *Moth-Wings* (Burning Deck, 1996), and *The Black Reeds* (University of Georgia Press, 1997). He recently contributed to the special issue of *Callaloo* devoted to emerging male writers and to *An Anthology of New (American) Poetry* from Talisman House Publishers. His fiction has been anthologized in *Ancestral House: The Black Short Story in the Americas and Europe* (Westview, 1995). Juliana Spahr's *Response* (Sun & Moon Press) won the National Poetry Series award. She is also the author of *Everybody's Autonomy: Connective Reading and Collective Identity* (University of Alabama Press) and the tentatively titled *Fuck You—Aloha—I love you* (forthcoming from Wesleyan University Press). With Jena Osman, she co-edits the influential journal *Chain*.

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JANUARY 16, WEDNESDAY

Jack Collom and Harris Schiff

Jack Collom has had his work published in over 100 magazines and anthologies in the US and abroad. His collections of poetry include *Calluses of Poetry* (a CD & book with Ken Bernstein, published by Treehouse Press, 1996), *The Task* (Baksun Books, 1996), *Sunflower* (The Figures, 2000, with Lyn Hejinian), and most recently *Red Car Goes By: Selected Poems 1955-2000* from Tuumba Press. He's also written books designed for teaching writing, including *Poetry Everywhere* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1994, with Sheryl Noethe), and *Moving Windows* (Teachers & Writers Collaborative, 1995). Harris Schiff published the legendary anonymous poetry mimeo mag, *The Harris Review*. His books include *Secret Clouds, I should run for cover but I'm right here*, *In the Heart of the Empire* and *Yo-Yo's with Money* (with Ted Berrigan). His work is widely anthologized in such classic collections as *American Poets Say Goodbye to the 20th Century*. In 1996 he established the pioneer e-zine *Slavery—Cyberzine of the Arts*, which can be accessed at www.cyberpoems.com. [8:00 pm]

JANUARY 18, FRIDAY

"Language Art" Talk That Talk

With Roger Bonair-Agard, Erica Doyle, Monica Ferrel and Mark Nickels. Roger Bonair-Agard is a native of Trinidad & Tobago. He is co-author of *Burning Down the House: Selected Poems from the Nuyorican Poets Cafe's National Poetry Slam Champions* and was the Nuyorican Poets Cafe "Fresh Poet of the Year 1998". He is also the National Poetry Slam Individual Champion of 1999. Erica Doyle's poems, fiction and essays appear in the anthologies *Best American Poetry 2001*, *Voices Rising* and *Gumbo: Fiction by Black Writers*, among others. She is a fellow of Cave Canem: A Workshop and Retreat for African-American Poets and lives in New York City.

(Cont. from page 11)

But did art mean something different to him during this time?

I think so—what he gave up on was the idea of a career, professionalism. His last show at the Fischbach was a total triumph, hundreds of works, some tiny, displayed en masse in vitrines, priced within reach of non-deep pocket fans, as well as collages, constructions, oil paintings: The Works. It was Brainard at his best. So he went out in an incredible blaze of glory, on his own terms, and shifted focus back to what he's always loved doing: making personal art for close friends.

Was he happy with that decision to leave the gallery, and just do whatever he wanted?

He found Gallery Stress extremely burdensome. And I think he suffered because he felt he couldn't be as great as DeKooning.

What does that mean?

I think he underestimated his own oil paintings, and he felt they weren't in the same league. If you can't be the best, give up, which, translated in people's minds, meant he'd given up art. But maybe all he did was give up DeKooning.

Did it make him happy to give up De Kooning?

I'm not sure.

Did it make you happy?

I hate stress—I run into it when I write the words for musicals. The art world, like the theater world, can be such a brutal marketplace. I was glad he was no longer subjected to it. But it was his decision. He helped me enormously because I'd started making postcard collages. I'd spread them around the table, and ask Ron and Pat Padgett, neighbors who have a house downhill, and Joe to look at them. They would circle around the table looking at my collages. This gave me a remarkable pleasure I couldn't tap into as a writer, watching someone read my work. The closest I could get as a writer to this palpable feedback was if somebody laughed at something funny I had written.

So then it's that sense of being in conversation with people, bringing them into the space of the art work? Well, making collages helped me with my musical

Postcards on Parade. I evolved from postcard-sized collages to big ones, backdrop scenery flats for performances, to enhance the songs and dialogues. They ended up hung in an alternative art gallery, track lighting, white walls. My very own art show! Minneapolis! This process helped me discover secrets about my characters. I don't psychoanalyze them—they appear to me, and I just take them as they are and allow them to say what they say. But every so often, their dark parts would materialize in the collages I was making, and I would think, oh my god, is that what that person is really like, underneath?

What did Joe find beautiful?

That's why he was so extraordinary for me, because I had certain dumb ideas about good taste. One of the first presents he ever got for me was an Art Deco fig-

...he didn't stop art, he stopped working with his gallery, but he still did art for friends, people he cared about. It was part of the friendship.

urine, quite large, of two women dressed as sailors—famous vaudevillians: The Dolly Sisters. I thought, now *this* is ugly. Of course now I know it is very beautiful. So he kept opening me up, so I wasn't hemmed in by received good taste.

What is your favorite color?

Red.

Why?

It affects me sensuously. I like red food. I like cinnamon candies. I like rare meat. And fingernails.

Kristin Prevallet writes essays and poetry and lives in Brooklyn. Her most recent chapbook is Red (Second Story Books.)

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poetry

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Stephen Ratcliffe:

Listening to Reading

SUNY Press, 2000.

Idea's Mirror

Potes and Poets, 1999.

Mallarmé: Poem in Prose

Santa Barbara Review Publications, 1998.

To twist a familiar phrase, one might say that Stephen Ratcliffe conceives his work as "left limit poetry, right limit criticism"—he gets infinitely close to both extremes, but finds infinite points in between. And when I use those terms—poetry and criticism—I'm thinking of them as they're most popularly defined, for another way to look at Ratcliffe's work is as a redefinition of these terms in ways that stretch them and push their limits outward.

