

# poetry project

NEWSLETTER

APRIL/MAY 1997 ISSUE #165

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## WHAT'S INSIDE

An Interview with John Godfrey  
by Lisa Jarnot

Poetry and Community  
by Kim Lyons

Jack Spicer Vs. "The Maidens," 1958  
by Kevin Killian

## REVIEWS OF

Juliana Spahr

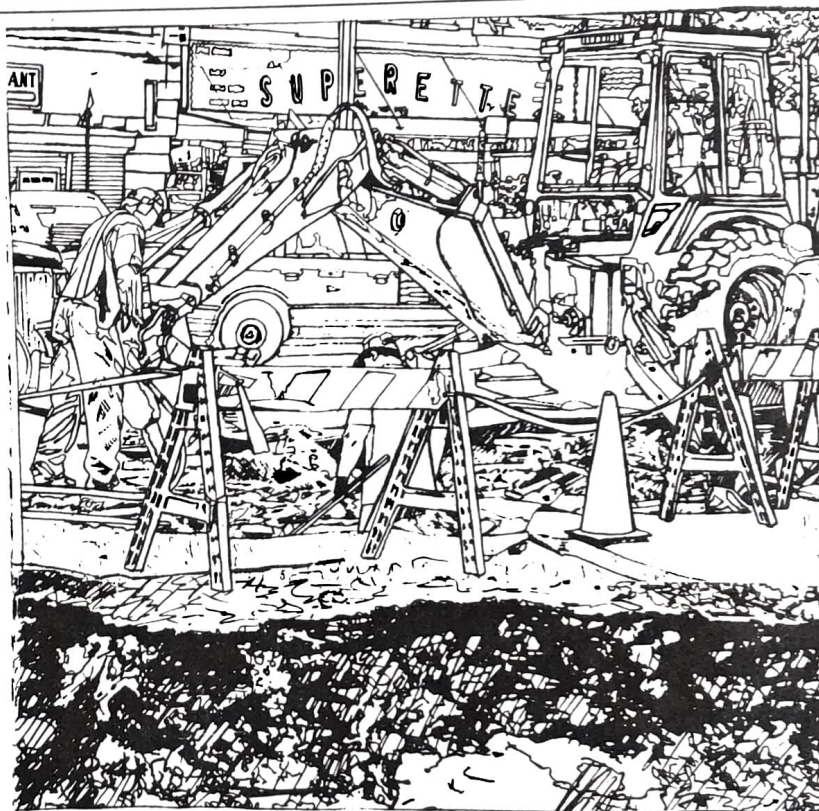
Wang Ping

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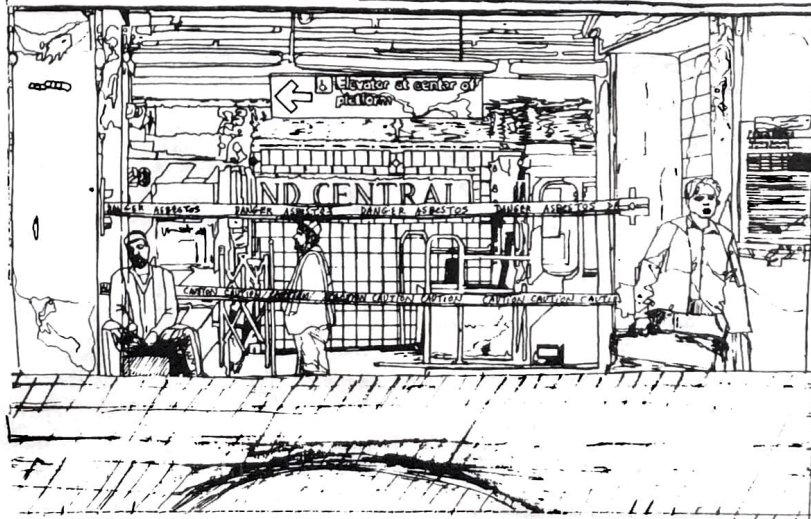
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5 To Bowling Green.  
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Late nights take 4





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Seattle Correspondent  
Minneapolis Correspondent  
Washington Correspondent  
Internet Correspondent

#### SEATTLE

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# regional updates

Seattle Correspondent: Laynie Browne

Minneapolis Correspondent: Mark Nowak

Washington Correspondents: Joe Ross & Rod Smith

Internet Correspondent: Loss Pequeno Glazier

## SEATTLE, WA

I am sitting with novelist Matthew Stadler, one of the curators of the Rendezvous reading series, in a cafe on Capitol Hill, known for the complicated leaf patterns artfully floating atop their cappuccinos, in order to find out the latest news on the soon to be open Richard Hugo House, a new literary arts center in Seattle. How did all of this come about? Fiction writer Linda Jaech is the generous benefactor who purchased and donated a pink Mediterranean Revival mansion for the purpose, and provided a five year budget to keep it running. The house will host the Rendezvous reading series, provide a meeting space, classrooms, zine archives, desktop publishing equipment, and a retreat for writers. The center has also launched a regular publication called Wordscape, which provides a guide to the literary scene in Washington. The center's director is poet Frances McCue, author of *Stenographer's Breakfast*. Who would have thought that there would be any resistance to the idea? But unfortunately, some residents in Capitol Hill oppose the idea not because they are against a literary meeting place, but because they don't want it in their backyard. Headlines in Seattle read: "Plans to Turn Mansion Into Literary Retreat Create A Storm." The property is zoned for single family use, and some residents "fear the world beyond" their "hedges" will "ruin" their neighborhood. One other note, a memorable performance from Kenward Elmslie this week singing and reading from *Postcards On Parade*. The show worked well in the small cabaret style theater which now hosts the Rendezvous series. He was extremely

entertaining to say the least. The audience kept swooning and falling over their tables in laughter. In short, I'm thankful for such an enlivening winter wake up.

## MINNEAPOLIS, MN

Newz from the Minne-Apple? The University of Minnesota dipped into small press-ville w/ its "Alternative Verbal Arts" series (organized by Maria Damon and Brian Horihan) that brought us readings and performances by Dreamtime Village and Xexoxial Endarchy co-founder Miekal And, novelist and Fiber Artists w/ Nerve director Carolyn Erler, myself, Standing Stones Press editor Jonathan Brannen, Detour Press co-editor Gary Sullivan, and Erik Belgum, whose VOYS spoken-word CD label has just brought out its much-anticipated inaugural issue: Raymond Federman reading from "The Voice in the Closet." Belgum's "Retirement Fund: A Chamber Opera," a collaboration with Japan-based computer music composer Eric Lyon, has also just been released. Contact him at belgu003@gold.tc.umn.edu about ordering copies (while they last!). Other interesting Nordic tidbits? Moyer Bell just released Diane Glancy's *The Only Piece of Furniture in the House*, and In the Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theater staged a remarkable production of Gabriel Garcia Marquez's "A Very Old Man with Enormous Wings," with poet Roy McBride intoning the anti-Minne-Apple Tourist Handbook mantra: "And in the Midwest a family decided NOT to go to the Mall of America." Finally, the appearance of another new literary mag, *Lightning & Ash*, sent shivers of hope across this north-central metropolis, and included fine work from both well-known poets (John Taggart, Rosmarie Waldrop, Theodore Enslin, etc.) and burgeoning local talent (John Colburn, Jeffry Little, etc.); *Lightning & Ash* is available from SPD.

## WASHINGTON, DC

Down here in DC we brighten the day. MLA was here. 3 group readings on three consecutive days (not at MLA) a total of 33 poets & nobody went too long. I happen to know that this has never happened before & may never ever ever happen again. We're lookin' forward to readings by Tina Darragh, Tom Raworth, Lyn Hejinian, Lisa Jarnot, a tribute to Tim Dlugos, and a Silvana Straw & Kenny Carroll sighting at the Meow: *Spoken Word from the Black Cat* CD release. reading. Heather Fuller's perhaps this is a rescue fantasy will be out soon from Edge. Still, we miss all those fabulous poets who were here in December. Why can't we all be in the same place?

## THE INTERNET

For brilliance in adding poetry to the Web, have a look at "For Larry Eigner" by Robert Grenier (<http://www.concentric.net/~lndb/grenier/lg100.htm>). The one paragraph introduction to these pages consists of an explanatory note by Karl Young. The suite Young suggests, is in "traditional gallery form, with each page fully visible on the computer screen"—but delivered via a conceptual arrangement that also shows innovation. The work? Extraordinary! Grenier's full-color visual poems exhibit beautifully via this medium. This tribute to Eigner is not to be missed. New author works online? Try pages for Clayton Eshleman, John Kinsella, and Michele Leggott new in the EPC author gallery (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors>). Interested in that more familiar medium? How about an extensive roll call of those dizzyingly enjoyable paper-based forays into circulating verse? Catch a read of the online "List of Experimental Poetry/ Art Magazines" (<http://wings.buffalo.edu/epc/authors/selby/current.html>). Enthusiastic thanks go to Spencer Selby for his labors to produce this excellent source of interesting and provocative vibrant little magazines.



# announcements

## Jo Ann Wasserman Leaves The Project

Jo Ann Wasserman, the Project's Program Coordinator, is leaving in June for Colorado to pursue life in open spaces. We'll miss her like crazy and, whether you're aware of it or not, so will you. We wish her the best—short winters, cool summers, big skies and great exploits.

## Paul Cummings (1933-1977)

While I was getting ready for bed I remembered that we hadn't spoken in a few weeks and reminded myself to call him in the morning. We usually talked on the phone every couple of weeks and went out to lunch once or twice a month. That was our routine and, except for a few interruptions, it had been for years. When I taught at Berkeley in the Spring of '94 and '95, we talked on the phone at least once a month and he probably sent me a half-a dozen or so postcards about the "state of the art world." He put more into the friendship than I did, and that is painful for me to think about now. I don't think that I'm alone in this, as I know that he kept up with many people, and that while I was living in California he regularly reported on different poets he talked to and saw in New York, among them Gregory Corso, Ted Greenwald, Bernadette Mayer, and Eileen Myles. His generosity extended in many directions and took many forms.

Ted Greenwald called me early in the morning and told me that Paul had died of a heart attack and that his obituary was in the *New York Times*. I had no idea that he was sick, that he was sixty-four, that he had a sister living in California, and that he was from Minnesota. I don't think Ted, who knew Paul longer than I had, knew much more than I did. I knew that he had lived in London in the early 1950's, but I didn't know what he did there, nor did it seem particularly important to our friendship. If you listened carefully, you could detect the faintest echo of an English accent, it was nothing you could really pin down, which he used to cover his

## Susan Leites 1938 -1996

When our daughter was born, Susan made a chicken dinner for us and wheeled it up Broadway in a shopping cart. That gesture was typical of the degree to which Susan would routinely extend herself for friends. She was exceptionally generous in sharing the knowledge she had gained from her many years of teaching when Louise was an anxious novice at the job.

We had occasion to become friends as part of the same Upper West Side contingent that would regularly travel 45 minutes each way to the Poetry Project or to Vicki Hudspith's apartment. Most of the trip would be devoted to impassioned conversations about art and, occasionally, equally impassioned discussions of politics. Often, the conversation would continue to gather momentum and, though having arrived back at our doorstep, would continue for another hour or more.

For, with the exception of motherhood, nothing was as important to Susan as art. She approached it with a serious, consuming ardor that permitted frequent displays of wit, but never the irony or cynicism of fashion. He own art explored subjects in an intensely personal and always twentieth century way; she was not afraid to delight nor intimidated by the somber. She was flexible and open in her choice of tools, and dared to address subjects as familiar as tulips, which she transformed and renewed through imaginative changes in scale, surface, and medium.

LOUISE HAMLIN & GARY LENHART

tracks. Like many New Yorkers, Paul wanted an accent that said nothing about where you came from or how you got here.

Paul had a round ruddy face and a cherubic smile that was deceiving and one could have easily been put off by his acerbic humor. But his humor was a shield, I think, for a man who was big hearted with his time. I first met him in the early 1980s. At the time, he was the adjunct curator of drawings at the Whitney and worked there from 1975 to 1987. He was the first museum

curator I saw regularly going to galleries. He didn't wait for the news to come to him; he went out and found it. He didn't follow fashions, which is why he and the Whitney eventually parted ways. He had a large, healthy dislike for academics and believed they didn't know how to write clear, crisp sentences about painting and drawings. I loved that about him and I knew that he would always be quick to point out any traces of academia and its deadening vocabulary that might have crept into my writing.

While at the Whitney, Paul organized an exhibition of works on paper by David Smith, which was a revelation for everyone. No one had seriously considered Smith's drawings before Paul came along. Now they sell for thousands. In 1969, he founded the *Print Collector's Newsletter*, which is now called *On Paper*. In 1979, he founded a second journal, *Drawing*, which he edited until 1995. From 1968 to 1978, he directed the oral history project of the Archives of American Art, and interviewed just about everyone. The Archives are one of those places that makes New York special. These are not jobs that gain you glory. They are intensely focused acts of generosity which can only come from someone who believes deeply in culture.

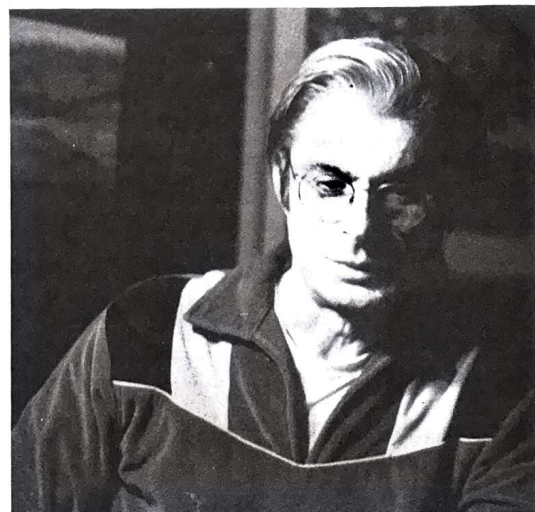
I last saw Paul at the New Year's Day reading at the Poetry Project. He had been there for hours and was typically cheerful and good humored in his criticism. "Too many guitars," he said, "not enough poetry." A bunch of us left together to go to a bar, but he decided not to join us and went home instead. He was walking slowly down Second Avenue when I turned and waved goodbye.

JOHN YAU

The Poetry Project would like to express sincere condolences to Gillian McCain and her family for the loss of Gillian's brother Peter McCain.



An Interview  
with  
**JOHN GODFREY**  
by  
Lisa Jarnot



John Godfrey lives on the Lower East Side in Manhattan. He is the author of **Dabble: Poems 1966-1980** (Full Court Press, 1982), **Where The Weather Suits My Clothes** (Z Press, 1984), and **Midnight on Your Left** (The Figures, 1988). He is a registered nurse and currently works with pediatric AIDS patients. The following interview was conducted on January 19, 1997, at John's apartment on East 12th Street.

**Jarnot:** When we talked on the phone a couple weeks ago you mentioned having gone to Buffalo, but you'd been Princeton before that, with other poets like John Thorpe and Lewis MacAdams?

**Godfrey:** To tell you the truth, John Thorpe was hardly there at all. I think he disappeared after one semester. He came and went. His father was a professor in the English Department at Princeton. John at that time was to me a type—the boarding school beatnik. I didn't formally "go to Buffalo." After lasting it out and graduating from Princeton in 1967 I went West and worked on a ranch in Crook County, Wyoming and returned in the Fall to the East at loose ends and waiting for the Draft. Because Lewis MacAdams, my first connection to poetry activities, was in graduate school at SUNY Buffalo, I went up and out there. The living was cheap. I was there from October 1967 to April 1968. I met Jack Clarke and Duncan MacNaughton that way. Phoebe MacAdams and Genie MacNaughton were equally close friends to me at that time. John Weiners was there, and, of course, Creeley. Like most of us, something got me

into writing when I was high school age, and it was a school teacher. Because I'd spent five or six years going to a small town Vermont school, and my parents moved to Albany, New York. I took a scholarship exam to this place called The Albany Academy, this military school—it was kind of weird—it was like Ivy League Military, and I got in. And I didn't know how to write shit. It was like ninth grade, and you wrote book reports. I was horrible. And I had an English teacher who straightened me out quickly. He was the typical old school type of guy—probably about 35, on the effete side, like most private school teachers would be expected to be. He was the kind of guy everyone was very fond of—jocks were fond of him, smart guys were fond of him. That happened consistently through high school, where a teacher of English—where there was a certain fascination with that *person* who gave me a lot of encouragement. This happened again in Dallas, where I attended the last three years of high school, again as a scholarship boy at a private school. There were two English teachers there who helped and encouraged me. By the way, I went to Princeton for free. Says something about my father's income. But anyway, I was interested in writing. My father also wrote, and expressed himself in words a lot. But when I got to college the world was not what it was soon to be—there wasn't a huge draft going on, there wasn't a lot of noise about Viet Nam. Although there was noise, it was mainly civil rights. My mind was blown. I was so happy to be away from home and I was really going away to school because I wanted to join the upper middle class. And that lasted about half a year, and during that time I was writing poems, without any motivation really. And then I suddenly



identified with it for reasons that had to do a lot with being in the wrong place at the wrong time. I wasn't happy to go to that particular college.

**Jarnot:** Did you have influences as a poet— were there poets that you were reading?

**Godfrey:** Well, from the very start, the biggest influence, and it still remains, is Shakespeare. I mean that's the best stuff you get to read in high school, and the way I was educated, you started in the ninth grade, you were reading Shakespeare. And you were memorizing the famous soliloquies. And those famous soliloquies are righteously famous. I use a lot of the patterns that just became ingrained from reading Shakespeare at that age. Mainly I mean Shakespeare will have a speech in which a person deals with a present moment on about five or six levels, and he weaves together observations leading to events, all in a speech, and it isn't a very long speech—they're magnificent. But when I was blundering around, not knowing shit as a freshman in college, when it came to poetry or something like it, I was listening to a lot of blues and folk, and I was getting an ear, because I hadn't had music as a kid at home. I listened to the radio, but I didn't have records. I had a roommate who had a record player, so I had the opportunity to purchase records and listen to them. This roommate had the Folkways folk anthology, and I got into Lightning Hopkins lyrics, and Bob Dylan. I'd just discovered Bob Dylan at the age of eighteen when he had one record and I was attracted to raggedness. But I wrote things in isolation until I was almost twenty years old. And there was this guy, a dear friend, Lewis MacAdams, who had gone to the same high school and been a year ahead of me, and was also a year ahead of me in college, who dressed very flamboyantly, with capes, and spanish hats, and things that he would never have worn in Dallas, who was active on the college literary magazine. There was a group that was very up to date, inspired by Burroughs and Kerouac, and so on. And Lewis MacAdams, whose poetry I love, introduced me to all of this stuff. He loaned me books, he introduced me to this very straight seeming classmate of mine, John Koethe, who was way ahead of me. To that point I had dug up the Don Allen anthology. I knew Ginsberg's *Howl* and *Kaddish*, and had an interest in Bob Kaufman, who,

by the way, did not impress the poets I got to know in the East Village at the time. All of a sudden I was reading Jones/Baraka's *Dead Lecturer*, Weiners' *Hotel Wentley Poems* and *Ace of Pentacles*, Duncan, Ashbery, and Berrigan. So all of a sudden my life changed, and I totally disengaged in a lot of ways from where I was. I came to New York occasionally with great trepidation. There were a lot of people walking around stoned on methedrine and they were very intimidating, and they were very prejudiced. I came from a lower middle class background, but I was a little shy and what-not, and they all assumed that I had to be some rich guy, or some upper middle class guy. It was very funny when Ted Berrigan finally figured out what my background was, and the age of my parents. We became very brotherly behind that, because he in fact would have been like the third oldest in my family, after initially having been quite biased against me on the background issue. Anyway, MacAdams turned me on to all of the books and to a number of people, and they seemed like such real things—the bohemian in the East Village. And so venerable. There wasn't one of them over twenty five except Berrigan, but they seemed so venerable. And I would come to New York and want to show them my poems. See when you really start thinking now, "yeah, that's what it's been all this time, I'm a poet," you start writing and all of a sudden you realize, "jeez, I've only written twenty poems." You have this feeling that you want to have a big stack of pages next to you, and so you do it. I mean I probably wrote two poems a day for about three years. I used to get very upset if I couldn't sit down and write something. The reality of it was not interesting. I was interested in the enthusiasm and the fact that— well, you know the feeling— if you're a poet and you have a certain thing that you know that you can do, doing it is probably like an expert on an instrument who practices all the time just because there is so much pleasure in being able to do it. I don't really feel that way now; I don't have time to be so self-centered with respect to poetry. It's equally interesting to do it though; when you get into a groove, it's great. Not only is it possible to write on so many different levels at the same time, it's possible to find out things about the way that you work on all those different levels too.

## THE DANSPACE PROJECT

April 4-6 Ellen Cornfield

April 10-13 FOOD FOR THOUGHT

April 17-20 Dean Moss

April 19 Draftwork: Yoshiko Chuma & The School of Hard Knocks  
*The Living Room Project*

April 24-27 Sean Curran

April 29 DANSPACE SPRING GALA

May 10 Draftwork: Sarah Lawrence

May 20 Dans Music: Reid Robbins

May 29-June 1 Irene Hultman

Reservations/Info. 212-674-8194

St. Mark's Church in-the-Bowery  
2nd Avenue & 10th Street

**Jarnot:** What were the poems like, your early poems?

**Godfrey:** I think I'm too embarrassed to try to remember. Well, I've never known a poet whose first poems were not "poor me, I'm so lonely." I've seen it, I've snuck around, I've found it... You know, you never leave a friend who's a poet alone in your apartment to go out for cigarettes because he's going to start looking through your poems. Some people are going to sniff underwear or find your porn, but poets are going to try to find your most recent poems that you don't want to show them. The young Jim Brodey was incredible. He would walk in your place, talk, lean over your desk, start looking at things, push them aside, and you'd say "hey man, get the fuck away." But what I wrote then? Yeah, I started out with the same "pity me" type of thing and then I sort of realized that if all I was really familiar with was academic/scholarly treatments of modern poetry, I had to get something beyond that, but that was also something that was going on. I mean by that time, I'm nineteen years old, you have to study so much of Eliot, you'd get some Pound also, but they seemed fairly far away. So a lot of what kicked in at that time, was that kind of self-consciousness that Bob Dylan brought to what had formerly been a kind of bland lyrics. Yeah, and Bob Dylan became a big influence, not so much in the way he was doing it, but in the spirit of it, which was, for one thing, to challenge constantly the people who had been interested in him. Every time he came out with an album you ran out to get it and listen to it because you realized that he was going to shake somebody off. That was the attitude a lot and what we



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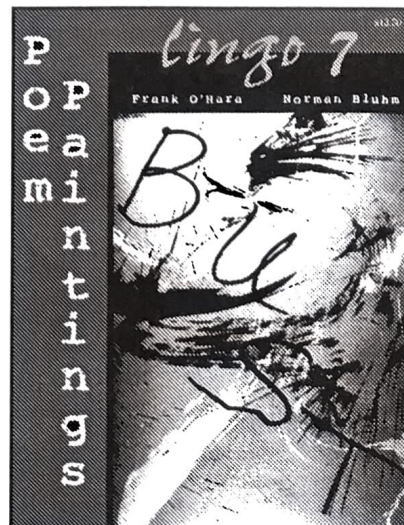
# WORKING TOGETHER (and alone)

New! from  
**Hard Press, Inc.**

**Frank O'Hara** and **Norman Bluhm**; **Raphael Rubinstein** and **Edouard Prulhiere**; **Denis Johnson** and **Sam Messer**; *Lingo #7* focuses on poet/painter collaborations that span twenty years.

In addition there is a photo/poetry collaboration between **Ben Watkins** and **Norma Cole**; reviews of Will Alexander's controversial new work by critic **Garrett Caples**, and Randy Bloom's work at/and The Gershwin Hotel by **Piri Halaz**; an essay from poet **Elaine Equi** on the creative process; **Roberta Lord's** consideration of the life and career of the late sculptor Dale Eldred. There is an excerpt from Bobst Award-winning fiction by **Jane Ransom**, translations by **Tricia Vita** of work from Japanese writer **Tahuro Inagaki**, and a short story by **Robert Wexelblatt**. **Margaret Morton** contributes a photo-essay on homeless shanties. There are illustrations from artists **Mark Wescott** and **Simen Johan**. The issue includes a survey of the Boston poetry scene showcasing work by twenty writers; more than thirty-five pages of poetry from other writers including **David Meltzer**, **Lisa Jarnot** and **Merrill Gilfillan**; fiction, commentary and surprises. A 170+ page feast for the eyes, mind and heart.

~175 pp: \$12.50



**Tilt** by Gillian McCain

The adventures of Magazine Girl, Grace and Egg, among others, in an unidentified (possibly unidentifiable) metropolis known only as "New York." A deconstruction of nostalgia - memoir as a manic, free-associative-meditation worthy of Neal Cassady - in these 74 prose-poems.

A stalwart of the punk-poetry revival of the eighties centered around the Poetry Project, Gillian McCain has been there, and done that. With Legs McNeil she recently co-authored another, less metaphysical look back, the best-selling *Please Kill Me: The Uncensored Oral History of Punk*. This collection offers another look into that world, through a different, more difficult and personal window.

Reacting to *Tilt*, poet John Ashbery said: "Gillian McCain's poems are like urgent telegrams from next door, or oddly but brilliantly cropped snapshots of the life that is going by." This eccentric and affecting viewpoint offers us an opportunity to stop in our tracks, see something we thought familiar reveal, suddenly, an unexpected side.  
84 pp: \$10

## The Basement Of The Cafe Rilke

This is the first collection of poems by Raphael Rubinstein. An Associate Editor of *Art In America*, Rubinstein is the author of numerous articles and critical essays. The incisive, insightful style that has made him a popular writer on art and culture is here brought to bear on a different subject matter: the poet and the world.

Reviewing *Cafe Rilke*, poet David Bromige says, "The simplicity is not deceptive, it's the obvious reframed; It takes nerve to face us into these truths. This book makes me feel that an honest man is writing. It takes tact to make one sit still for that."

And this from Harry Mathews: "Raphael Rubinstein's first collection of poems is lucid, compelling and endowed with astonishing authority."

"His voice is unmistakably his own and, remarkably, it is spoken in a second voice that keeps the most eloquent distance from it. In this ambiguous space Rubinstein gathers intense, precise observations of the world without and within.... The poems that emerge display a classic intensity in their synthesis of emotional vividness and critical alertness."

80 pp: \$10



Available at bookstores or direct from:

**Hard Press**

PO Box 184,  
West Stockbridge, MA 01266





## Poetry Project Memoirs Anthology

### A Call for Submissions

For a proposed anthology, we are seeking short memoir-works (200-500 words in length) about poets' most memorable moments at the Poetry Project or as part of the Project's community. We're hoping to collect memoirs about: 1) attending Poetry Project readings, events, workshops, etc.; 2) giving readings, performances, workshops, lectures, etc. at the Project; 3) working at the Poetry Project in official and/or unofficial capacities; 4) the impact of the Poetry Project on your work 5) the impact of particular poems and/or poets encountered here or in Project publications; and 6) social life at the Project—parties, post-reading gatherings, community intrigues, controversies, friendships, sex, romance, ingestible substances, collaborations, fights, rivalries, conversations, thefts, road-trips, "dirt" etc. A lot has happened here over thirty years. This is an chance to share how the Poetry Project has been significant to you.

**Deadline for submissions is July 1, 1997.** Include SASE. Previously published work will be grudgingly considered.

all aspired to at that time in the sixties to be doing was to be out from under—out from under the deductive. Academics works like bad science. Academics kind of deduces rather than using induction. Induction maybe has to do a lot with phenomenology or something like that, if you want to be real philosophical. Especially in the sixties, the idea of entering new kinds of matter into all kinds of art works had a lot to do with that—these things are here—they should be noticed and added to the data that is used in art. But you know, very quickly, the first two things that knocked me down were being loaned *The Tennis Court Oath* [by John Ashbery], and *The Sonnets* [by Ted Berrigan], which were only out for like two years at that time. In fact, the copy I had was the C Press edition of *The Sonnets* that was loaned to me by John Koethe. I never gave it back to him and I still have it. I'm more of a sap than an intellectual, and Ted's *Sonnets* had an analytic quality, but at the same time I was aware of the sentimental Irishman in them. Ted maintained that quality for me all the way. And, having this ear for disjunctive things, one of the appealing things about Bob

Dylan was that we weren't thinking of things in terms of the linear, like you do today, the lingo was different. You know, all these non-sequiturs and abrupt turns of direction were interesting. The *Sonnets* were like that, *The Tennis Court Oath* used a lot of that. I didn't understand shit about how it might be done, how those guys might have done it, but my gut took me in that direction. You know, I try to avoid in my own stuff getting into connecting dots, or having something that has a narrative flow that is narrow. I like to suggest that it's sort of like a movie. I also have to say that one of the big influences from that time was having seen *A Married Woman*, the Godard movie, which just knocked me out, because it does what I aspired to, which is to give you different angles on something concrete, and at the same time have something abstract going on, either in what the voices are saying and then making the impression through the use of all these weird still life angles that there's something going on, so that you're thinking also on a conceptual basis. And all these things going on at the same time, and not being a linear thing. It's sort of like picking details and not worrying whether they make a totally coherent picture. It's maybe hard to convince someone who wasn't there because they weren't born yet, but everything that was going on in America in the sixties was very aware that some kind of threshold had been crossed and the way people thought, the way people lived, everything was being challenged, up in the air, everything was new and there was a belief in answers. So much for answers, huh? It was more a depressing than a hopeful time.

**Jarnot:** Well how do things seem now?  
**Godfrey:** Now? Terrible. From what I do so many hours a week, and think about a lot, I'm into a different kind of narrow world. But you know, if you've got knowledge of how classism and racism and sexism work in a city like this, that's far more important to me than anything that's going on in arts or poetry, to say the least.

**Jarnot:** Maybe we should talk about that. You're working about sixty hours a week as a nurse. So what's a typical day for you?

**Godfrey:** I get up at 4:30. It's kind of weird, but when you get used to it it's cool. It's just another time to get up. I exercise a bit, eat quickly. I'm in my car at a little after 6:00 and I drive out to

Bayside to this office and I open the place up. And I have to do a lot of paperwork. Every kid I have for a patient has a chart, and there are hundreds of pages—all of these items that I have to keep up to date, and a lot of them legal, with the Department of Health. I'll do paperwork until about 8:00 and then I might work on a couple of visits from the day before. I have to write up a lot of details on these visit reports, because what I'm doing is more or less a clinic visit in the home, between clinic visits to the doctor. And I'm keeping a running account of how a patient is doing, especially when they are taking medications and there are issues of compliance with multiple medications, expiration dates, storage details, food restrictions, and dangers of drug resistance with regard to all the preceding. Because I deal with people who lie a lot, the best of them lie to me a lot. It's very interesting. I have to deal with people who have no reason to like me, and I'm a likeable enough guy. The kids and I get along great, but I'm dealing a lot with adults who have control of how these kids are going to live and who are dreadfully under-educated, and because they live in complete segregation, aside from television exposure, they have no idea of what is expected of them when they go out into the white dominated world, whether it's a hospital or welfare, or something like that. They become very defensive; they have ways of coping that aren't always in the best interests of the kids. So, I'm in my office and by 9:00 I'm starting to use the phone, I make dozens of phone calls—I talk to doctors and all my patients. Then at about 10:30 or 11:00 I get in my car and I make four or five visits in Brooklyn, and I cover Bushwick and BedStuy, a little bit of Crown Heights, the downhill part of Park Slope and Sunset Park. I'm out there making visits until 6:00, and if things come up, I might be out there until 7:00. I get home, I eat, stare at my navel, and go to bed.