Three of his recent books illustrate this point. While they remain distinct, their boundaries are porous, allowing themes and even specific phrases and words to pass from one to the other. His recent book of criticism, a collection of diverse essays titled *Listening to Reading*, opens with the very phrase twisted above, thus signaling his affinity with the Zukofsky lineage and specifically that lineage's attention to "the visual/acoustic shape of the poem—on the page, in the air—which is never apart from its meaning." The ensuing introduction defines the impetus of both the essays and his own poetry: "that a poem is less a representation / evidence / likeness of the world than its sound (echo), an event in which the world takes further shape." He remains committed throughout this collection to the notion that the word must be experienced as a real object, both visible and audible, in a real world. The writers he reads and hears in these pieces—from Mallarmé and Stein to Larry Eigner and Robert Grenier, Lyn Hejinian and Mei-Mei Berssenbrugge—are all ones whose works support these tenets or ones allied to them.

Many of the more recent writers that Ratcliffe discusses are also people who've worked in the sort of hybridized critical forms that he employs here, and one of the things that makes this collection so successful is the variety of hybrids he develops. Some of the essays, such as "Idea's Mirror," which discusses Susan Howe's

work, function as homage and elucidation on the one hand and as freestanding, and stunning, pieces of creative writing on the other. It's as if what begins as a secondary source is transformed by its end into a primary one.

The article "Idea's Mirror" is additionally interesting because it's connected, particularly through its title, to his recent book of poetry *Idea's Mirror*. The book can be read either as a single poem or as a book composed of one-line poems, and he keeps the syntax just jumpy enough to prevent any patterns from forming, just disrupted enough that the reader's assumptions and reading habits must be constantly and consciously revised. But there's no doubt of the affinity of these independent lines for each other. They accumulate into a structure, but it's not a predetermined or even a particularly recognizable one. Instead, he replays his vocabulary, images, and evocations so that each gathers volume and weight until we find ourselves in increasingly familiar territory, among familiar characters such as bird, telephone, airplane, bed, the second person, the first person, car.

And though these characters never tell a story, we begin to realize that they might be part of a play, or perhaps somehow part of a movie, a video, a painting, and/or a house by the sea. He gives us a seamless field that fuses experience and representation, both equally real, one the mirror image of the other—which is the idea that opens the essay "Idea's Mirror": "as if work and history were images of one another." The long poem *Idea's Mirror* presumes just that: the recounted story is the lived experience, and vice-versa. This mirror structure is further emphasized by the recurrent images of falling asleep and waking up; not only are these two the flip-sides of each other, they also constitute a marginal state of continual transition. Throughout the book, we're more often waking up—it's an awaking from which we soon awake, and then wake up from. Whether it's waking up from or into representation or reality is determined only by perspective.

The crucial role of point of view is underscored by the recurrent theme of sight—this is all about looking, and thus also about being looked at. The words watching, window, glass, mirror, eye, and light come up again and again. And looking, as it gets more and more con-

stitutive, gets converted into hearing. For instance, we suddenly realize that we've only heard the birds that appear on every page. Toward the end of the book, there is more and more that we only hear—which again brings us back to the thesis of *Listening to Reading*. The connection between the two texts is reinforced by his using the title as a phrase in the poem: "like an idea / inside the body, his heart / enclosed, as if listening to reading / wasn't beginning to wake, bird / sounds." There's an accuracy here, an acute precision to his recording that keeps even something as potentially loaded as birds from becoming sentimental; they can't because they're always real birds—simply the ones that happen to gather outside his window every morning. It's a reality so pervasive that it leaves no room for symbol, emblem, or metaphor. This same reality attends all the nouns in the book; through their repetition, they gradually and meticulously build to a surround, an environment, a place to live.

A earlier book (published in 1998, but written in the late 80s) *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose* shares much strategy and structure with *Idea's Mirror*. Like *Mirror*, it's informed by a much earlier text that never shows up on its surface. In this case, it's Mallarmé's *Le Livre*, his attempt to establish or to track the book that everything in the world exists in order to end up in. In a sense, Ratcliffe's attempt is more direct than Mallarmé's. Into short lines that, as in *Mirror*, form units at the levels of line, page, and entire book, Ratcliffe packs as much of the flickering, piercing, specific detail of days as he can manage. The point of view is closer here than in *Mirror*, keeping the reader's focus too close-in to discern character or scene, but through a weave of repeated words—face, voice, arm, instrument—he again constructs a world entirely present on the page and entirely real in its own terms. The environment he creates is so self-consistent and so solidly built that by the middle of the book, passages that would be lovely to hear in any case—but that would in most lack concrete sense—come to be perfectly sensible, entirely fitting:

in no way the child, reading poems
 whose bloom in the window
 leaves that way, light
 as it was in the ear of its refrain

Out of context, it's striking, but when read after 70 pages, it's somehow also entirely logical, even inevitable.

If the world ends up as a book, so does the writer, and this text is full of oblique equations between text and self: "...a pause 'The Pen' / sound snapped as I continue myself / meaning the last syllable,...."; "how-

ever it breathes the first I / as reading, paint a hand in the window / of an instrument light has made." The recurring use of "instrument" evokes Mallarmé's piece "The Book: A Spiritual Instrument" and, in its repetition, spans the distances between scientific device, musical apparatus, and the collectivity that amounts to spirit. Words, for Ratcliffe, have a magnetic capacity: they act as nets pulling diverse meanings into them, getting huge without ever losing integrity or specificity.