**Jarnot:** So what you do is physical evaluations of the kids?

**Godfrey:** Yeah, a lot of it is strictly clinical, but a lot of it gets into all kinds of stuff. I mean most of my visits I aim for an hour or an hour and fifteen minutes, but I'm there for an hour and a half. Something comes up, something's really wrong, or I'm going to run some kind of test I can do in the field. It's very hard, but it's also very



gratifying because I get to learn so much. I've learned so much physiology. I've learned how to do a very quick, very thorough head to toe examination. I have no trouble with kids. I think poetry is a very good background for dealing with children in the first place, as we know from guys like Jack Collom and so on. If you're a little wacky and you're dealing with kids who have maybe a delay, but they're not bad on receptive language, you can find out a lot by joking with them and being ridiculous and absurd. They have difficulty knowing what's real and what's not anyway because they're children. And one way to learn what is real is to learn what isn't real—and absurd language use is not real, and they begin to get a certain value for when you're really communicating real things. You know this is a really great job—having always been fascinated by Celine's writings as much as anyone's. In the 1930s there were all these fantastic things happening in fiction. I mean think of it—you have Faulkner, you have Celine, you have Williams, you have all these people writing these great novels, all of them trying to be fearless in confronting really the big things, the human condition, all this ugliness. And Celine especially with his nose stuck in the underclass, portraying himself in a way that wasn't quite true. He was sort of an upper middle class guy who happened to be slumming. Not slumming, I mean all of a sudden you find yourself in the slums, you're not slumming—you're in the slums.

**Jarnot:** When do you write poems?

**Godfrey:** Whenever I feel like it. I chip away at it. I used to have a fetish about pens, and then it became a fetish about sketch books, and now I just use a legal pad. I keep it around and I chip away at things. When I put them on my computer then I print out a thing to look at and it becomes a little more together. What I react to becomes a little more together. I always wrote long-hand and you never knew what it really was until you typed it, which I dreaded doing because I don't type well and for that reason I usually wrote as short as possible, because I knew that sooner or later I'd have to use the typewriter. I mean when I first started out, there weren't even xerox machines. You had to type everything over again to send it to somebody; it was a drag.

**Jarnot:** Do you ever think about writing a long, sustained, "epic" poem?

**Godfrey:** Never. I used to do sonnet sequences and shit like that. I never published those. That was a phase of

mine up to about 1970. At that point I felt like I had something going on inside, like I was ready to step out of an apprentice mentality. My *Music of the Curbs* represents to me the time when I stepped out, poems from 1970 to about 1974. I kept them to myself for extended periods of time. I felt like I was woodshedding. I was more interested in certain poems than in certain poets, and I began reaching back in time. A big influence since the mid-sixties had been a Penguin edition Baudelaire, now out of print. The translations were by this Brit don Francis Scarfe, and the translations were all in prose small type at the bottom of the page. No attempt was made to fudge around with relative prosody between the English and the French versions. Also the Rexroth translations of Reverdy by New Directions, beautiful renderings of a Cubist silence and elegiac sentiments. Apollinaire's *Zone*, also elegiac—since that time translations have increasingly abounded, I have most of Apollinaire and Reverdy. I don't really know what to do with them from my soul, I'm such an American. Which leads me to my final real source of inspiration at that time, Whitman's *The Sleepers*. These four things, poets, poems have been the four corners of everything I've done, if you forgive me the attitudinizing and druggy dreck that got into my work at times. Also, Ted Berrigan had a lot of great ideas. I hadn't the faintest idea until years later how he'd actually done *The Sonnets*. I mean what he did was using the clerical facility you get with methedrine he would take lines that were actually cut out on small pieces of paper and then rearrange them. And that was one part of it, but the real part of it was that Ted would wait until it looked right. He wouldn't try to be able to defend it verbally. He wouldn't try to make anything more of that than what it was—it looked right, and that was when you were through with it. And I liked that a lot. That was very important to me that there was nothing to measure, except for whether the person doing it thought it was right. To paraphrase the great Yogi Berra, writing a poem is 90% instinct, and the other half is aesthetics. And if it wasn't right to anybody else in the whole fucking world, then well, go figure—do you really want to do this, or are you going to commit yourself to doing something that no one is interested in? Speaking about collections and stuff like that, in my heart of hearts I think that if you're

[continued on page 28]

## POETRY PROJECT SEEKS NEW PROGRAM COORDINATOR

THE POETRY PROJECT IS SEEKING A PROGRAM COORDINATOR, A FULL-TIME POSITION BEGINNING IN THE SUMMER OF 1997. THE PROGRAM COORDINATOR MANAGES AND FACILITATES ALL OPERATIONS OF THIS NOT-FOR-PROFIT ORGANIZATION INCLUDING: WEEKLY READINGS; WORKSHOP PROGRAM; PRODUCTION OF NEWSLETTER AND LITERARY MAGAZINE; PLANNING AND EXECUTION OF SPECIAL EVENTS; MAINTENANCE OF ARCHIVAL MATERIALS; AND IMPLEMENTATION OF ALL PUBLIC RELATIONS EFFORTS FOR EVENTS AND PROGRAMS. THE PROGRAM COORDINATOR ARRANGES RADIO AND PRINT INTERVIEWS FOR AUTHORS; ASSISTS WITH THE DRAFTING OF FUNDING PROPOSALS; OVERSEES THE EXECUTION OF AUTHOR CONTRACTS; PERFORMS LIGHT BOOKKEEPING; ORGANIZES ANNUAL MEMBERSHIP SOLICITATIONS AND FUND DRIVES; AND PERFORMS AS LIAISON BETWEEN THE POETRY PROJECT, ST. MARK'S CHURCH AND THE CHURCH'S OTHER RESIDENT ARTS PROJECTS. PROGRAM COORDINATOR ACTS AS ASSISTANT TO THE ARTISTIC DIRECTOR AND AS A CONTACT PERSON FOR ARTISTS, THE PRESS, BOARD OF DIRECTORS, FRIENDS COMMITTEE AND THE PUBLIC. APPLICANTS SHOULD BE ABLE TO TYPE 40 WPM AND BE FAMILIAR WITH MACINTOSH COMPUTERS. SALARY: \$25,000/YR., HEALTH BENEFITS INCLUDED. PLEASE SEND RESUME AND COVER LETTER TO: ED FRIEDMAN, THE POETRY PROJECT, ST. MARK'S CHURCH, 131 EAST 10TH STREET, NEW YORK, NY 10003. DEADLINE FOR APPLICATIONS: APRIL 21ST. ALLOW 6 WEEKS FOR REPLY.

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## POETRY AND COMMUNITY

by  
Kim Lyons

evolved. In the Spring of 1981 when I came to New York City, Ronald Reagan had just been elected and AIDS was just becoming horribly apparent. The most interesting scenes for me were the Ear Inn, 10 Leonard Street, and the Poetry Project. There was a sense of the communities within the Poetry Project dissembling and reassembling. Bernadette Mayer had recently become the director and there was also this influx of energies, projects going on in the poetry scene at large.

The language scene was really

I went around asking people at readings what they thought about poetry and community for awhile. A funny consensus emerged that community (but none of us could define it) is desirable but not easily available. Martha King said: "my community is made up of people dead and alive." There was a wistful, regretful, embarrassed quality to people's responses as though we were speaking of poetry and family.

There could be a discussion of community as an abstraction, a concept loaded with our various wishes and repugnances. A projection of attributes; nurturing and supportive, hostile and vacuous, present and absent. A term inserted into the space where we mean a consistent, activated set audience— as in: the community must organize to fight the dismantling of the NEA. There's a public body politic kind of community, actual or imagined and this other subset community of those that hear, respond and compel and inspire our writing. Ask us to answer. KL to Mitch Highfill: "so what's community mean to you?" MH: "everybody teaching everyone what each knows."

One of the ongoing projects of poets is figuring and re-figuring the limits and de-limits of the subjective self in the poem and perhaps we can't consider language as a cohesive community, then maybe we try to figure out how then to be a responsible, continuous self among a dynamic community of others.

I experience words as attractors and long for and look for in writing a play of magnetism and resistance, playful groupings in which the attributes of words are made apparent in relation, signaled by boundaries and silences, spaces and sudden rushes of conversation. I wonder if that's how I long for it also to be with people in my community.

Here's how my own experience of community

cooking up. The impact of the Language mag anthologies was acute. I remember reading them over and over again to try to understand this movement. I had this sense that the first generation language poets had established affiliations and correspondences of interest in other places but at this time in New York City a lot of publishing occurred. Perfect bound, desk-top published stuff—which was new then in the early 80's, and off set magazines too. By the very fact of the community of works emerging then—it seemed like they were defined as a community. Although there weren't so many venues for their readings. Maybe the Poetry Project once in a while, the Ear Inn, but only regularly at 10 Leonard Street and maybe at galleries and lofts.

Everyone's aesthetics it seemed were consolidating or being re-evaluated and opened up and not with a little anxiety about the stability of the supporting contexts. And it seemed like everyone was tight for money to live on. There was this scramble to get in ten thousand word processing hours a week because of the gentrification of the East Village, which was really getting in gear in the late 70s, early 80s, there was no question of not working full-time then as maybe there was in the past. The old timers just looked at you with pity when you told them how much rent you paid on your Avenue D tenement apartment. These pressures were an emotional background to my experience of community.

I came to New York City with this idea that you worked and worked on your poems (and sensibility) and the magnetism of the work would draw those with the resources to publish your work. In contrast to that passivity, there was this tradition at the Poetry Project and really most of the downtown scene, that



you publish yourself and your friends in mimeo magazines, make your own books, work hard at distribution but it's enough, maybe, to have some kind of extended circle of 50 readers. So any vague notions about becoming famous were extinguished quickly in the face of the pleasure and problems of this more proactive role. However, some of the participants in that scene seemd to be getting tired or diverted and the mimeo publishing was slowing down, although each issue of *United Artists* (edited by Bernadette Mayer and Lewis Warsh) was looked forward to with interest.

For a number of years, I didn't feel as though any of these scenes were exactly my community. Which was interesting because the person I lived with coordinated readings at two of these venues but it was a situation of inviting people we had read but didn't know at all and in our case, sort of standing back at this anxiety laden respectful distance. There was a positioning of oneself as student that I think hampered participation in or construction of a community. In contrast, it's great to see how poets who emerged—so to speak—a few years ago, are really insistent about bringing out the work of themselves and their peers, examples of which (magazines) are: *Black Bread*, *The Impercipient*, *Poetic Briefs*, *Apex of the M*, *Cocidrilio*, *Torque*, *Arras*, *Pagan Place*, and many others. It seems like there is less delay in the assertion of community among this generation, however they may also struggle with definitions of identity.

But not to be disingenuous. My circle of writer friends certainly did schedule ourselves to read at the Ear Inn and 10 Leonard Street. And we did publish a few books of our work and a magazine. And I worked at the Poetry Project for four years. But I guess the most true way of participating in and enacting a community over the years through the losses and dispersions and shifts, has just been to keep at it: to keep faith, to read as much as you can, to make a community of readers, to cultivate reception and curiosity, to shift perspectives so as to let in the work. I now find my micro community, more or less, among poets who prioritize those attitudes rather than share a definable poetics.

"Community is not an agreement to share a style"—Lisa Robertson, Nancy Shaw, Jeff Derksen, Catriana Strang.

The challenge, though, is to be responsible to that reading by responding however you can and it's hard to sus-

tain response beyond glib prescriptions. Social, political, and aesthetic barriers, not to mention the exigencies of our end of the century, burden the free play of response.

Part of the pleasure of composition is that kind of alienated, abstracted alone reverie that writing poetry can engender and one wants to be true to that experience of isolation. So how to mediate between that state and the social?

"I'm only at home in my body"—Barbara Henning.

John Yau: "If one wants to assimilate and desires membership in a tribe or club, it might be because one wants to feel secure, feel accepted and loved... It is to propose a zone of safety that one can actually inhabit. It is to say this place is where I speak from and it is a privileged space... It is to continue the illusion of the us-them relationship."

I think Yau is here addressing a conflict that troubles a lot of us, but are membership, tribe, privilege and the dreaded desire for safety and acceptance inherent equivalencies?

It's instructive to observe the renewal of the Nuyorican Poets Cafe because as that scene developed, poets came out of the woodwork, down from the Bronx, out of Avenue D or wherever, and thrived in particular ways that no amount of avowed diversity on the part of other venues could match.

Another instructive phenomena is the productiveness of cliques or cabals. You don't like to have your feelings hurt or to be excluded from the magazine of writers whose work you like but we just seem to have this need to constellate in numbers of affinitive groups that generate intimacy and allow us to get things done. It isn't always just snobby power plays. I think it's as true at the Ear Inn as at the Poetry Project as at The Darkroom or Jackie 60 or Buffalo or whatever, that differentiated circles try to construct the situation in ways that make sense to them. Some cliques just need to concentrate their focus and stubbornly resist the prevailing "outside" that might capsize their delicate ecology.

But if poets struggle with how to talk to each other, then you know there's not much conversation going on between communities. The lines seem drawn at this point at least from what I've erratically observed. Maybe it's a matter of being defensive about diminished resources and everyone's frayed nerves—but sometimes such reticence seems a manifestation of fear and unwillingness

to open up areas of poetic inquiry and you know, embarrass yourself.

Lee Ann Brown: "...but in all these divine ecstasies, don't forget to look up at what's out there in your neighborhood, on the other coast and in the back row... don't rest on your baby laurels or pout and take the ball home. Play on."

And Anselm Hollo: "Stop moping and start troping."

I've come to need a community that tolerates the vagaries of my writing, asks questions and does the organizing work for me—that's why, after all, I send in 75 bucks a year to the Poetry Project.

"How shall one know a generation, a new generation? Not by the dew on them! Where the earth is most torn And the wounds untended and the voices confused, There is the head of the moving column."

From "Of Being Numerous" by George Oppen.

Kim Lyons' most recent work is *Mettle* (Granary Books, 1996), an artists book she collaborated on with Ed Epping. This talk was presented at a panel titled "Poetry & Community" at the New York City Poetry Talks Conference at New York University on March 29, 1996. (The February/March 1997 issue of the Newsletter included Canadian poet Jeff Derksen's paper from this same panel.)

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## Faggot Vomit: Jack Spicer vs. "The Maidens," 1958

by  
Kevin Killian

This paper was given as a talk at last summer's conference on "American Poets of the 1950s" at the University of Maine in Orono, where I met Stephen King and got his autograph! Most of it is drawn from a book Lew Ellingham and I are writing—the life of Jack Spicer—which Wesleyan University Press will publish. I thank Helen Adam, Donald Allen, Robin Blaser, James Broughton, Robert Duncan, Joe Dunn, Jess, Denise Levertov, George Stanley, and Warren Tallman—the living and the dead—who provided me and Lew with interviews and memoranda.

I attempt a confused, overlapping reading of Jack Spicer's poem "For Joe." I thought of Lacan in a vapid way while studying the note Spicer wrote on this poem—"Each poem is a mirror, dedicated to the person that I particularly want to look into it. But mirrors can be arranged. The frightening hall of mirrors in a fun house is universal beyond each particular reflection." I'm not saying Spicer was familiar with Lacan, but he certainly knew Freud's "Some Psychological Consequences of the Anatomical Distinction Between the Sexes," and he knew his *Alice through the Looking Glass*. I want also to sketch in some biographical and historical detail, to make the picture come alive.

Though once the closest of friends, in recent years strain characterized relations between Spicer and Robert Duncan; a competitive edge came to stain the radiance of their devotion. In January 1958, the poet Denise Levertov, making her first trip to California, came West to read at the Poetry Center at San

Francisco State. Duncan also arranged a second event, a book party for White Rabbit Press, the innovative press dreamed up by Spicer, who had made Joe Dunn go to printing school to learn how to make books. The first book was Spicer's own first book, *After Lorca*, and both *Billy the Kid* and *Admonitions* were planned as White Rabbit books, as was Duncan's "comic masque," *Faust Foutu*. Both older poets were dictating to Joe what books he should print next. White Rabbit Press had produced Levertov's *Five Poems*, and was about to publish Helen Adam's *Queen O' Crow Castle*. The party was held in Mill Valley, north of San Francisco in Marin County, to honor the two women poets. Jack Spicer shocked the audience by reading his own current project, "For Joe," from *Admonitions*.

People who don't like the smell of faggot vomit  
Will never understand why men don't like women  
Won't see why those never to be forgotten thighs  
Of Helen (say) will move us into screams of laughter.  
Parody (what we don't want) is the whole thing.  
Don't deliver us any mail today, mailman.  
Send us no letters. The female genital organ is  
hideous. We  
Do not want to be moved.  
Forgive us. Give us  
A single example of the fact that nature is imperfect.  
Men ought to love men  
(And do)  
As the man said  
It's  
Rosemary for remembrance.



Jack tore into the poem with "extraordinary venom," Duncan recalled. All present felt implicated in Spicer's misogyny—Helen Adam, a bike messenger in daily life, dreamed about the reading. In her dream she knocked at a series of office doors. As each door opened, Adam handed over an envelope, saying, "I'm sorry, but I'm a woman." Several years passed before Levertov countered Spicer's misogyny with a poem of her own she called "Hypocrite Women": "And if at Mill Valley perched in the trees/ the sweet rain drifting through western air/ a white sweating bull of a poet told us/ our cunts are ugly—why didn't we/ admit we thought so too? (And/ what shame? They are not for the eye!)"<sup>1</sup> Spicer seems to be quoting from "Hypocrite Women" itself in a later (1964) poem from *Language*: "Sable arrested a fine comb./ It is not for the ears. Hearing/ Merely prevents progress. Take a step back and view the sentence." The following year Spicer praised both Levertov and Adam in his *Vancouver Lectures* (1965). His use of misogyny as a public stance he borrowed from the Surrealists—at public occasions he wished to shock and disturb. It was a disastrous programme he had arranged for his life, and one inordinately hurtful of others.

"For Joe" is a poem capable of endless interpretation. Okay, "endless" is a little strong. Michael Davidson reads the poem as a demonstration of "absurd logic":

However hostile to women, Spicer's poem is hardly a celebration of homosexuality. His misogyny is linked to a profound sexual ambivalence, expressed in its most violent form in the poem's opening lines. Nor does the poem address heterosexuality in ways that might moderate or qualify his attitude about women. Rather, he offers the most extreme version of sexual preference: either "faggot vomit" or the "hideous" vagina. Spicer implies that acknowledging one's homosexuality involves adopting several corollary attitudes about women as well as about fellow gays.

Davidson also looks at the poem within its specific historical context, as a test of "group loyalty against an outsider."<sup>2</sup> I think he's on to something

<sup>1</sup>Denise Levertov, *O Taste and See*, "Hypocrite Women" (New York: New Directions, 1962), p. 70.

<sup>2</sup>Michael Davidson, *The San Francisco Renaissance: Poetics and Community at Mid-century* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ Press, 1989), pp. 172-173.

here. "Don't deliver us any mail today, mailman./ Send us no letters" is an apt admonition in a poem "For Joe" Dunn, since Joe had been a mailman in his Boston days, and indeed much of his poetry from this period—like Spicer's own—draws power from themes of dead letters, misfired communications, mystic and mundane correspondences. We understand Joe as twice male—like all mailmen, he's so male they put his gender right into his job description. And, he's the publisher, too—printing not only the books of Adam and Levertov, but Spicer's own—he's Spicer's creation, Jack's own Frankenstein monster. The boy brought to the mirror. The mirror reveals the monstrous. The poem also implicates "Joe" as a homosexual—a prime example of wishful thinking on Jack's part. I read this poem, as well, in the context of Duncan's and Spicer's very different desires for Joe, who was at this time that familiar figure, the straight boy everyone wants. I wish I could describe Joe Dunn to you properly—he was 21, untidy, wildly talented, prone to fits of violence and well on his way to addiction to speed and the olfactory drug the North Beach crowd called "Valo." He was Irish, tiny, I could put him in my pocket like Tom Cruise—or eat him off the top of an ice cream cone. Spicer, Duncan and Jess all wanted to "rescue" him, as I, Kevin, wanted to perform this recuperative work on Spicer by rescuing him from his sexism and his quote-unquote self. In the introductory letter to *Admonitions*, Spicer tells Joe that "the poem I wrote for you gives the most distorted reflection in the whole promenade. Mirror makers know the secret—one does not make a mirror to resemble a person, one brings a person to the mirror." The poem, written across the disputed territory of Joe's body, fairly breaks—at least, its sense is almost total-

ly obscured—by its overload of negatives ("don't like," "won't see," each one unbalanced by its link to a kind of "positive": the "never to be forgotten" thighs, for example, echoed later in the final word, "remembrance"). Or the shifting, "new sentence" quality in which for example, from inside the lines "Men ought to love men/ (And do)/ As the man said," emerges the command, "do as the man said."

Perhaps the key line in the poem is "Parody (what we don't want) is the whole thing." As Davidson has pointed out, "For Joe" seems to be some kind of message to Robert Duncan, who organized the Mill Valley reception for Levertov and Adam, and "For Joe" interrogates Duncan's recent poetic practice, at least that part of which stemmed from his involvement in "The Maidens." Spicer brings the mirror up close to Duncan's determined assumption of ultra-high camp, drag personae, and the sexual ambivalence underlying the "Maidens" project. Which are the men who "don't like women," which men find the "female sexual organ hideous"? Duncan and Jess loved Helen Adam's unflappability, and enrolled her into the "secret society" which they called "The Maidens." Other members were the poets James Broughton, Eve Triem, and Madeline Gleason—another bike messenger, incidentally. (I'd like to start my own bike messengers club, because I'm from San Francisco. I have a name for it—the "Spokesmen." "Hi," I'd say, "I'm here with my Spokesmen.") This stage of Duncan's career deserves more attention than I can provide here, but basically the Maidens attempted to combat rigid gender stereotypes of the 50s by exaggerated use of costume, fairy tale, high camp, role-playing, sexual ambiguity, and whimsy. I say

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"exaggerated" because drag practice was nothing new to the San Francisco poetry world. It was a community not fully professional, in the New York sense; a world where the Poets' Follies were held yearly—a bohemian Cafe-des-Artistes spectacle, practiced ritually. The Maidens' adventure merely accentuated these tendencies, foregrounded their homoerotic potential. It was an interesting experiment in cultural subversion, but one that left Spicer cold. As Duncan became more femme, more fey, Spicer became more butch, or tried to. From this point Robert Glück's distinction between Duncan and Spicer takes hold. Duncan's poems (femme) seem always to be addressed to a man, while Spicer hones his butchness with his continual address to a boy.<sup>3</sup> Away from Duncan, Spicer could be quite camp himself; in writing this biography, Lew Ellingham and I have been able to identify three poems which Spicer published under a woman's name, a drag joke within a joke drag. Yet parody à la the

<sup>3</sup> This insight is credited to Glück by Bruce Boone, "Robert Duncan and Gay Community," *Ironwood* 22, Vol. II, No. 2 (Fall, 1983), p. 80.

**SAINT JOSEPH COLLEGE  
WRITERS' WEEKEND  
JUNE 20-22, 1997**

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**POETRY: Elaine Equi,  
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"Maidens" is "what we don't want." "We do not want to be moved" into "screams of laughter," but that is after all the basis for the Maidens' foray into gender confusion. It's possible, then, to read "For Joe" as a defense of Helen Adam, an objection to Duncan's exploitation of her as a woman, of using her as a "fag hag"—pretending to like her, but exploiting her womanhood as some kind of disguise one can slip into and out of for art's sake. It's almost as though Duncan were "too homosexual" for Spicer, so it's interesting that Duncan later writes to Le Roi Jones, who had complained to him of the gayness/"bitchiness" of O'Hara's group, that Spicer and his circle were "too homosexual" for him and Jess. As the man said, It's rosemary for remembrance. The Maidens' project reached back through centuries of "compulsory heterosexuality" (Adrienne Rich) to the Globe Theater and the drama of parricide played out by men in women's watery garb. The Maidens acted out plays with titles ("Mission to Gomorrah") that anticipate Charles Busch by thirty years. **Admonitions** itself, the book of which "For Joe" is a part, was almost complete when Olson wrote Spicer an astonishing letter in reaction to his "Postscript." "I stand to be admonished," he wrote, ostensibly for never having finished reading *After Lorca*. "But you don't know how difficult it has been for me to take baths, clean the house, get some sleep, cut down on beer when it's sopor and just that . . . Don't slap my ass when I'm already starting to breathe I could choke to death sometimes."<sup>4</sup> I could draw a picture of Spicer's troubled relation to Olson, one that would draw in Duncan and Levertov, and Helen Adam: Adam, the mother of Duncan, Olson, the adopted father, Spicer, the brother rejected by all, and Levertov, the screen upon which all these fantasies are elaborated.<sup>5</sup>

Though Spicer's faggots are not vomiting at the sight of the vagina, the blur of syntax assures us that readers and listeners—and Levertov—will think so. So I bring in Lacan's screen and gaze, his extension of the "mirror stage." Kaja Silverman: "the subject relies for his or her visual identity on an external representation."<sup>6</sup> Vomit, the dejecta,

<sup>4</sup> Charles Olson to Jack Spicer, n.d. (January 1958?)

<sup>5</sup> I would also draw on Joe's status as the protege of Olson. Spicer's greatest joy was in "seducing" the students of Olson as recompense perhaps for having lost Duncan to Olson.

<sup>6</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible World* (New York: Routledge), 1996, p. 18.

the inside of the body that, excreted ("outside"), becomes a site of shame and humiliation. Lacan's "petit-objet-a," always "bound to the orifices of the body." "From which the subject, in order to constitute itself, has separated itself off as organ," which consequently, "serves as a symbol of the lack."<sup>7</sup> Castration, in the strict Freudian sense. "No mail." The rupture between the inside and the outside, says Kristeva, is the place where the abject becomes the sublime. "To preserve himself from severance, he is ready for more—flow, discharge, hemorrhage."<sup>8</sup> Is the "smell" of vomit more likeable than the vomit itself? Spicer brings Joe to the mirror the way the mother brings the baby there: her gaze, says Silverman, "superimposes the structuring reflection upon the child, and so makes possible the child's identification with what it can never 'be.'" Yet this mirror is the most distorted of all in the fun house. Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble* in general values drag ("gender parody") for its exposure of identity—the "original identity after which gender fashions itself is an imitation without an origin." Yet she admits, "Parody by itself is not subversive, and there must be a way to understand what makes certain kinds of parodic repetitions effectively disruptive, truly troubling, and which repetitions become domesticated and recirculated as instruments of cultural hegemony."<sup>9</sup> In New York, Spicer wrote to Jonathan Williams, women chop off men's dicks and collect them, pushing them ahead in wheelbarrows. There's a space inside Spicer which recognizes his castration, the exaggerated macho—the baseball, the pinball, the lovesick boy-chasing—as the fall into a language which embodies an alterity I can't jump out of, I can't climb over. My body collapses in and of itself. When I vomit it is to make real the dissolving borders of my loves, words. It's odd what one can inure oneself to. My faggot vomit. People, people who need people, are the luckiest people in the world.

<sup>7</sup> Kaja Silverman, *The Acoustic Mirror: The Female Voice in Psychoanalysis and Cinema* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press), 1988, p. 7.

<sup>8</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, tr. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press), 1982, p. 55.

<sup>9</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (New York: Routledge), 1990, pp. 138-9.

Kevin Killian lives in San Francisco where he edits the zine *Mirage* #4/*Periodical* with Dodie Bellamy. His new books include a novel, *Arctic Summer* (Hard Candy/Richard Kasak Books) and a book of stories, *Little Men* (Hard Press).



# The Poetry Project Celebration of Three Decades

READINGS, PERFORMANCES, REMINISCENCES, GOSSIP AND PARTIES with Victor Bockris, Bridget Brehen, Lee Ann Brown, Michael Brownstein, Tom Carey, Jim Carroll, Susan Cataldo, Todd Colby, Robert Creeley, Alan Davies, George-Therese Dickinson, Maggie Dubris, Barbara Einzig, Maggie Estep, Merry Fortune, Ed Friedman, Cliff Fyman, Phil Good, Barbara Guest, Steven Hall, John S. Hall, Marcella Harb, Richard Hell, Barbara Henning, Robert Hershon, Mitch Highfill, India Hixon, Christian X. Hunter, Darius James, Lisa Jarnot, Patricia Spears Jones, Vincent Katz, Shannon Ketch, Martha King, Daniel Krakauer, Bill Kushner, Steve Levine, Joel Lewis, Phillip Lopate, Kimberly Lyons, Jackson Mac Low, Yukihede Maeshima Hartman, Greg Masters, Bernadette Mayer, Gillian McCain, Legs McNeil, Taylor Mead, Sharon Mesmer, Rebecca Moore, Dennis Moritz, Marc Nasdor, Elinor Nauen, Charles North, Dael Orlandersmith, Maureen Owen, Ron Padgett, Wanda Phipps, Wang Ping, Nick Piombino, Jill Rapaport, Bob Rosenthal, Douglas Rothschild, Ann Rower, Ed Sanders, Tom Savage, Harris Schiff, Paul Schmidt, Carolee Schneemann, David Shapiro, Serena Siegfried, Herschel Silverman, Sparrow, Carol Szamatowicz-Malamud, Edwin Torres, Tony Towle, Paul Violi, Anne Waldman, Lewis Warsh, Jo Ann Wasserman, Weatherly, Marjorie Welish, Jeff Wright, John Yau, Bill Zavatsky and MORE!

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## WRITING WORKSHOPS AT THE POETRY PROJECT

### Poetry Workshop (Tuesday evenings 7-9 pm; 10 sessions from February 18-April 29th)

The workshop will center on weekly writing assignments designed to stretch our poetry skins. We will work with surprises, journals and other procedures as a group. We will also examine different elements of performance poetry and its history, exploring possibilities through visits with a variety of guest artists. The goal of the workshop is to create a trusting and informal environment where we can discover new forms and happy accidents with inspiration and ease.

Poet, actor and vocalist, Todd Colby is the author of *Ripsnort* and *Cush* both from Soft Skull Press. He has performed his poetry on MTV, PBS and Canada's New Music Network. This is the second workshop he has lead at the Poetry Project.

### Experiments in Poetry 1997 Workshop (Friday evenings 7-9 pm; 10 sessions from February 21st-May 9th)

Bernadette Mayer's *Experiments in Poetry Workshops* at the Poetry Project have been legendary. A variety of writing methods are explored in connection with Mayer's ever-expanding lists of experiments, exercises, rehearsals, practices and intentions. This workshop will include in-class exercises and focus on works written during the ten-week course. Some Sessions will include talks and presentations by special guests.

Bernadette Mayer is the author of numerous books of poetry and prose. Her recent books include *Sonnets*, *The Formal Field of Kissing*, *The Bernadette Mayer Reader*, *The Desires of Mothers to Please Others in Letters and Proper Name*. She has taught writing workshops at the Poetry Project since 1971.