Mallarmé, like *Mirror*, is also intertwined with the book of critical essays. And it, too, keeps turning our attention to the audible. Two of the words that recur most frequently are "voice" and, above all, "ear": "(that is all) the ear" (34); "ear level / the whole time..." (80); "I turned in the ear's / flight..." (94). Phrases such as "(content) reading speech" (7) and "in the other exhibit of metaphor / clarified as speech..." (25) seem to move even more directly toward the themes of *Listening to Reading*. But the clearest link is through the essay titled *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose* that appears in the collection. Written a while after the poetic text and planned as an element in the critical collection, he then borrowed it back to use as an introduction to the poetic text. The note at its end informs us that certain passages are from Mallarmé's texts while other passages are from *Mallarmé: Poem in Prose*. Thus the new text by that name is permeated with a variety of Mallarmés, both processed and unprocessed, and none sounding at all like Mallarmé—but all following a principle of composition that reveals an understanding of the connection between life and work, world and book, and—so evident here—book and book that Mallarmé would have recognized at once as kin to his own.

As is true of all of Ratcliffe's work, these three books are rooted in an affection for the daily world and in a solid belief in its infinity and integrity. By entwining his critical voice with his poetic one, Ratcliffe displays that, far from being contradictory, the poetic and the critical are two complementary modes of inquiry, mirroring each other into a seamless continuum.—COLE SWENSON

Poetry at One Remove: Essays

by John Koethe

University of Michigan Press, 2000.

John Koethe belongs to the tiniest minority in American poetry. He is a professor of philosophy at University of Wisconsin at Milwaukee, and a working poet, a distinction shared by very few. These are two of

the most despised disciplines of our times; but if one had to take the prize, the makers can take solace in knowing they're not *quite* as despised as the wisdom-lovers.

Koethe is well known as a poet in the tradition of Ashbery and Stevens. I first encountered him in *Broadway*, a magazine edited by James Schuyler and Charles North. Koethe was a youthful buddy of poet John Godfrey and was at least peripherally associated with the New York School in the sixties. This is briefly mentioned in his essay "The Absence of a Noble Presence," possibly the most controversial, and therefore valuable, of his essays to the Poetry Project audience. But the great motif of this book is valuable to poets everywhere: "Many poets and readers of poetry hold what seems to me to be an overly narrow view of its range and possibilities, one that insists on the concrete and particular and proscribes the abstract and discursive." He traces this attitude to two factors: the reaction against New Criticism, and the institutionalization of writing programs within academic English departments.

Elaborating on the latter in "Contrary Impulses: The Tension Between Poetry and Theory," Koethe makes several points that on the one hand seem obvious and on the other, should be set in neon lights over the gates of writing programs everywhere: that Theory was always integral to Modernist poetry. That the level of reflectiveness among most poets is simply retrograde (here he names names: Helen Vendler and Jorie Graham, at least in her *The End of Beauty* incarnation). That good poetry does not equal "truthfulness." Indeed, it is this last point that receives delicious treatment: much American poetry gives us the "rhapsodic fallacy" or a "default poetics of 'individual voice' that valorizes authenticity and fidelity to its origins in prepoetic experience or emotion."

The mediocrity of writing programs, Koethe is careful to say, does not arise from formulaic ideations of poetry but just the opposite—they are *too free* of any theoretical orientation. Hence a "default poetics," tolerant but unexamined, humanistic but ahistorical, has proliferated. Koethe acknowledges the exclusionary nature of institutions that do have theoretical bases—including the Poetry Project—but he regards this as a virtue, not a flaw. Although he doesn't mention the possibility, I imagine he sees an intellectual and cultural benefit from the competition between ideas that would result from varied allegiances; it is the lack of allegiances to ideas in our current climate that fosters boring art and boring culture.

But perhaps writing programs are themselves the symptom of a boring culture already in place. During

my week as a visiting writer in the Naropa Summer Program, I saw nothing to criticize in the school's valiant attempt to assemble a faculty rich in competing points of view: it was the students—not all, but a few—who seemed put off by the very notion of conviction. One girl's complaint: "At Harvard when we studied dead white British males, at least we understood they didn't *matter*." A perfect candidate for the sort of writing program Koethe skewers.

But he has some reservations about the avant-garde as well. If there is a guiding spirit to Koethe's poetry and poetics, it is John Ashbery; Koethe, whose career took a different path than many other Ashbery disciples, is in a unique position to criticize his tribe:

Looking at Ashbery's work in aesthetic terms alone makes about as much sense as taking Traherne's *Centuries of Meditation* (with which *Three Poems* has a great deal in common) as a response to the itch to meditate. *Of course* Ashbery is innovative; it is just beyond that point that his poetry begins.

Ashbery's real innovation, he implies, is in his delineation of the self. Whereas the experimental wing of American poetry, which takes inspiration from Ashbery's formal devices, derives a kind of philosophical underpinning from the idea of experimentation itself, Koethe thinks that misses the true import of Ashbery's essentially Romantic spirit. Romanticism, he claims in a recurring motif of the book, derives from Kant's "dynamical sublime" where subjectivity contests its objective circumstance (i.e. DEATH). In "Absence of a Noble Presence" Koethe discusses the problematics of Ashbery's influence in terms of his followers' rejection of "many of the most familiar elements of human experience"—a notion that echoes a delicate question Ann Lauterbach once posed about Language poetry's denial of mortality.

Whether or not we count ourselves as Romantic poets, Koethe's essays clarify issues that most of us have only a very poor vocabulary for. His is not a style I associate with critical theory—I don't think he uses the word "ideology" at all—but he writes very passionately (and extensively) on Ashbery; provides short appreciations of James Schuyler and a 1930's poet who died young, Joan Murray; illuminates competing notions of the poetic self using Descartes, Hume, Kant and Wittgenstein; and is matter-of-factly autobiographical throughout it all, as if there were no essential separation between one's life and one's thinking. Koethe does us all a service, reminding us, especially in our new, post-9/11 era, that "our notions of freedom and autonomy derive from our capacity for higher-order reflection."—ANGE MLINKO

Earliest Worlds: Two Books

by Eleni Sikelianos
Coffeehouse Books, 2001.