### Prose & Poetry Workshop (Saturday afternoons, noon-2 pm; 10 sessions from February 22nd-May 10th)

*"Constraint, as everyone knows, often has had bad press. All those who esteem the highest value in literature to be sincerity, emotion, realism, or authenticity mistrust it as a strange and dangerous whim."*

—Marcel Benabou (from *OULIPO: A Primer of Potential Literature*)

The class will devise and examine various forms of restraint—structures to which one willingly submits. The intention being that each device generates at least one piece of writing. In the most successful writing the device will be invisible. The focus of the class will be on prose, prose poems and short texts; the maniacal, fantastic and everyday, UFO abduction literature, Multiple Personality Disorder, ecstatic literature, and George Perec.

John Yau is the author of more than a dozen books of poetry, fiction and criticism. His recent publications include *Radiant Silhouette: New & Selected Writing 1974-1988*, *Edificio Sayonara*, *In the Realm of Appearances: The Art of Andy Warhol*, *Hawaiian Cowboys*, *Ed Moses: A Retrospective of the Paintings and Drawings, 1951-1996* and *Forbidden Entries*. His *The United States of Jasper Johns* is forthcoming from Zoland Books. Yau has taught at the Pratt Institute, Brown University and the University of California at Berkeley and has received awards from the General Electric Foundation, the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York Arts Foundation and the Academy of American Poets.



12

**An Evening with Vernon Reid**

Guitarist, composer Vernon Reid is best known as band leader for the Grammy-award-winning rock group Living Colour. Reid works in a variety of musical styles. His music was featured in collaboration with choreographer Bill T. Jones for the critically acclaimed piece "Still/Here." Reid is also an accomplished writer whose articles and essays have appeared in the *Village Voice*, *Bomb* magazine and elsewhere. His recent musical forays include work with the bands Masque and My Science Project. His most recent album, *Mistaken Identity*, was released by Sony 550 Records.

14

**Mark Morris & Jennifer Moxley**

Poet and writer Mark Morris lives in Providence, Rhode Island. His most recent collections are *Moth-Wings*, published by Burning Deck Books and *The Black Reeds* from the University of Georgia Press. Jennifer Moxley is also a Providence poet and the author of *Imagination Verses* published by Tender Buttons. She is the co-editor of the *Imprecipient Lecture Series*, and recently translated *The Translation Begins* by Jaqueline Risset, published by Burning Deck.

16

**Night of the Curatrix**

Readings by some of the *grandes dames* of downtown's curatorial scene, including Elena Alexander, Lee Ann Brown, Fay Chiang, Merry Fortune and Wanda Phipps. Elena Alexander is a poet, writer and organizer of the reading series *Mad Alex Presents* which makes its home at Biblio's Bookstore. Lee Ann Brown is the author of *Polyverse* forthcoming from Sun & Moon Press. Brown has curated reading series at the Poetry Project, the Ear Inn and recently ran a Film & Poetry series at Segue. Poet and visual artist Fay Chiang is the author of two collections of poetry. In *The City of Contradictions* and *Miwa's Song*. She has curated a number of readings series including *The Henry Street Settlement Series* and the *Basement Workshop Series*. Merry Fortune is the editor of the journal *Pagan Place*. A former curator of the Poetry Project's *Monday Night Reading* and *Performance Series*, Fortune is currently working on a CD of her own work. Wanda Phipps is a poet, translator, dramaturg and journalist whose work has appeared in over thirty journals including *Long Shot*, *Agni* and *The World*. Phipps curated the Poetry Project's *Monday Night Reading* and *Performance Series* from 1991-94. [10:30 pm]

19

**Marena Lobosco, Alison Solomon & Jonathan Wineil**

Performance artists Marena Lobosco and Alison Solomon will be presenting a new work entitled *Until the Blade Runs Smooth*. Alison Solomon is a Brooklyn-based poet, actress and musician who performs regularly at numerous New York venues. Marena Lobosco is a performance artist with an MFA in creative writing and a background in modern dance. Lobosco was the founder and coordinator of Artists Co-Op, a San Diego-based performance group. A frequent reader at the Poetry Project's Monday night

21

**Patrick Gaspard & Greg Tate**

A relative new-comer to the poetry scene, Zairean Patrick Gaspard has already won crowds over at New York City venues including the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe and the Gershwin. Writer and band leader Greg Tate has contributed to numerous publications including *Pulse!* and *Vibe* magazines, and he is a staff writer at the *Village Voice*. He has worked with the bands *Women in Love* and *Mack Diva* and is the author of a collection of essays, *Flyboy* in the *Buttermilk*. Tate will be reading from his new novel *Altered Spade: Race, Mutation, Theory*.

23

**Barbara Henning & Carter Ratcliff**

Barbara Henning is the author of *Love Makes Thinking Dark* and *Smoking in the Twilight Bar*. Her work has recently appeared in *Talisman*, *Trois*, *Paris Review*, *Spectacular Disease* and will be included in *The World #53*. Henning recently completed a limited edition book with visual artist Miranda Mayer entitled *How to Read and Write in the Dark*. Poet and art critic Carter Ratcliff is a contributing editor for *Art in America*. His most recent book is *Fate of a Gesture: Jackson Pollack and Post-war American Art*.

25

**A Reading for A Gathering of the Tribes**

With Steve Cannon and surprise guests. [10:30 pm]

28

**Vinie Burrows & Kiimi Ya Salaam**

Internationally known performer, writer and activist Vinie Burrows is a multiple AUDELCO award-winner for her many productions including her starring role as Obatala in *Shango de Ima*. Burrows recently participated in the touring production of *Having Our Say*. Kiimi Iburu Salaam is a founding member of the *Red Clay Collective* and the co-editor of *Red Clay* magazine, a quarterly publication of cultural criticism and the arts. Salaam is the author of a forthcoming collection of short stories *Rebellious Energy*. She is presently working on a science fiction novella, the first two parts of which have been published in *Fertile Ground* and *Dark Eros* magazines.

**Also in April—A Special Reading and Cocktail Party with John Ashbery**

This soiree will open the Poetry Project's 30th Anniversary Symposium: *A Celebration of Three Decades*. It will also cele-

APRIL 2

**Mei-mei Berssenbrugge, Patricia Dienstry and Erica Hunt**

A reading by authors published by Kelsey St. Press. Kelsey St. Press has been publishing innovative writing by women since 1974. Its publication list includes experimental work by emerging writers, women of color, and lesbians. Mei-mei Berssenbrugge recently collaborated with Kiki Smith on *Endocrinology* which will be published in a trade edition by Kelsey St in late Spring 1997. Co-founder and current manuscripts editor at Kelsey St. Press, Patricia Dienstry is the author of several books, including, most recently, *The Woman Without Experiences*. Poet and essayist, Erica Hunt is the author of a recent Kelsey St. title, *Arcade*, which features woodcuts by Alison Sarr.

4

**Ladies Start Your Engines: Women Writers on Cars and the Road**

Readings from the anthology by editor Elinor Nauen and contributors including Maureen Owen, Cheryl Fish, Hettie Jones, Maggie Dubris, Kate Culkun and Eileen Myles. [10:30 pm]

7

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

9

**Tribute to Edwin Denby**

Planned as a 30th Anniversary Benefit for the Poetry Project this evening will include the premier of a film about Edwin Denby by Rudy Burckhardt as well as dance by Douglas Dunn, Yoshiko Chuma and Kenneth King, readings by Ron Padgett and Anne Waldman among others, and a dialogue between Robert Wilson and Christopher Knowles. Alex Katz' "Edwin" poster (signed and numbered in an edition of less than 100) will be given to those who purchase tickets at \$250 along with an unpublished Denby work, produced as a broadside especially for the occasion. Those attending the benefit for a basic ticket price of \$100 will also receive the broadside and admission to a pre-event cocktail reception. General Admission to the performance at \$20/\$15 for members will be available on a first-come, first-served basis. [Films and performance begins at 9 pm]

11

**Eric Drooker: Musical Slide Lecture**

Painter, graphic artist and storyteller Eric Drooker will give a slide performance of his forthcoming book, *Street Posters and Ballads of the Lower East Side*, and discuss his use of art as a political



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broadsheet and admission to a pre-event cocktail reception.  
General Admission to the performance at \$20/\$15 for members  
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[Films and performance begins at 9 pm]

11

### Eric Drooker: Musical Slide Lecture

Painter, graphic artist and storyteller Eric Drooker will give a slide performance of his forthcoming book, *Street Posters and Ballads of the Lower East Side*, and discuss his use of art as a political weapon. Known for his covers on *The Nation* and the *New Yorker*, and his award-winning *FLOOD! A Novel in Pictures*, Drooker recently collaborated with Allen Ginsberg on *Illuminated Poems* (Four Walls Eight Windows). [10:30 pm]

13

### 1997 PEN Prison Writing Awards Ceremony

This event, co-sponsored by the PEN American Center will feature a keynote address by the Honorable Judge Bruce Wright as well as readings by Jessica Hagedorn, Wesley Brown, Jack Agüeros, Janine Pomny Vega and other special guests. [2-4 pm]

14

### Xenobia Baily & Beans

Fabric artist and performer Xenobia Baily has produced wearable art which is recognized for its trend-setting style. Baily recently performed at Aaron Davis Hall in conjunction with an exhibit of her visual work and will present both media and performance work at the Poetry Project. Beans is a member of the experimental band 62; the Blank Slate. He has recorded words on records for Shaky's *A Head Nadda's Journey*, Greg Tate's *The Witches of Bushwick* and 99's debut album. Beans' own EP, *Breath Made Visible* is available on Antipop records.

16

### Alan Davies & Ted Greenwald

Alan Davies is the author of *Signage, Candor, Rave and Panther*, among other books. His long essay, "Peer Pleasure", recently appeared in the journal *Rattle Moon*. A re-issue of Ted Greenwald's *The Licorice Chronicles* is due from Sun & Moon this year. Also forthcoming from Sun & Moon is *Going Into School That Day*. Greenwald is the author of many collections of poetry including *Word of Mouth*.

18

### Verses That Hurt: Readings from the New Poemfone Anthology

A celebration of St. Martin's Press publication of *Verses That Hurt: Pleasure and Pain from the Poemfone Poets*, edited by Jordan and Amy Trachtenberg. This evening will include readings by Penny Arcade, Emily XYZ, Todd Colby, Edwin Torres, Tish Benson, Anne Elliott, Christian X. Hunter and Bob Holman. [10:30 pm]

Having Our Say, Kimi Ibara Salaam is a founding member of the Red Clay Collective and the co-editor of *Red Clay* magazine, a quarterly publication of cultural criticism and the arts. Salaam is the author of a forthcoming collection of short stories *Rebellious Energy*. She is presently working on a science fiction novella, the first two parts of which have been published in *Fertile Ground* and *Dark Eros* magazines.

### Also in April—A Special Reading and Cocktail Party with John Ashbery

This soirée will open the Poetry Project's 30th Anniversary Symposium: *A Celebration of Three Decades*. It will also celebrate the publication of Claes Oldenburg's *Notebook Torn in Half*, 1997, a three-color lithograph on handmade Saint Armand Special Etching paper in a signed and numbered edition of 97 published by Brooke Alexander Editions as a benefit for the Poetry Project (see ad on page 25 for more information about the print). Tickets to the evening with John Ashbery begin at \$100 per person. To purchase tickets, please call the Poetry Project 212.674.0910.

MW 1-4

### The Poetry Project's 30th Anniversary Symposium: A Celebration of Three Decades

Four days of lectures readings, performances, community gatherings, memoirs and gossip by Jim Carroll, Anne Waldman, Robert Creeley, Barbara Guest, Ed Sanders, Jackson MacLow, Todd Colby, Maggie Estep, Phillip Lopate, Gillian McCain, Taylor Mead, Dael Orlander-Smith, Victor Bockris, Carolee Schneemann, David Shapiro, Sparrow, Edwin Torres, Duncan Hannah, John Yau and many, many more. [look for a special poster mailing with a complete schedule in April!]

5

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

7

### Richard Foreman & Suzan-Lori Parks

Richard Foreman founded the avant-garde Ontological-Hysteric Theater, twenty-seven years ago. He has written, directed and designed over forty of his own plays in New York and abroad, including this season's production of *Permanent Brain Damage* at St. Mark's Church. Foreman has also directed and designed over twenty classical productions with major theaters including Lincoln Center, the Paris Opera and BAM. He has published five collections of plays and essays, and his first book of fiction will be published this year. Suzan-Lori Parks is a two-time Obie Award-winning playwright, winning most recently for her play *Venus*. She is also the author of several screenplays, among them *Girl 6*, directed by Spike Lee. She is currently at work on a novel.

9

### The Poetry Project's 1996-97 Workshop Reading

This reading will feature readings by members of the Poetry Project's 1996-97 workshops lead by Todd Colby, Charlotte Carter, Paul Violi, John Yau and Bernadette Mayer. [10:30 pm]

Performance Series from 1991-94. [10:30 pm]

19

### Marena Lobosco, Alison Solomon & Jonathan Winnell

Performance artists Marena Lobosco and Alison Solomon will be presenting a new work entitled *Until the Blade Runs Smooth*. Alison Solomon is a Brooklyn-based poet, actress and musician who performs regularly at numerous New York venues. Marena Lobosco is a performance artist with an MFA in creative writing and a background in modern dance. Lobosco was the founder and coordinator of Artists Co-Op, a San Diego-based performance group. A frequent reader at the Poetry Project's Monday night monthly open reading, Jonathan Winnell has presented work at numerous venues including Moroccan Star, Petra's, Sips, ABC No Rio and the Back Fence.

21

### Ed Friedman & Gary Lenhart

Since 1987 Ed Friedman has served as the Artistic Director of the Poetry Project. His most recent book, *Mao & Matisse* was published by Hanging Loose Press. His other collections of poetry include *Humans Work*, *La Frontera* (with Kim MacConnel) and *The Telephone Book*. Friedman's work has recently appeared in *The World* and in the anthology *Poets Say Goodbye to the 20th Century* edited by Andrei Codrescu. Gary Lenhart is the author of two collections of poetry, *Light Heart*, published by Hanging Loose and *One At a Time* published by United Artists Books. Lenhart worked as an editor on two magazines *Mag City* and *Transfer* and his work has recently appeared in *ALoud: Voices from the Nuyorican Poet's Cafe*.

23

### Help Yourself: The Unbearables Trash Self-Help Books

Jim Feast hosts this evening of readings by Jill Rapaport, Carl Watson, Sharon Mesmer, Sparrow, Tsauroh Litsky, Ron Kolm and Tuli Kupferberg. Don't miss this opportunity to see first hand the taping of one of the *Unbearables Mis-Infomercials!* [10:30 pm]

28

### Ron Padgett

Ron Padgett's most recent books include *New & Selected Poems* published by Godine, *The Complete Poems of Blaise Cendrars* from the University of California Press and a new book of non-fiction, *Creative Reading*. A former director of the Poetry Project, Padgett is currently the Director of Publications at Teachers & Writers Collaborative. He has recently finished writing a biography of his father.

30

### Hudson Valley Writers

An evening of words and music by poets/un-poets and songwriters/noisemakers from a thriving Upstate scene. Featuring Jennie Allen, Bridget Brechen, John de-Vries, Jim Donnelly, Dalia Garth, Josh Lechner, Jason Merritt, Christopher Porpora, Jayson Russo, Justin Russo, Matt Wells and others. [10:30 pm]

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

131 East 10th Street, New York City 10003

<http://www.poetryproject.com>

All events are \$7.<sup>00</sup> and begin at 8 PM unless otherwise noted. Programs are subject to change. For information call 212 674-0910



# book reviews



JULIANA SPAHR

## Response

Sun and Moon (6026 Wilshire Boulevard, Los Angeles, CA 90036), 97 pages, \$10.95.