From syllable to sequence, signs to semantics, Eleni Sikelianos is among the poets inaugurating a post-millennial dynamics of form, one which links the cerebral with the emotional, the rational with the irrational—though she's arriving at a fuller expression of humanism with what might seem at first to be unlikely means.

One of the stylistic enablers in Sikelianos's new book, *Earliest Worlds*, is the language of science, described at its inception by Spratt, Boyle and others, as a sterilized language devoid of rhetorical feature. Since the 17th century, the opposition between the objectivity of science and the subjectivity of the humanities has haunted every aspect of society, the marginalization of poetry being only one effect of the fact/value split. Sikelianos, a former biology major, instigates a curious reversal—the factual language of science partakes of the fluidity of self, the fluid self infiltrates the domain of science. Autobiographical components mix with scientific laws in the form of proofs or counterproofs; the self performs experiments and presents evidence; depersonalized facts betray their personalized frame; and so on. The constructed knowledge of both science and self has perhaps never been so closely intertwined. At every level in the poetry, from the stammering phonemes through to the segmentation of poems within the series, facts and values tussle, fight, merge.

Amazed by the porous boundary between the objective and the subjective in *Earliest Worlds*, I sent Sikelianos an email, asking about her interest in bridging science and poetry. In her reply, she writes, "Both poetry and the sciences speak to ecologies of permutation that can let any new animal or plant or word or number in (which will throw the whole thing not out of whack but into a new system)." The holistic model of interdependency and acceptance extends to Sikelianos' perception of self. She continues, "I became interested in letting all parts of the self and the life it leads and has led into the poem—say, what I believe and argue for in the day, the 'stories' or life of childhood, the life that was mine before I 'became' a poet, how I might talk to my mother or someone on the bus..."

This tendency toward inclusion, and its concomitant urge to transform, is inscribed in Sikelianos' prosody. The line, with its "variable" or "elastic" foot, is a remarkable feature of *Earliest Worlds*. At times the foot appears to be in a perpetual state of transmutation—it can be a few words long or stretch across the

page, build into stanzas of varying length or isolate itself in a patch of white. Consequently, there is very little use of lexical repetition as a rhythmic device within the line and scarcely any repetition of form from poem to poem. Some works are anchored to the left margin, some are in open field, some are in prose with poetic line breaks folded in, some are layed-out as solid text blocks—the exact opposite of the rigorously contained forms which dominated American poetry only a decade ago.

And yet the mutability of Sikelianos' line—another declension of permuting ecologies—is surprisingly coherent and, even more importantly, consistently and overtly musical. *Earliest Worlds* exhibits an accomplished lyricism that produces, in my opinion, an almost intimate experience of hearing, as if the dialogic frontier of language were subject to some form of intensely private loyalty.

Sikelianos reminds us that the sciences of language, and the languages of science, belong to the dialects of the self. Facts and values, it turns out, aren't at all split—it's only our institutions that make them so. The experience—or the experiment—of being alive, Sikelianos shows us, is a marvellous, evolutionary blend of the two.—DAWN-MICHELLE BAUDE

To Repel Ghosts

by Kevin Young
Zoland Books, 2001.

Word on the street is that Zoland Books has gone out of business. Sad if true, but I'm glad that one of their last publications was Kevin Young's *To Repel Ghosts*, a "biography" in poems of the late 1980s artist and international art world star Jean-Michel Basquiat. The book is a sprawling, ambitious project—part-biography, part-double album (as conceived by Young), part-epic study of 20th century African-American cultural iconography. In treating his arrangement of work as a double album, Young has taken on the subject of Basquiat's life and re-imagined the details as the book's rhythm section—"an extended riff" on the artist rather than a straight biography. Using a largely flush-left collection of triplets to carry his poetic structure, Young pushes sound to the surface without sacrificing fluidity (in terms of story telling) or quickness and cutting (in terms of syntactic maneuvering).

Young also adopts a number of Basquiat's artistic gestures—cross outs, copyright symbols, street signs, re-articulations of Black heroes and stereotypes—to create a continuous, multi-leveled sense of engagement between the poetry and Basquiat's art. Basquiat's can-

vases are followed for information to put into the poems (including using painting titles as poem titles: "Self-Portrait as a Heel, part one," etc.) and directions for a broader application of the condition of Basquiat's place in the usurious, Warhol-centered New York art scene. A particular highlight of the book is a suite of poems dedicated to and spoken from the perspective of early 20th century boxer Jack Johnson (first African-American heavyweight champ in the States), the insidious trappings of his blazing rise to fame functioning as a kind of parallel to Basquiat's trip:

THE FIX: 5 April 1915

That fight with Willard was a fix
not a faceoff. Out of the ring
three years, jonesing

for the States, I struck a deal
to beat the Mann
Act—one taste of mat

& I'd get
let back home...

("Jack Johnson")

Cartoons, cartoon speak, various Kansas City Monarchs' lineups (Negro League baseball team), singers, musicians, graffiti artists, "artworld" artists (e.g.: Warhol, whose sketchy relationship with Basquiat is particularly detailed, and Schnabel—whose film bio of Basquiat is trumped by *To Repel Ghosts*, in this reviewer's opinion) are cut in and out of the poems with a mapmaker's precision. Young is often looking more at the culture around Basquiat than into a constructed elaboration of Basquiat's character. That in mind, in pulling all of this material together Young conjures up a large number of 80s-era ghosts, including that of Michael Stewart, the young graffiti artist beaten to death by members of the NYPD:

two cops, keystoneed
pounding a beat,
pummel

a black face—scape
goat, sarcophagus
uniform-blue

with sticks. The night
Michael Stewart snuck
on the tracks

& cops caught him
tagging
a train—THIRD RAIL

("Defacement" (1983))

There has been a renewed interest in poetry as a source of historical and social documentation lately (Ed Sanders' verse history of America and bio-in-verse of Allen Ginsberg, Dale Smith's chronicle of Cabeza de Vaca's travels in *American Rambler*), and *To Repel Ghosts* represents another significant advance in that department. Perhaps the thing to do with *To Repel Ghosts* is to read it and then look at Basquiat's paintings; read it and then watch the Schnabel film *Basquiat*; read it and then read Greg Tate's essay on Basquiat, "Fly Boy in the Buttermilk" (recommended by Young in the book's liner notes). Or just read it. One of the low-level epiphanies born from our current state of catastrophe and war has been the reinforcement of reading as a function necessary for the survival of the species. *To Repel Ghosts* may not quite speak to a reality drenched with terrorism, but it does speak to a reality of blurred, disfigured, dynamic set of racial and aesthetic boundaries that remains an inexorable fact of these times.—ANSELM BERRIGAN

Argento Series

by Kevin Killian

Krupskaya, 2001.