"[generic possessive pronoun] stutter is our stutter"

Winner of the 1995 National Poetry Series Award for Sun & Moon Press, Juliana Spahr's *Response* is a tense, incisive book which should reinstate confidence in poetry as a viable form of ideology critique. The book does so by both soliciting and interrogating responses to some of the most persistent representational issues of our time; including questions about what constitutes and legitimizes public fantasy, how information is disclosed and controlled, and the kinds of language available to us for describing or passing judgement on events that occur in the world. The poems are not shy about naming these issues explicitly, particularly when they relate to the processes of their own making: "Where does art define our vocabulary?" "How does one write the question of letters and not appropriate or make bland?" What qualify as "claims of truth in the age of cover-up and misinformation?" *Response* begins by scrutinizing and problematizing its own artistic project:

how to tell without violating?  
how to approach mass thought patterns  
as history?  
as opportunity?  
as truth?  
as art?

This line of questioning is easily

extended. How are our responses to what we encounter in contemporary culture (including phenomena such as hate crimes, incurable illnesses, or the 'bizarre' behavior of a talk show guest who stalks herself) related to the ethical problem of 'responsibility'? Are all responses to a given situation useful, or even coherent? Do they need to be coherent? And how do poets and artists in particular respond to things that happen, or the things done by other poets and artists in response to things that happen? By immediately confronting the reader with these contextual problems, Spahr's work compels us to take a closer look at the presumptions underlying the experience of responding. One such presumption, as Derrida points out, "from which no response will ever be free," is the fact that "The response claims to measure up to the discourse of the other, to situate it, understand it. The respondent presumes, with as much frivolity as arrogance, that he can respond to the other and before the other because first of all he is able to answer for himself and for all he has been able to do, say, or write." Thus: "If I respond I put myself in the situation of someone who felt capable of responding: he has an answer for everything, he takes himself to be up to answering each of us, each question, each objection or criticism." Though the response clearly offers potential for various forms of expression, creativity, and political action, the opening lines of Spahr's "introduction" also force us to consider it as something other than a space of unlimited possibility or freedom. Our responses and the languages in which they are enacted are as ideologically informed as the events which initiate them. For every response that allows us to radically transform a situation or deal with a crisis, there is a response that is preprogrammed or controlled, limiting its potential to destabilize conventions and change them.

One of the most unusual things about Spahr's poetry is the manner in which it oscillates between bold rhetorical moments as noted above (direct addresses to the reader and explicit

naming of the issues at stake) and an atmosphere of openendedness, generated by strategies of parataxis and ambiguity which have become relatively familiar to readers of postmodern poetry. This fluctuation between indeterminacy and a manifesto-like bluntness or specificity is one of the things that makes *Response* so interesting. The former, moreover, has become such a ubiquitous and critically valorized aspect of experimental writing that I find myself more excited by the latter, as it manifests itself in Spahr's work as a riskier and more challenging poetic maneuver.

In "responding," for example, Spahr interrupts a field of floating statements, wherein their relation to one another is purposely uncertain on the level of meaning (is a relation of spatial adjacency rather than semantic progression or causality) with a firmly anchored proposition: "the question here is the same as that of a relationship / where does art define our vocabulary." Here the poem directly acknowledges its 'aboutness,' announces its enterprise or what's at stake in it, momentarily calling to a halt its deferral of signification. This is not to say that the poem participates in a rigid fixation of meaning, but that it dares to disrupt its own metonymy—often with an abruptness that is both surprising and appealing. A similar thing happens in "testimony," where Spahr creates an assemblage of quotations from alleged victims of alien abductions and their interlocutors. This hermetic web of "claims," deposition-like statements gathered and reported in a detached or objective manner, is broken, however, by the speaker's subjective voice, which enters the poem as something radically exterior to it, thus rupturing the neutrality of its initial stance. The introduction of the subjective voice is also radical in that it calls this previous stance, the stance of an impartial or indifferent observer, into question, as the speaker interrupts an undifferentiated flow of information to urgently make plain her stake in the poem:

my point here is not the laugh



LETTER

nor the truth  
nor to merely explore truth's turns,  
information's conspiracies

it is:

what do we do?

trust no one?

trust no I?

as we try to look with eyes better than  
what we've had before

Spahr shows that she is unafraid to introduce an affective crack into the poem's otherwise calm, distanced, and objective demeanor, as produced through a paratactical build-up of information in which the connection between individual 'data' is left uncertain or unexplained. The accumulation of claims in "testimony" recalls the format of the list, catalogue, or inventory, all vehicles for information we tend to think of in conjunction with documentaries and other narratives privileging facticity or versimilitude. Two other poems, "documentary" and "witness," explicitly take up as subject matter this mode of narration and the quasi-scientific objectivity it presupposes, and in so doing reveal how the traditional language of witnessing and reporting (with its reliance on a critical distance between the seer and the thing seen) proves radically insufficient when what is being witnessed or reported is violence, illness, or the effects of power. By openly "stuttering," these poems dramatize the fundamental inadequacy of descriptive language in certain contexts. As in "testimony," when Spahr interrupts the flow of anonymous, disembodied voices in order to announce her personal engagement in the poem, in "witness" the reader is suddenly pulled out of her/his role as spectator and directly challenged to engage in the kind of questioning it enacts; to participate, to enter into the poem's struggle: "when does witness no longer witness?//when does faith turn to act?//why is everything reduced to letters, to abbreviations?//how does one write the question of letters and not appropriate or make bland?"

"Testimony" is also a poem in which utterances of the disparate individuals and institutions engaged in the alien controversy are made to eerily echo one another: "we will never be the same again"; "you will never be the same again." This conflation of statements from those involved on opposing sides

of debate is sustained by the anonymity of speaking voices; at moments the reader is uncertain of who is saying what, and nearly always uncertain of what the referent of 'what' is. In interweaving the claims of both skeptics and believers, the poem undermines the conventional separation of myth and *logos* to suggest that mythological and rational discourses in fact mutually inscribe and support one another. The binary opposition between myth and *logos* falls apart when one realizes that myth has its own logic, its own system of rationality and rationalizations, while science simultaneously depends on a kind of discursive mystique to maintain its powers of persuasion. "Testimony" overturns this dichotomy by examining both the narratives of the believers and the narratives created by the skeptics to debunk the narratives of the believers.

When starkly presented on the page, moreover, some of the claims of the so-called believers are made to sound disturbingly *un-irrational*, if not downright familiar. Through Spahr's careful, minimalist placement of phrases, the reader is struck by how these seemingly phantasmagoric claims coincide with truths about daily life under capitalism: "I did not choose to join"; "I wake up invaded"; "They have an agenda to carry out and once it begins nothing can stop it." Such statements equally describe the ordinary representational effects of living in the late twentieth-century, where it hardly seems unusual to hear a subject say, "I have recurring nuclear war dreams." Similarly, what seems to be an account of a human body being experimented upon by unknown beings ("them") bears some resemblance to a routine physical examination:

they take a sharp instrument and scrape it  
down her soles, causing her feet to curl in  
reflex

they touch her ankles and twist her foot  
from side to side

they push and press against her calf muscles

they squeeze hard and painfully between  
the bone and calf muscle

they look closely at her knee and bend her  
leg several times

Here a narrative that appears to belong to the realm of the strange and incred-

ible slides easily into realism: is this an account of something out of the ordinary, or an allegorical description of how our bodies submit on a daily basis to authority or power, as instanced in something as terrestrial as a visit to the doctor? As the poem unfolds, the phantasmagorical and the real become virtually indistinguishable. Fiction and science are thus revealed not as incompatible systems of belief (or disbelief), but as logics that depend on and reinforce one another.

In *Response's* keen examination of "the way we define our difference," the text twists through a series of *mise en abymes*: documents inside documents, fictions inside fictions. *Response's* uncanny overall effect also derives from how its poems echo the reporting of daily horrors; how poems describe supposedly bizarre events in a manner which could equally apply to aspects of daily life; and in how poems seem vulnerable to a textual superego that has the capacity to turn human subjects into subjects of grammar ("[generic plural pronoun]"), thus literalizing the process by which individuals are socialized by language into language. Not only are agents replaced by these anonymous grammatical designations, but their actions are subsumed into the actions of grammar and syntax as well. Yet this seemingly oppressive bracketing is what allows the poems to do their work, which is to create a sense of unease in the reader. By dramatizing the binding effects of representational language, the poems incite us into thinking about and thus actively engaging with the problems they address—and in particular problems specific to us as users of language. "Stuttering" is posited as an alternative way of speaking, one which is perhaps both unavoidable and necessary in our attempts to describe or respond to what we encounter in the world; whether it consists of a news report of a beating, information about safe sex, an image on a screen, or the confessions of someone suffering from dissociative personality disorder. Spahr's book asks us to ask if and how the languages currently available to us can accommodate our desire to speak about these things, and to raise the question of what distinguishes 'responsible' from 'irresponsible' answers to their differing and often conflicting appeals.



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### WANG PING Foreign Devil

Coffee House Press (27 North 4th Street, Suite 400,  
Minneapolis, MN 55401), 1996, 287 pages, \$21.95.

Wang Ping's first novel *Foreign Devil* begins with the protagonist Ni Bing losing her virginity to her married lover Yan. By consummating this act she further seals her identity as an outsider/social criminal/ruined goods. Ni Bing is a compelling, complex character, one who we watch metamorphosize from girl to woman, from student to leader, and from silence to noise. She wears many masks all of them true (hers). She is a model student and a suspect, a victim and a tormentor, a peasant and an intellectual. At the core of her shifting identities is a visionary: one capable of seeing past the oppressive machinery of the new China.

Many of the pleasures of reading *Foreign Devil* lie in the language bursts into lyrical description as experienced through Bing's point of view.

I grew up with different nicknames: *iron lips, wooden melon, mute mud, dead ghost*. I didn't give a shit about what they called me. Silence was the only way to keep one's dignity in this world, and I treasured the sacredness of sound and words more than anything else. Sounds should always be used to make things beautiful, like music, songs, poetry, expressions of emotions, making up and telling stories. The noises children made when they were playing could be beautiful even though they had no meaning. The sounds of sobbing or cursing, if they were done with true emotion and purpose, could also be beautiful. It was a crime to waste sounds, and worse, to pollute the earth with babbling nonsense and poisonous words. When adults got together, they immediately started chatting or arguing, as if they would be possessed by ghosts if they remained silent for a minute. I guarded my sounds and words like a miser except when I told stories, made up or real. To me, there was a very thin line between the two. How did we know what was real, what was made up?

Ni's transformation begins when she unwittingly betrays her neighbor Ma Gang. When she finds out that he is the son of a landlord and therefore a class enemy, she refuses to taste his harvest at the mill. Her refusal is cited as a triumph over evil. Ni is sent on a tour to lecture on how she resisted temptation. Ma is further doomed to toil in a pit and pay for his father's sins. This haunts Ni and she bears it in mind as she is challenged turn by turn.

As Ni gains experience she loses her naiveté; her capacity for cruelty in the name of the state decreases and her awareness increases. When loyal party member Li Ai's interrogation brings up a buried memory of Ni's mother's public trial and punishment, Ni begins to realize the absurdity and insanity of the situation:

I had to force myself not to burst out laughing. This whole thing was a play: Li trembling on the dwarf chair, Hong pacing around her with his hands behind his back. The problem was that it had been played so much with exactly the same words, same roles and same plot, that it was just funny. Twelve years had passed since I had watched my mother being paraded in that snake hat, half of her head shaved. But nothing had changed. Hong was doing exactly the same thing Li had done to Geng Hai. Who would be Hong's executioner in the near future?



Yan dreams of escaping with Ni to America and introduces her to his American uncle who has made a fortune in trade, and thus her associations with "foreign devils" increases to the point of her risking her entire future and being jailed for prostitution. Through these experiences Ni gains in worldly knowledge and in her own power. As she matures she looks towards her origins, her mysterious family who, like China is both cruel and loving, for answers to her outsidership. She seeks the identity of her real parents; her quest brings her closer to her father.

Finally he picked up a lump of coal from the pile he had just dug. It shone like gold. He weighed it in his palm. "Ni Bing, do you know that this lump holds millions of lives and many millions of years? Those trees and plants, birds and animals, they once lived on the surface of the earth, bathed in the sun, the winds, and the rain. Then they fell, died rotted, turned to fossils, and were buried deep in the earth, waiting, waiting silently for a moment when they could be lit and burst into flame. This day may never come. Even if it does, the fire lasts only for a few minutes, maybe an hour, then it's all over. Nothing but white ashes remains. Is it worth it? Absolutely!"

Ni leaves China to come to America carrying her lump of coal, willing to risk all for a brief burst into flame.

**Foreign Devil** further extends the reputation for strong character development and lyrical prose that began with Wang Ping's book *American Visa*. Her gift for creating and building a complex character full of contradictions and honesty, like the China that she presents, continues in this novel. Wang Ping's ability to create an interior life layered with lyricism, intellect and logic propels this novel forward with energy and grace. In addition to Ni Bing, the other characters here are also unpredictable and surprising in their capacity for change. As their motives and consequences unfold, we gain understanding of the high price extracted by the hardship of nature and of governments. I recommend **Foreign Devil** as wonderful, intriguing reading about what it is to be Chinese, different, and just human.

BRENDA COULTAS

JONAS MEKAS

### There Is No Ithaca

Translated by Vyt Bakaitis, Black Thistle Press, (491 Broadway, New York, NY 10012-4412), 1996, 181 pages, \$14.95.

I can't seem to read more than one of these a day—because they're *concentrated*, like brownies. And what are they made of? *Time*. Each poem is a brownie of Lithuanian time.

Of course one is always learning languages. You don't think you are (in the willfully monolingual USA) but you are. You listen for a moment to the Spanish radio, you overhear Russians speaking on the street, and you recognize patterns. "Corazon", you know, is heart, and "Boris" is a name.

Something in the mind—wishes to know all languages.

So I am learning Lithuanian, as I read **There Is No Ithaca**. "Mama", I have learned, means "mother", and "traukiniai" seems to mean "the trains go by".

I went to see an herbalist on East 29th Street for my knee. "I think the problem is my posture," I told him.

"Well, I'm no paragon myself," William said. (He is a somewhat potbellied Texan.) But we stood together in his small office, and he said, "As I walk, I like to think of that Navajo prayer—do you know it?—

The sky is atop my head,  
The earth is beneath my feet;  
All around me is beauty."

After I left his office, I thought of that prayer for a few blocks down Lexington Avenue and felt beatific.

Then I forgot about it until the next morning, when I began my daily Jonas Mekas (via Vyt Bakaitis) poem ["Sesioliktoji Idyle" or "Sixteenth Idyll"]:

Hands still smell of honey and clover,  
with fresh grass and cool evening-air on clothing.  
How quiet it gets, with the mist rising,  
with the last of the clanging pails,  
shouting milkers, well-cranes straining  
by the wooden watertroughs, all now  
far off, the other side of the elms...

Suddenly I noticed a Navajo warrior standing by my side. "This is a good poem," he said. "It is a Navajo poem." I nodded, from the bathtub.

SPARROW

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MARK MCMORRIS

### The Black Reeds

University of Georgia Press (330  
Research Drive, Athens, GA 30602),  
1997, 96 pages, \$14.95.

Mark McMorris begins his new collection of poems, **The Black Reeds**, with an epigraph by Kamau Brathwaite.

This house is all that's left  
of hurt, of hopes of history.

While Brathwaite recently examined the legacy of slavery and the Middle Passage through Blues music in **Black + Blue**, McMorris comes at this prodigious topic through examination of language and poetry itself. The tight-woven surface of McMorris' poems is layered with language; spoken, sung, brightly conceived and fluttering. For all this beau-



ty, there is a parallel, counterpart enterprise underway. The pure tactile pleasure of words is cleaved from the various abilities or failures of words to transmit what is explosive in consciousness and in history. Anxiety erupts over whose words these are. How does the poet claim or crib or demolish oppression and its pronouncements, its proverbs?