Many of the horror films made by the director Dario Argento show him to be as enamored with *mise en scène* as he is with character and plot. In *Tenebrae*, for instance, before fully registering the character's terror at having her hand chopped off by an axe, Argento has her sweep her fresh stump of an arm in an arcing motion that causes the spurting blood to momentarily create a striking Abstract Expressionist-like composition on the white wall behind her. *Suspiria*, perhaps Argento's most stylized film, is suffused with reds, blues, and yellows intensified via a manipulation of the Technicolor camera's three-strip process. Meanwhile, the camera—in its fascination with carefully designed environments many contemporary visual artists might themselves be willing to give an arm for—frequently positions the actresses and actors in the corner or side of the frame in order to encompass as much of the haunted and violent setting as possible.

Argento's fascination with *mise en scène* occasionally causes his narratives to lose their moorings. At the same time, his concern for setting and milieu means his characters are always situated within a larger, usually malevolent, context. In this sense, his films are like tragedies pointing toward a set of conditions more cultural and historical than existential. Unlike conventional horror films, the violence that transpires isn't the result of some lone freak sporting a hockey mask,

razor-sharp fingernails, or chainsaw who interrupts an otherwise idyllic summer camp, pubescent slumber party, or cozy family setting. Instead, the very environment of his films is structured by carnage, death, and, in the midst of it all, beauty and a lingering touch of innocence and pleasure, i.e., all the elements of tragedy.

In Kevin Killian's book of poems *Argento Series*, Killian uses many of the themes and methods of Argento's films to reflect and refract the devastation that AIDS has inflicted on the literary and social communities of which Killian has been a member for the past two decades, particularly the San Francisco gay community. In Killian's revisioning of Argento's films, the victim spells the killer's name H-I-V "on a misted porcelain surface" right before she dies. As in *Suspiria*, the color red saturates these poems, and signifies an attack on both individual physiologies and social bodies: "a possible poet began to disintegrate / away across the wide border red ribbon swath of the US." *Argento Series* is a unique and remarkable book that personally responds to the suffering caused by AIDS and the lack of information frequently surrounding it.

As a result, it's an overwhelmingly sad book that displays a skillful writerly poise in rarely indulging this sadness. For despite the temptation offered by a vertiginous slide toward incomprehension and tragic silence, Killian never stops trying to make sense of it all, partly because he knows that silence, however tragic, can be a form of complicity. After all, "SILENCE - DEATH" is the political slogan ACT UP made famous in the '80s. He writes in "Four Flies on Gray Velvet," a poem titled after an early film by Argento:

As one by one, the men I knew and loved, or disliked
leave this planet due to a rapacious virus
my widow wear gets lots of use
in the middling funeral march hare nightmare
that's the way of our times, I know, but . . .

Killian's strategy for depicting this sense of ruin is similar to the experience of an Argento film, in that the reader of Killian's poems is forced to look for meaning in the *mise en scène* first and the narrative second. It's also what assures the reader of Killian's intimacy with the details he presents. At other moments, Killian's disruption of conventional modes of narration functions like a bobbing spotlight that illuminates for the camera a killer or victim as she or he runs through a dark wood at night.

Yet for all of its very serious concerns, there's an abundance of humor and delight in *Argento Series*. Much of this occurs in allusions, references, and jokes that Killian shares with the different communities with which his book is in dialogue. This helps break down

the isolation of grief, and points to Killian's deep involvement with marginalized groups enduring the effects of AIDS, cancer (Kathy Acker is a recurring figure in the book), discrimination, and neglect. There's also a sense of optimism as these alternative communities continue to search for meaning and fulfillment on the edge of mainstream U.S. society. Thus, Killian argues for the big picture; and in doing so, he's a fun and witty guide who looks first and foremost at how subcultures fashion their everyday worlds of friends, lovers, poetry, media, leisure, and work.

Just as the camera's subjective point of view in Argento's films implicates the viewer and makes her or him participatory in the action, so, too, does Killian's *Argento Series* make the reader a participant in history, and not simply an observer of it. This is the avant-garde as organic (if so, can it still be called an avant-garde?), committed to the alternative cultures within which it's created, and asserting the capacity for poetry to be both critical and affirmative in the midst of uncertainty and even death. —ALAN GILBERT

The Idler Wheel

by Avery E.D. Burns

Manifest Press, Oakland, CA 2000

In *The Pound Era*, Hugh Kenner observes that modernist reading and writing discern "patterns of diction and gather meaning from non-consecutive arrays. We can tell one page of Ulysses from another at a glance; to our grandfathers they would have seemed as featureless as pages from a telephone directory." Avery Burns' first full-length collection, *The Idler Wheel*, clarifies what many contemporary poets have derived from their modernist predecessors by presenting a poetry that is grounded in what Kenner describes as "an aesthetic of glimpses." Moving from page to page, the reader encounters tiny but pithy fragments of text (cf. p. 75 whose contents are only, "spin faster/silly top"). These are not tentative poems, and they are not merely spare or economical. By their own formal and internal necessity these pieces refuse to elaborate on their own landscape. They create their universe via concision and hint. They land on the eye a pixel at a time, and enter the mouth grain by grain—sometimes with the sweetness of a sugar crystal, at other times with the sharpness of salt:

i you lived it
the range of stratification
given like spare change
rarely or not at all
people cover one eye
and hope for the best

In an understated way, *The Idler Wheel* is an ambitious book. Though this may not be apparent to the reader, the collection is informed by a number of formal constraints. Burns looks to Heraclitus' fragments as models of ellipticism and brevity; he also permits Heraclitan concerns for flux, change and paradox to influence the content of the work. At the same time, Burns has determined the shape of the 129 poems of the book on the basis of rhetorical strategies that are listed in Latin in the notes at the end of the book. The book's success, then, can be measured by how little these poems feel beholden to the formal rules from which they have emerged. Happily, the constraints on form have helped the author to focus his message.

Additionally, Burn's preoccupation with seasonal cycle and repetition more broadly offer the reader a sense of passage through a quasi-reliable rhythm. This pattern can have a pleasing, meditative quality in some of the more lyrical pieces, but just as frequently that sense of circularity is observed wryly and pointedly:

repetitive movements
mark your opponent's game
strike their habit hard

The world, as depicted by Burns, is not an entirely reassuring place. But it can nonetheless offer up political commentary and even observations on the literary community that are acute and wickedly funny. Mixed in with his rather pessimistic outlook is the occasional affirmation: "look it's real/i love it!" and passages that can only be described as beautiful:

liquid acts as container
and thread
as if the symbolic
omnivore
slipped its prior associations
of the conjoined world
our place is to repeat
ourselves
to seek refuge in
similarity
conformity that depends
on the shape of the spoon

I take it as encouraging and indeed a sign of boldness that Burns never eschews the lyric, imagistic pleasures of poetry. He creates a poetry that enjoys its own idiosyncratic beauty, given the limitations of word, page, universe. Despite his embeddedness in an aesthetic of glimpses, it is unlikely that Burns has Pound's faith that "Points define a periphery." Instead, *The Idler Wheel* deftly knits disparate ideas and images together into a circle in which the world is more suggested than certain. —ELIZABETH ROBINSON

Leaving Lines of Gender: A Feminist Genealogy of Language Writing

by Ann Vickery
Wesleyan University Press, 2000.

Australian critic Ann Vickery's *Leaving Lines of Gender*, a Nietzschean genealogy of several women writers associated with Language Poetry, attempts to correct both the "amnesia" of anthologies and the effect of even the most sympathetic histories of Language writing to "shift women's work to the margins." Her interpretations of the works and authors at hand, however, imply a view of poetry in which the relative value of what a writer intends—or worse, the aesthetic strangeness of the look of the work on the page—is more significant than what she actually says. That said, the book does present a thorough history of the production and distribution of Language poetry, putting editorial and broadcast projects such as Lyn Hejinian's Tuumba Press, Kathleen Fraser's *How(ever)* magazine, and Susan Howe's "Poetry" radio program on the same scale of importance for the movement as the theoretical apparatus manned by note-card wielding men. Significantly, she does not go the next step of assessing that importance for non-Language-poetry society.

Arguing with accounts of the history of Language poetry (such as Bob Perelman's and Michael Davidson's), Vickery provides details that yield a more complicated picture. For instance, while Language poetry is often described as having emerged at roughly the same time in New York and San Francisco, Vickery gives equal place to Washington D.C., looking at the work of Lynne Dreyer, Joan Retallack, and Tina Darragh. While some Language writers have presented the movement as a socially marginalized group (i.e. a minority), Vickery cites a *Socialist Review* article by Ron Silliman that waives those claims. Perhaps the most destructive overstatement that Vickery challenges is the idea that the Language writers acted as a united front, combining high modernist investment in contemporary philosophy and experimental form with Marxist critique. Vickery's interviews and gleanings from the archives reveal that this perception annoyed some of the original participants as much as it annoyed writers who criticized the movement. Viz. Susan Howe in a letter to Hejinian: "much of the work produced by L-A-N-G-U-A-G-E poets is so damn CERTAIN." Vickery gets a repudiation of the Language mystique from Charles Bernstein himself:

"Recently, a scholarly poet friend was telling me that he thought he would have to undertake two years of background reading in philosophy and literary theory and lin-

guistics to find out what L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E was all about." He argues that, had his friend done so, "he would have read far more comprehensively in [the] area than most of the poets published in L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E."

Vickery in turn is careful not to equate the equals sign magazine with the movement, but this begs the question, what constituted Language writing? She seems to have settled on something like, "Anything by a writer who doesn't deny affiliation with Language writing," the contrapositive of Silliman's definition of a language poet: "Anyone who has been accused of being one." The book is divided roughly in half between essays on various means of distributing poetry (presses, anthologies, talks) and essays on writers; aside from the authors mentioned above Vickery discusses Bernadette Mayer, Hannah Weiner, Fanny Howe, and Rae Armantrout. The chapters on Hejinian and Susan Howe are solid and vivid appraisals of two of the best known writers of the movement. Readers of this magazine may have special interest in the chapter Vickery devotes to Mayer, in which Mayer is literally treated as a saint (despite the Church's sensible ban on beatifying the living). Mayer's 1971 book *Memory* and her first workshops at the Poetry Project that year are tentatively put forward as beginning brackets for the history of Language writing. A few pages later, Barrett Watten (whose journal *This*, founded in 1971, is often identified as starting the movement) is quoted dismissing Mayer's work as "too much possibility/not enough necessity." And despite seeing Mayer's turn from experiment to lyric as a parallel to the change in John Ashbery's work between *The Tennis Court Oath* and *Rivers and Mountains*, Vickery dismisses Mayer at the beginning of the following chapter:

While writers like Bernadette Mayer show poetry and life to be mutually informing (often in strange and unexpected ways), Joan Retallack explores this relationship more fully in a practice she calls "poethics."