Mr. Poet, why does your poem sing to me so sweetly and lift up the maudlin of a slave as Word and Beauty, when I know, Mr. Poet—know with my skin—there's no requital for me?

The **Black Reeds** wins close consideration as the second poem, "Tree without Color" kicks the writing into high gear: We talk about socialism/how the boy swings/like a bell with his tongue..." Curious I entered a place drawn to the poem's specification's; brutal, painterly details urgently whispered from another life, another locale. This bracketed in a conversation of shared disposition "We talked about socialism" and with the closing lines "and if space were to part us/it grows slack with hurt/there's no logic to this move/it's a paradox, a flat curve/of eyesight tending

to go/where it will." The poem is bound with a metaphor of rope, roping and pulling/hanging, intensifying urgency in a visceral sense and jeopardizing the complacency of words as merely marks on paper.

McMorris makes clear, early on, his investigation in to the word, The Word. In "Palm by the Letter" found later in **The Black Reeds**, he asserts, "To scream is no substitute for prayer" and yet many of the poems sing out in grief. From "Salt and Lotos" "I hear that there is the belief/ that some man who go to heaven/talk without any throat to talk through./I won't say any more than that." To transcribe; lost voices, tongueless, silenced in the murderous Middle Passage, the plague of slavery in the Americas, this is part of the book's occupation. The Old Testament (another transcribed text) details God's words to the slave organizer Moses, "What gave man his mouth? Who makes him deaf or dumb? Who gives him sight or makes him blind? Is it not I. Now go I will help you speak and will teach you what to say."

McMorris is pursuing this great question. What gives (as in offer/as in

dictates through violence) man his mouth? How is language smuggled into daily discourse? From "Pastoral": "Language is a thin country/but for them, the two were one, Greece and the Greek speech,/whereas we drop from slaves into an imported tongue/begrudged it, scarcely admitted to the franchise,/disdaining to worship their kings or learn of Nelson at Trafalgar, /Gordan, Lawrence, Churchill, Lincoln, Franklin,/and other heroes that slew our relatives/or took hot iron to their parts,/getting up near to the end of their rule." The Old Testament recounts that when Moses sees his first child he says "I have become an alien in a foreign land."

The **Black Reeds** is testifying to the African Diaspora. It is cast on waters, the Caribbean, India, The Black Sea, South America, South Carolina. The second section of the book, "Interplace/ A Drift into the Theory of Terrain" isolates habitats of the body, of memory. Recording with precise attention to the tiny, the fleeting it is preparing an environment of infinite size, the scale be it large or small is less important. "An anthill comes into

## UPCOMING POETRY EVENTS

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, March 2nd @ 3 p.m.**

DAVID RIVARD and JEFFREY HARRISON read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, March 9th @ 3 p.m.**

A reading from the new anthology *Ecstatic Occasions, Expedient Forms* featuring editor DAVID LEHMAN and contributors MARJORIE WELISH, PAUL VIOLI, CHARLES NORTH, MARC COHEN and COLETTE INEZ.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, March 16th @ 3 p.m.**

PAUL HOOVER and KEITH WALDROP read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, March 23rd @ 3 p.m.**

ROBERTA ALLEN and LYDIA DAVIS read their fiction.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, April 6th @ 3 p.m.**

DAVE JOHNSON and WILLIE PERDOMA read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, April 13th @ 3 p.m.**

PATRICIA DIENSTFREY and STEPHANIE STRICKLAND read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, April 20th @ 3 p.m.**

JUANITA BRUNK and PHILIP LEVINE read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday April 27th @ 3 p.m.**

ALFRED CORN and LOUIS ASEKOFF read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Thursday, May 1st @ 7 p.m.**

COLE SWENSON and RAY DIPALMA read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, May 4th @ 3 p.m.**

ROSMARIE WALDROP and PAM REHM read their poetry.

**DOWNTOWN — Sunday, May 11th @ 3 p.m.**

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## AVENUE OF ESCAPE

by Lewis Warsh

Cover by Yvonne Jacquette

*Avenue of Escape* strikes me as a book of curious solitude—perhaps solitudes—the very territory where writing takes place. This is a "progress of stories"—to adapt a famous phrase—from the *child-writer* to the *writer-of-the-age-you-are*. That the poem is not the world—that the poem is not the self—are clear *foci*, as if destiny were not inhabited, except by aphorisms and dispersed tales. It is a reading book, as if you had been torn out of it—words escape as from your "staring's mouth."  
Robin Blaser

In turn elegiac, discursive, ironic or deadpan, Lewis Warsh's poems trip the real while revealing the incontrovertible logic of his lyric. What's love got to do with it? Everything, for words and lovers are haunted by their absent objects in the same sublime way. Like a modern cross between Montaigne and Jabès, Warsh anatomizes this torment with the mastery and clarity of the possessed.  
Chris Tysh

An anxious romantic enters night. An erotic muralist paints breasts on a mirror. A student of architecture unveils a "new" New York in different seasons. An archivist of feelings watches them seep out of people and buildings. A retired mechanic sees civilization sputter. All of these people are Lewis Warsh, incomparable scribe of late, late New York.  
Andrei Codrescu

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focus, one petal at a time. Skip the/intermediate steps: what everyone wants (what we want is) the even/distribution of mists and spaces in between, ahead of me."

The poems sparkle with clean, crisp facets. This work reels, applying the puzzle of languages to large human histories as well as personal histories. A ricochet between formal elements, use of dialect, mythical/biblical lyricism, confession, incantation and prayer emphasizes the extreme fluidity of McMorris' writing. There are no pretensions of security in the mechanism of words. His suspicions are more than justified, there is a lot of knowledge in these poems and the more you know the more explosive language appears. This truth sets in place an incrimination poetry: "and famine like the holy ghost ignores blood on the tree limb/and the desert every year creeps along/and civil wars break up the old kingdom/ and there is no end to the poetry/and the smell of the world in its dotage coming to roost." In spite of such realization the poems retain an equal portion of tenderness for words. In turns McMorris is both the tranquil landscape and the tornado which cuts through that landscape: "...to relish a green/place, without name yet, ours to give. But those scents named/ themselves and merely awaited a mouth to pronounce what they/already composed; and speech was an added thought." The *Black Reeds* includes reliable love poems which resist a temptation to objectify. From "Licinus": "what a day it was, Carlissa,/before the curtains shut us up, these lines must rejoin in our hands..."

Voices of faith, skepticism, grief, pride, restraint and abandon compose the music of these poems. McMorris' solo voice lifts above and through that sound to perform a rare and inspiring book.

JO ANN WASSERMAN

**LEWIS WARSH**  
**Money Under The Table**

Trip Street Press (P.O. Box 190201, San Francisco, CA 94119), 1997, 115 pages, \$10.00.

**Private Agenda**

Illustrations by Pamela Lawton, Hornswoggle Press (759 Brownwood Avenue, Atlanta, Georgia 30316), 1997, 34 pages, \$9.00.

Lewis Warsh's turf is fluid and cinematic — a landscape of emotional closeups,

lurching jump cuts, analytic long shots, bumpy cinema verite, and unblinking, seemingly mundane medium shots that ultimately prove highly revealing.

To further develop the filmic metaphor, consider these snippets of cinema commentary: "Each camera setup is flatly lit and built around one or two ruthlessly developed ideas . . . are these movies funny or sad? . . . blandly paranoid settings . . . matter-of-fact treatment of everyday life (work, meals, sex) . . . the world is transformed into a stage . . ."

They come from a J. Hoberman appreciation of Ranier Fassbinder that appeared in the *Village Voice* during the recent MOMA retrospective of the German director's work. And they apply equally to Warsh, who often aims for the flatly lit, quietly unnerving aspects of the everyday.

But there's a telling difference between the German *katzelmacher* and Warsh. Warsh blends millenium-end irony, stylish distance and self-driven humor with classically lyrical hesitancy and longing. His *mise-en-scene* is warmer than Fassbinder's; he operates in a locale where battered expectations still hold sway.

Warsh has telegraphed his dark lyricism of artfully smudged boundaries in two novels, *A Free Man* and *Agnes & Sally*, and scores of poetry books, including the muscle-stretching *Blue Heaven* (1978), which presented a broad range of voicings; *Methods of Birth Control* (1983) and *The Corset* (1986), which delved into stripped-down formalisms; and the assured *Information From the Surface of Venus* (1987) and *Avenue of Escape* (1995). *Private Agenda* and *Money Under the Table* are the latest installments in his ongoing exploration of poetry and fiction.

*Private Agenda* features evocative, painterly drawings by Pamela Lawton of elegant wrought-iron railings, formal gardens and out-of-context shadows/reflections that frame and echo gauzy interactions between men and women. How perfect for this sequence of 19 poems, which examines the structure of passion, the jarring telephone tag of interpersonal connection and disconnection!

Warsh opens with a précis of the territory he's about to examine: telling disjunctions of cliché, random threat, heartfelt feeling, veneers of ongoing surface "noise", full-force advance and ambivalent retreat:

What's understandable is the flow of words beneath the roar of traffic. Get out of the car real slow & put your hands on top of your head. Will the actress who won the Oscar for best supporting role please stand up? Everything we meant to say was condensed into a single sentence. Take the brunt of each wave freely: it's something you deserve. You don't know what you deserve until they hand it to you on a silver tray.

Once he's provided an overview, he embarks on a survey of the seductive yet dangerous terrain, where "water suddenly rises over your head," along the way offering a wry commentary on male sexuality: "male bonding in the outer boroughs, human zombies in front of the porn machine."

Despite the dangers, the diction of the fourth poem edges into the elegiac. "That person, nameless, with whom your life & body is intertwined, the self critical shadows that loom like clouds on every corner, the writing on the wall, smudged, blotted, forever crossed out."

But the sequence can't rest here. Warsh wants to examine all the angles, crosscut between straight-ahead romanticism and self consciousness, edit in clinical longshots to augment the highly subjective closeups. So *Poem Five* handily renders the emotions over-ripe: "You gave up what you valued most & nothing came back. A single earring. A Valentine. No, no Valentine this year ..."

Then *Private Agenda* goes boldly over the top by going out on a limb:

. . . The most you can hope for are some leftovers, someone else's possessions, on loan. You have to pay interest, I forget how much, but it's less than credit card interest. You don't have to pay by the month & no one bills you, but the interest accrues.

Like an organism that recoils from electric shock, the poetry retreats from blunt drama to melodrama to jokey literariness. To underscore the abrupt shift and striking attenuation, the next poem recounts the pop culture tale of Montgomery Clift and his sexual ambivalence, transforming the personal into glib, glamorous movie-star parable.

Once a safe distance has been established, forces are mustered for examination of the "private agenda" from yet another vantage point. *Poem Seven* begins: "I looked up 'pulchritude' in



the dictionary, but it wasn't there. . . , " and the sequence resumes its zig-zag trek, throwing off in its wake terse lines: "It seemed like each dinner consisted of leftovers from the night before," "Interior life whittled down/to a single memory./ A thread at the end of the spectrum./ Please call if you get lost," "In all arrogance, I'm convinced that this tree/is a tree, this flower a flower, but I'll change/my mind if it'll make you feel better," "passion is incompatible with security, will you be home for dinner?"

In *Private Agenda*, Lewis Warsh has his cake and eats most of it, too. He presents blunt, powerful emotion and observation, then puts on his craftsman hat and filigrees it via commentary, deconstruction and humor. There's the satisfaction any artist receives from executing a tour de force. But there's also acknowledgement of the limitations of his enterprise and the immutability of personal history. The sequence closes with the following lines:

. . this rain  
was solicited & then rejected.  
A gentle rain: nice for the trees,  
to protect them from the  
sycophants & flatters.

Happy oblivion.

*Money Under the Table*, a collection of seven short stories, makes further forays into this territory. But unlike *Private Agenda*, where the action centers around acute, constantly shifting dictions, *Money Under the Table* communicates via characters that "evolve in a bewitching and scary realm somewhere between event and insight. . . , " as Harry Mathews notes in his apt cover blurb.

Warsh ferociously mines this casually appalling region of the psyche with great success and impressive economy. One story bluntly opens with "I wish I was marrying you instead of her," Richard said," and proceeds to completely fill in the roiling world behind this provocative remark in seven and a half highly specific, convoluted pages.

The stories in *Money Under the Table* often have a compelling inevitability that sometimes makes the characters seem like automatons or tourists on strange vacations. "Crack," the collection's first story, is an offhand study of an aimless office worker who sleepwalks through his days until he joins a posse of crackheads in a rat-infested basement beneath "the engine

of the building," and realizes that he "no longer knew what 'feeling' meant, only 'intensity'" and muses on deluding "myself into thinking that happiness was a function of order. . . ."

As might be expected, the title story, which profiles a boy's sexual coming of age, is a centerpiece of the collection. All the unfocused, histrionic, random sexuality of adolescence comes through loud and clear. In one delicious section of the story, the 12-year-old main character attends a Metropolitan Opera performance of "Tristan und Isolde" with his mother and fixates his burgeoning sexual energy on the twenty-something woman seated next to him.

He weaves elaborate fantasies as his secret lust melds with the on-stage passion of Isolde, who "had a wild concentrated look in her eyes as if her mind was a tunnel with no light at the end and she gestured with both her hands as if she were gathering the words from the sky and then offering them back to the air itself in return for nothing."

*Money Under the Table* closes strongly with "The Acting Lesson," a story that's structured around a film/theater metaphor. Midway through, the narrator offers a bit of advice, which also serves as a succinct

summation of important aspects of Warsh's aesthetic.

"One way of dealing with fear is to be aware of the possibility: to court it, let it swallow you whole, while staying outside yourself. The only way to survive is to cheat a little, seeing yourself from a distance, from the sky, until you no longer know your own body."

PETER BUSHYEAGER

ELINOR NAUEN  
*American Guys*

Hanging Loose Press (231 Wyckoff Street, Brooklyn, New York 11217), 1997, 103 pages, \$12.00.

"I'm a terrible comedian because I have no sense of timing  
I gotta always say everything I think."

says poet Elinor Nauen in her spanking new collection of verse called *American Guys* in a poem that has no less than three (count 'em!) titles, and they are: "The History of the Human Body/Winfield's Infield Hit/The Lassitude of the Infinite".

But this reviewer has to humbly disagree with Nauen, because, just as her three titles indicate, she is a superb "comedian", straight out of that scan-

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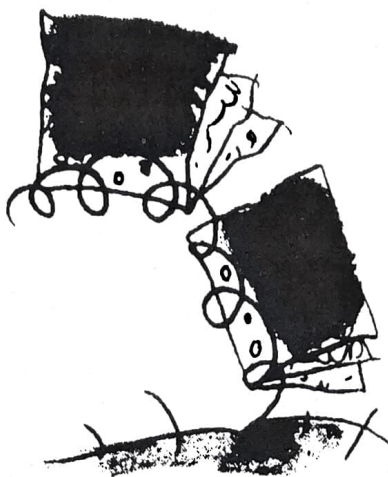


dalous school of poet/guys such as Koch/Padgett/Violi who can make us laugh as easily as to think and to wonder and to cry, and oftentimes in the very same poem. Her humor, however, is more lay in wait, curled talons, hungry tigress, ready to pounce.

"At 10 I loved the Yankees cuz they won/at 25 I love them again/for what I can't do--no self-consciousness/of body or mind, like perfect/conversation late at night, seamlessly caught." Nauen writes again, in the same tripodian poem, and again I disagree, because many of her poems are just like that, like perfect conversations late at night, and caught quite seamlessly, putting the naked reader right there to hear all her nifty and oftentimes quite sexy bon mots.

But why "comedian" rather than "comediienne"? Because one of the most fascinating, to me, themes of this book is poet Nauen's sly probing of the mystery/mystique of the masculine, of what it is to be a "guy", and especially an "American Guy" and all as seen by a one on the outside, an American gal. Say hey, it's America and it's all about the guise.