While I read both Mayer and Retallack (and while I'm well aware of the difficulty of writing a decent segue) I find this comparison laughable and anti-feminist. Readers concerned with demonstrations of mastery will be pained to see pi described as an infinite number; and Marianne Moore misquoted as having written "I, too, dislike it./However, there is a place for it." More numbing than these statements is the constant vagueness and circumlocution; the book is filled with paragraphs that wander off and sentences that appear to have been edited about as much as the following: "Writing that began considering the formal concerns of Language writing featured in *o-9*, a journal that she coedited with Vito Acconci in the late six-

ties." It's possible to parse this as meaning that Mayer and Acconci's journal anticipated the concerns of Language writing; how, though, to read this:

While many women writers are now producing collections of essays, it is to be hoped that such work—by its very nature—resists the call for an expedient illumination of their author's poetry, encouraging instead new ways in which poetry will be identified, read, and valued.

Identifying, reading, and valuing—sounds like the old ways to me, that is, when it sounds like anything at all. A more reasonable hope might be that future literary movements avoid the divisive economy of praise and indifference guarded by self-appointed leaders. Vickery identifies an insight of Rachel Blau du Plessis's, that usually literary movements only allow one woman in—may future groups continue the struggle towards parity. In all, Vickery presents a literary movement arguably less backwards in its personal politics than the beats or the Black Mountain poets, but nevertheless one in which women have to fight not to be crowded out by talkative men.—JORDAN DAVIS

The Paris Stories

by Laird Hunt

Smokeproof Press, 2000.

At the center of Laird Hunt's *Paris Stories* there is a relationship between two unnamed characters. We see them in glimpses, on the streets of Paris, in cafes, a hotelroom. They tell each other their dreams. Sometimes we glimpse them separately and then we hear about what they've done in letters beginning "Dear Sweetheart." Interspersed with their stories are fragments of anecdotes, sometimes quite humorous, relating to an historical Paris (Hunt goes as far back as retelling a story from the life of Villon). The relationship between the historic stories and the he/she stories aren't clear in any obvious way and part of the pleasure of this dreamlike book is that we can read the stories either as links or as independent units. The structure feels random—there's a lot of airiness and white space. It's to Hunt's credit that he doesn't bludgeon us with the need to make any connections. The connections between the sections (or lack of them) mirror the improvisatory dialogue between the characters who seem to have invented a new way of talking.

Hunt uses the photographic eye to capture the moment so that a glimpse can seem to have the same intensity as something revelatory. The nature of a glimpse is that what you look at isn't going to be there when you look that way again so that you better get it right the first time. The book is in black and white—

Jacques Rivette's amazing movie *Paris Belongs To Us* keeps flickering through my memory. The writing is very speedy:

While I was waiting I unwrapped one of the pieces of cheese broke off some of it tasted was not satisfied so unwrapped the other piece of cheese followed the same procedure was satisfied this time and was still satisfying myself with that second piece of cheese when the old woman from upstairs appeared in the courtyard. She wore a grey skirt black shoes thick grey stockings that sagged slightly at the ankles and a blue cardigan sweater buttoned twice. She stopped in the middle of the courtyard pulled a piece of tissue from a pocket I couldn't see blew her nose so softly I couldn't hear then stood up very straight; and the sun fell smack on her white hair and I thought of the Eiffel Tower it was once a docking station for dirigibles. I looked away for a moment and—if there is a point to any of this it is this—when I looked for her again she was gone.

The best moments are when Hunt pushes the words outwards, opening up a moment in time so it can include everything. The rush to get it all is what makes this passage remarkable (and there are many like it in this book), with the last sentence acting as a kind of denouement, a statement of purpose. If you don't grasp what you see in the moment it's going to disappear.

If there's a climax to the book, it's the short play towards the end, where the characters investigate the nature of landscapes (the blue hills of Kentucky, the cornfields of Indiana), and continue to exchange stories, make associations. What they don't talk about is the nature of their relationship—nor (like the disembodied couple in Hemingway's "Hills Like White Elephants") do they seem to be walking around in a blinding snowstorm of guilt or denial. Telling and seeing without fear of reprisal, the way one glimpse or one story folds into the next, makes them immune from the verbal shadows that cloud most relationships. Communication between two people has never sounded more innocent.—LEWIS WARSH

Homeless At Home

by Gloria Frym

Creative Arts Book Company, 2001.

The fifty-four letters in Gloria Frym's *Homeless At Home* take the form of sonnets, prose paragraphs, poems in stanzas, thin columns of words. Each poem begins "Dear Father" and the repetition locks the reader into an illusion of stability, of sameness. When I read the book a second time, I tried to ignore the address—refused to vocalize it in my mind—and in some cases the poems felt freer once they were liberated from the epistolary context. Ultimately, though, repeating the address—"Dear Father"—is like taking a pulse of the book at every turn. It gives the book a

charge and creates momentum. Frym forces us to repeat ourselves, it's like saying a prayer, and then rewards us—in each poem—with something anarchal, something other.

Frym's model is Jack Spicer's *After Lorca*—poems/ letters from the living to the dead—but the seriality and wry fatalistic humor of *Homeless At Home* also links it to the later Spicer of *Language* and *A Book of Poetry*.

The idea of a book of letters from a daughter to a dead father summons up the confessional ("Dear Daddy") but there is nothing of that here. Frym is closer in form and scope to Charles Olson's *Maximus Poems* ("Anxiety," she writes, "is nothing more than an extension of form.") As the title *Homeless At Home* implies, the personal goes beyond the familial love/hate relationship that needs to be reconstructed or talked about and opens out into a wider social context that is continually unfolding.

At the end of Letter 14, Frym includes a PS: "This is how narrative actually grows, adding a few words at a time. A mark now a bump then a chunk. You just never noticed." This is the daughter/writer both advising and admonishing. The language of "bump" and "chunk" is childlike, but the father missed it all. In Frym's poem the narrative goes beyond accumulation, not just the amassing of words (or experiences) but the progression. Something is always lingering, something unsaid is waiting in the wings. Unfulfilled expectation is at the poem's core, but Frym never calls it that; the narrative overflows with expectancy—what's to come, what's up ahead, what's possible. And with missed chances as well. When someone dies there are the things left unsaid—there is always something left unsaid—that fill in the blanks in the argument that then ensues. The most beautiful of the poems, and one of the longest in the book, #31, is written with a nod to Williams' variable foot: "I have known men and / I have known women / and you / know nothing / about me from my telling / you this nothing / except the ones who know me and you / know who you are."