Here is a gentle/tough/guy/gal who



Claes Oldenburg

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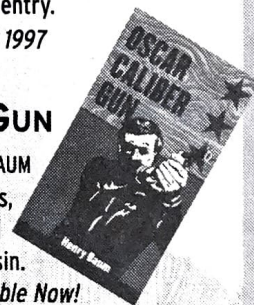
Sparrow documents the shining path of his (very) independent candidacy on the '96 campaign trail, in a revolutionary blend of verse and journal entry. Because Lincoln Was a Marxist. Available: June 1, 1997

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writes about cars and baseball, taking typically masculine themes, perhaps, in order to get at just what "masculine" means, just what it is makes a "man", and why it is that even seemingly sensible women continue to go all loony over 'em.

As Nauen somewhat ruefully concludes in the telling title poem of her book, a poem about shooting pool that is really about Life and that comes to us lit like a film noir by the author's oh so casual preciseness: "I love/American guys./saved from knowing/anything except keep/one elbow up/skittering toward a side/pocket."

In her poem, "The Red Vine" the feminine/feminist Nauen asks "Is there a place where women speak?" Hailing from Sioux Falls, South Dakota, the daughter of a Jewish immigrant who came to America to escape the holocaust, she asks a similar question in "Storm Surpassing": "And I feel lonely. Was I the girl/who stood caught in silence in a summer storm?/Was there once a girl in this pivot of the world?" But in the poem "Now That I Know Where I'm Going" the masculine/macho Nauen eschews "I can't be a milkman cuz people

would make rude jokes/or a garbageman because I couldn't stand/to throw all that perfectly good stuff away/I'll never be Queen for a Day cuz they took it off the air/So suck my dick & I don't even have one."

And this from her poem "A Moustache and a Cigarette": "knowing everything makes me feel smart/and drunk, my dad didn't have Sunday guys/I'm, like, first-generation guy/my eyes full of strange little dashes/anyone can see perfectly."

As the poet/poetess she/he becomes fantastic/ fantastical/real legend/wild thing. Many of her lyrics cry out for someone to put them to song. From "Riding in Boats with Boys": "...I like how the birds leap/up & at 'em/in the moment/with the sun/in our hair/where the hills surge down to the shore." Or, from "I Smoke This Cigarette for You": "take your shirt off let me see/your darkness my red bra your hands that see/what my words remember only when I sigh".

*American Guys* is dedicated "For my father, Hans Nauen (1906-1986),/who would have been bemused and amused/to be considered either an American or a guy".

The book is divided into 4 sections, of which *American Guys* is just Part I. (There are a most generous 103 pages to this most sterling book, for which this reader is most grateful.) Part IV is titled "How Hans Became an American" and in this section Nauen seems, somewhat fittingly and of course most touchingly, to be seeking some form of closeness/closure with that most elusive and most malest of all males, "my dad". I venture to firmly opionate that the title poem of that section, "How Hans Became an American", is one of the finest daughter to father evocations it has ever been my privilege to read. I won't even dare quote from it because of it being such a whole. But from another one, "To Hans in Heaven", here are a few closing lines: "Your noisy American kid/wants to phone you in heaven/hear you say how are you, little one,/but it's enough to think you're doing/the tax returns of the stars/slouching on your cloud patio/turning off the moon to save on the electric bill/playing patience, dealing solitaire,/bridge from one world to another."

BILL KUSHNER

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William Bronk, *The Cage of Age*. "Our most significant poet"—*The Nation*. A hundred new poems; "one leaves them with a sense of having more often than not been teased into active thought in unexpected directions." —*Library Journal*. Paper, \$10.50, ISBN: 1-883689-41-4

William Bronk, *Vectors and Smoothable Curves: Collected Essays: New Edition*. "It is impossible to read these essays by the poet William Bronk without marveling at the rigor and philosophical reach of his intelligence." —*New York Times Book Review*. Paper, \$17.95, ISBN: 1-883689-32-5

Michael Heller, *Wordflow: New and Selected Poems*. "Heller should be considered a unique and vital part of the contemporary canon." —*Dictionary of Literary Biography*. Paper, \$10.50, ISBN: 1-883689-49-X (May)

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Ivan Zhdanov, *The Inconvertible Sky*, translated by John High and Patrick Henry, introduction by Mark Shatunovsky. "Zhdanov is the master of depicting forms that seem already to have lost their substance but regain themselves in memory, in times of waiting, in the depth of a mirror or the shell of a shadow." —Mikail Epstein. Paper, \$8.95, ISBN: 1-883689-43-0

Scheduled for fall, 1997: William Bronk, *Life Supports: New Edition*; Lyman Gilmore, *Don't Touch the Poet: The Life and Times of Joel Oppenheimer*; Lisa Jarnot, Leonard Schwartz, and Christopher Stroffolino, eds., an anthology of works by younger poets; Mary Margaret Sloan, ed., *Moving Borders: Three Decades of Innovative Writing by Women: Poetry-Narrative-Theory*.

Recent and forthcoming issues of *Talisman: A Journal of Contemporary Poetry and Poetics*: #14 (spring/summer 1995) William Bronk/Poetics/Contemporary Turkish Poetry; #15 (winter 1995/96) Gerrit Lansing; #16 (fall 1996) Boston/U.K./Robin Blaser; #17 (winter 1997) Eileen Myles/Seattle; #18 (fall 1997) Lewis Warsh/Southwest; #19 (winter 1998) Armand Schwerner/Ireland. Subscriptions: \$14/yr (two issues): Talisman, P.O. Box 3157, Jersey City, NJ 07303-3157

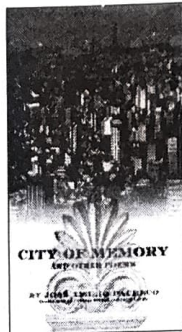
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[continued from page 9]

young and you're a poet, then you ought to go off and do it and come back in about 25 years and show me. If you get too hung up on production, you kind of take away from the idealistic quality of being a writer which is sheerly to commence and progress and discover. I'd like to say—I'm not trying to be politically correct—but I think it's interesting that in the group of people just showing up in New York under the age of 30, the most interesting writers I know of right now are women. I sort of think that women find more interesting things to have as their subject of honesty. Right now it seems that the inheritance is being manipulated in the most interesting way by young women, and usually from a much more intellectual use of writing than was true twenty or thirty years ago.

**Jarnot:** Do you set up a system of rules for the prose poems that you write? Are there any constraints that you use?

**Godfrey:** Yeah. I started using a trick at a time when I hadn't been writing because I'd been studying a number of different things. I tried real hard to stop being a poet for a few years in order to have other interests for a couple of reasons. I was changing gears and no one really seemed to like what I was doing and I was kind of depressed, did some travelling, and was diverting myself in weird ways that still continue. Then I'm in school; I'm writing like four papers a week, about things I'm interested in but I'd rather just learn about it rather than have to write it up, and they're all scientific and medical, and I say to myself, "you know, what the fuck? Every time you walk down the street things go through your brain like they always used to—you're a fucking poet. Why don't you do it?" Then I'd answer, well I don't have any time. And then I rationalized that if I could sit down and pull off these papers, then I should try sitting down and pulling off a poem in that kind of time constraint. Now when you do something with an academic demand placed on you, you sit down and you don't think in the least about being inspired, or about how careful you're going to be in writing it. So that when I said okay, now is when I have to go sit down and write a poem and I don't fucking feel like it, there's no trigger. So I got an idea. Since I was well acquainted with Thai language at this time and I have this one dictionary which happens to be for Thai people to learn English—all the entries being in

Thai language. I'd think of a word in Thai language, open to that page, and take the English definitions that were given for Thai people in order to learn English, and choose words in the order they appeared on two open pages up to whatever number I happened to pick—19, 26, whatever, many words. And then I would write a sentence or a phrase using each one in order. I got this idea because Bob Dylan used to in the early sixties write all in rhymes, and he would hit the most weird combinations. You could tell that he was being taken into an imaginative direction by having to get to a rhyme. And I decided that I was going to try to do that with these lists of words. And then I would come up with this stuff. Now if I look at those poems, I can't for the life of me remember which were the words that I had to work with, and some of them are totally nothing words, but it just was a way to start pulling things out of my head. And I still do it, simply because I am still able to get things to pop off in all kinds of different directions.

**Jarnot:** Yeah, Robert Duncan used to do that with a Japanese dictionary. He would pick phrases from the Japanese dictionary and then arrange his lectures based on the information from that.

**Godfrey:** I didn't know that. You know, when you use these arbitrary things it's amazing how what you come up with may have the consistency of something that doesn't have that much arbitrariness and that's what the beauty of the arbitrary was. John Ashbery was very effective 35 years ago in his use of the arbitrary. He could make something just come out of infinity into this place that seemed to have had some kind of finiteness about it, something concrete about it. He just pulled in this thing that didn't belong there and made it fit. I mean your mind would make it fit and it would bounce you into this place that just had nothing to do with our conventions of thinking, of logic. Logic isn't really very sound. I've been thinking about it a lot; I've been reading a lot of science writing and dealing with the scientific method. But I'm not interested in analytic thinking about the writing of poetry, or theory, semiotics. I'm not into any science of language or linguistics. Riffing isn't very scientific. There's a complete break between my science in medicine and my writing.

**Jarnot:** But your work life, your nursing life, is starting to come up in the subject matter of your poetry.

**Godfrey:** Well actually, you know, I loved living in the East Village a long time ago because it was a ghetto and I

lived in some very bad places and I was interested in what I could find out about how the people who belonged there lived. I mean in those days you could be one of a dozen white people living on a block that had 3500 people on it and observing what went on and hearing what went on from the next door and upstairs, and all around you, always fascinated me a lot. But I never got into too many kitchens. I was hanging out with guys in that neighborhood doing drugs, and I got into their homes and saw what went down. I've always had this nosiness about people who live in this kind of neighborhood. Now, I'm in the kitchens of these certain people who've always fascinated me. I deal with a lot of nasty places, and it's hard to describe. It is very poetic. I'm inside all the places that I've lived next door to. That affects me when I'm writing a lot more than anything that has to do with what actual role I'm doing out there. I mean if you spend all day in elevators in housing projects in Brooklyn, that's a lot of your visual information and your tone information. I always did this. I'd be writing a poem but at the same time I'd be coming and going from Avenue C and 8th Street, 30 years ago. It's like paint, what goes through your brain when you're walking around is like paint. You're going to use it when you do your work.

**Jarnot:** It's interesting to talk about being out in the world and doing the things that you're doing as a thing that's useful to people, but I wonder, does poetry function in the same way? Do you think it's useful to people? I mean obviously it's not helpful on the same scale as what you do with your job.

**Godfrey:** If you want to start thinking about the utility of what one does in one's life you're crazy. I mean, the most honest reaction to what goes on in the world is to say nothing fucking matters. No matter what you do, the world is not very manageable. So you live in it, and nothing is really manageable—your personal life isn't, and all kinds of other things aren't, so why should there be a purpose to everything you do of a kind where you're saying "this matters to so and so." Poetry, I never give it a thought. I find it kind of charming that people will have symposiums discussing the role of poetry. I mean the role of poetry for poets? I mean, what the hell? Poetry is like DNA or fingerprints, and that's



what you aspire to. You aspire to realizing your DNA when you write, and that's not easy to find out and you try to approach it more and more as you go along. And when you're very young you're probably going to be impressed by so many things that you're doing these kind of malaprop imitations, which in themselves are very good, because your imitation failed because your DNA was showing. And you attempt to try to get to this kind of pure DNA state in your writing. What that has to do with anybody else, go figure. Why should it be interesting to someone else? If it is, great.

**Jarnot:** Do you think that all the DNA is showing in your work?

**Godfrey:** Oh no. I might hit it from time to time on a given day. I mean I don't sit around thinking about this very much.

**Jarnot:** Are there people who you think of as your contemporaries as writers?

**Godfrey:** Well sure. It would be hard not to since we've known each other for so long. Let's put it this way, of my particular generation, it was the women in that group who had some kind of priority and seemed to have the seniority also. It was almost like they had their own little hegemonies—there was Anne Waldman, followed after a few years by Bernadette [Mayer] through her workshop, and Alice [Notley] through her workshop. I think of them as my contemporaries. I'm coeval with them, but I don't think the rest of the world thinks of us as any kind of crew. I mean I haven't had that much exposure. I was never an insider on the Project scene. I'm, like, in the middle of the left lane most of my life. As a kid my older siblings even spoke of me as an independent type. But there are a number of people who give me good feedback. And to be honest with you, I have read a lot, especially magazines, and I'll read my friends' books, but I don't study poetry. I read poetry, and this and that and the other happens in my head, but when I'm writing, I'm sort of cut off from any sense of preparation for the act of writing. I go with what's happening. It's more a matter of you sit down and try to do what you can. There may not be much there on that day, and sometimes that's the best day to catch yourself. Music always pushes me. Jazz gives me ideals, you could put it, not of technique, but of outlook. I contemplate music for inspiration far more than I do poetry. Coltrane's *Ascension* and *Interstellar Space*—I love Rashid

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Ali's drumming—a lot of Don Cherry, late Monk with Charlie Rouse—who, if you ask me, was the tenor who knew how to play *Monk*—and also Bartok's *String Quartets*, all of 'em. These I take to the desert island along with those four poetry mainstays. Incidentally, here's a music beauty tip: *Chants Sacrés Melchites, Hymnes à la Vierge*, sung by Sister Marie Keyrouz, a Lebanese Maronite nun. The hymns are in Latin, Greek, and Arabic, mixed in the same hymn. The hymns are from the early Byzantine Church liturgy. Harmonium Mundi disks are expensive, but this one will take you, well, to interstellar regions. When it comes to my own work, I try not to like everything I write, but of course I end up doing that. You know, you get so involved in things you can't see them anymore. And there a lot of times when I think, Jesus, I have a lot of ideas that are not conducive to writing wonderful poems. You know, my idea of writing in the first place is not conducive to writing a wonderful poem. And I see things where I think—you know how it is, on the wrong day you think it's all been a waste of time and I regret having gotten myself to the place where I find myself writing this,

that, or the other way. I spot weaknesses or I have habits of dealing with ironies that are not that discernable, especially if they have to do with feeling. Sometimes I think that I don't communicate feeling in a way that is as deep as the feeling. You know you get into these little snits, and then on other days you say "why the fuck don't I get the Nobel prize tomorrow?" It's a weird game. It's very hard to know what relative place you are at every time you look at things, like Heissenberg's indeterminacy, and what always happens of course is that it's a bad day and you've got to give a reading. So it's a little like being the pitcher who's in the bullpen and says, man, today I've got nothing. And he goes out and throws the no-hitter. And after the game they say to him "How did you feel before the game?" And he says, "Man, I felt horrible." You give a poetry reading and for five minutes people shake your hands and the next thing you know you're looking around for the two or three friends who want to go and have drinks. It's not like you're going to get mobbed out the door with bulbs flashing. I would kind of hate that. And I'm glad I've never had to deal with celebrity—that would be kind of dreadful.



# books received.

**ROGER APLON**

**It's Mother's Day**

Barracuda Press (Escondido, CA), 1996, 99 pages.

**ANTHONY BARNETT & DAVID MARRIOTT**  
**Word And Act/Names of the Fathers**

Archeus Series No. 1 (London), 1996, 4 pages.

**RACHEL BLAU DUPLESSIS**

**Drafts 15-XXX, The Fold**

Potes & Poets Press #39 (Elmwood, CT), 1997, 91 pages, \$12.00.

**MICHAEL BOUGHN**

**iterations of the diagonal**

shuffaloff press (Toronto), 1995, 35 pages.

**LOUIS DANIEL BRODSKY**

**The Complete Poems**

Time Being Books (St. Louis, Missouri), 1996, 633 pages, \$25.00.

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