Frym—who is also a fiction writer of great empathy—is yearning towards the real, trying to undo the artifice of the relationship. The metrics is one way of keeping the energy in check—it can only be released in increments—and draws all the attention to itself. There's an underlying eroticism here (this could be said of the entire book) which plays off the ascetic choice of words; the pointedness of the plain speech defies misunderstanding. The child testing her limits and the lover trying to please pass through one another in the corridors of eternity. With this poem, which reconciles everything, the book leaps into starlight.—LEWIS WARSH



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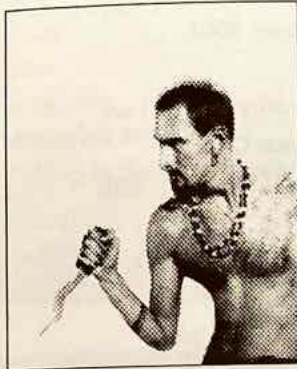
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Magazines

Aufgabe #1

Editor: E. Tracy Grinnell.
Contributors: Fanny Howe, Rod Smith,
Miles Champion, others.

Ixnay #6

Editors: Chris McCreary, Jen McCreary
(ixnay press c/o McCreary, 1328 Tasker
Street, Philadelphia, PA 19148).
Contributors: Kevin Varrone, Elizabeth
Treadwell, Tom Devaney, K. Silem
Mohammad, K. Weiser, others.

Mungo vs. Ranger #5

Editors: Jeremiah McNichols, Roger Snell
(632 Lyon St., San Francisco, CA 94117).
Contributors: Mary Burger, Marcella
Durand, Hoa Nguyen, Dale Smith, others.

Ur Vox #1

Editor: Lee Ballentine.
Contributors: Andrew Joron, Kristin
Prevallet, Elizabeth Robinson, others.

Books

Michael Basinski

**Strange Things Begin to Happen When a
Meteor Crashes in the Arizona Desert**
Zygoté Press, 2001.

Dodie Bellamy

Cunt-Ups
Tender Buttons Books, 2001.

Bill Berkson

Fugue State
Zoland Books, 2001.

Taylor Brady

Microclimates
Krupskaya Press, 2001.

Robin Caton

The Color of Dusk
Omnidawn, 2001.

Cydney Chadwick

Flesh and Bone
Avec Books, 2001.

Jack Collom

Red Car Goes By (Sel. Poems 1955-2000)
Tuumba Press, 2001.

Victor Hernandez Cruz

Maraca, New & Selected Poems
Coffee House Press, 2001.

Susan Edwards

**The Wild West Wind / Remembering
Allen Ginsberg**
Baksun Books, 2000.

Edward Foster

The Angelus Bell
Spuyten Duyvil, 2001.

Anne Frost

All Things Being Equal
Incidental Press (summikaipa@earth-
link.net), 2001.

Peter Ganick

Podiums: Autobiographical Café Fictions
Potes & Poets Press, 2001.

Barbara Guest & Kevin Killian

Often
Kenning, 2001.

Donald Guravich

A Brief History of Flying
Sardines Press/Third Ear Press, 2001.

Robert Harris

She Who is Alive
The Figures, 2000.

Alejandra Ibarra

Santa Perversa & Other Erotic Poems
Calaca Press, 2001.

Edith A. Jenkins

Selected Poems
Black Star Series, 2001.

Jensen/Daniels, Publishers:

Chapbooks by Ed Friedman, Serge
Gavronsky, Burt Kimmelman, David
Landrey, Joseph Lease, Christopher
Sawyer-Laucanno, Susan M. Schultz,
Daniel Wolff.

Jack Kimball

Frosted
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Manship

Detour, 2001.

Dorothy Trujillo Lusk

Ogress Oblige
Krupskaya Press, 2001.

Nathaniel Mackey

ATET A.D.
City Lights, 2001.

Michael Magee

Morning Constitutional
Spencer Books/Handwritten Press, 2001.

Anne Portugal

Nude
Translated by Norma Cole
Kelsey St. Press, 2001.

Pascal Quignard

On Wooden Tablets: Apronesia Avitia
Translated by Bruce X.
Burning Deck, 2001.

Keith Waldrop

Semiramis If I Remember
Avec Books, 2001.

**Writings through John Cage's Music,
Poetry, and Art**

Ed. David W. Bernstein
and Christopher Hatch.
The University of Chicago Press, 2001.

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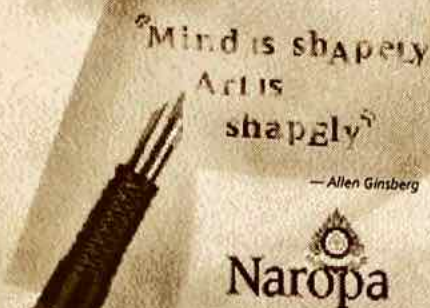
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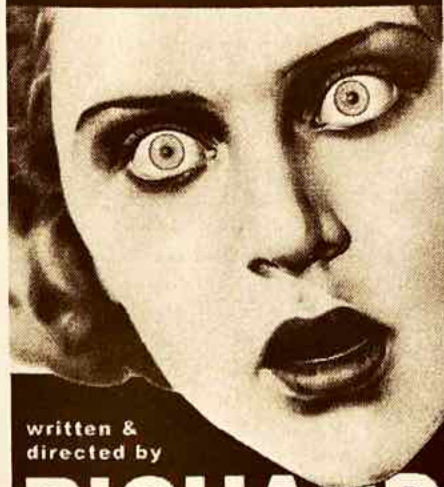


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