ANSELM BERRIGAN

MICHAEL GIZZI

JESSICA CHIU

RAY DI PALMA

DAVID KOPPISCH

LAURA GOLDSTEIN

AMIRI BARAKA

BRIAN KIM STEFANS

BILL BERKSON

SHAWN WALKER
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ANSELM BERRIGAN

Poem for Pre-History

Mine! Whap! No mine!
No mine! No mine!
Belly triangle
Points nowhere
Let it touch
I wiped out
My brother was moved
We swallowed
Surf together
Spend all day
Cleaning a window
Is that any way
To shatter the limits
Of what we bring
Myself to attend to?
Billy's blue toenails
You hang over
I hungover
Ministers of phoney relaxation
Demonstraters of wack device
Status seekers masquerading
As bridge builders
I was watching you sleep
You looked like you
Were having interesting dreams
No chemo
Just jack the hormones
Quaintly possessed
By emotion, gulping
You have been sentenced
To death, later
Gimme some of that
Genepool
Landscape peppered
With quakes
Turkey in real time
Or
Manhattan in prime time?
Camby gains mental toughness
When wacked by guy
Named PJ
We were in Fairfax
I had a gavel
A motion passed
One audience member
Handed me ten reasons
To choose God
It happened
I was there
& I was fucking terrified
Tho' outwardly calm
As per usual

Recalled To Life
out like long johns. It took
Dalziel both
his cities. And his underwear, said, “not a spare taxi are you?”

“Just you be round houses
unless you've got a meter running”
retorted Stamper.

“knickers in a twist” said Dalziel

“ponies and traps suppose.”
horses pulling Dalziel.
“better for the roses, and better I reckon.”

“That radio thing
fuller of nostalgia than an Old Boy's dinner.”
“That was the producer wanted, I suppose,” said Stamper.

“back when I was things.”

Dalziel nodded his understanding.
Your dad must’ve been the same
kind of jumped up twat then as you reckon he is now. Me, I were

yon bloody houses inside
the other guests”

Dalziel needed a nonstop supply
of

all kinds of pies.”

“Inkerstamm?
he's stuck
everytime he looks out of his window.”
This sounded a bit metaphysical to Dalziel.

“I think he was probably just
trained to check bathwater for sharks.”

“And of course there was your mam.”

Dalziel yawned

Dalziel dryly

Stamper shortly

demanded Stamper

Stamper shrugged

Dalziel realized

combo
Stamper’s flat

Stamper

turned

Stamper to adjust

Dalziel said

Stamper obeyed

Dalziel said

Stamper said

Dalziel rebukingly

Dalziel’s technique

Stamper’s attempts

Finally Dalziel

Dalziel didn’t

demanded Stamper

Dalziel with heavy sarcasm

Dalziel turned

“Morning” said Dalziel

Dalziel flushed

Dalziel pointing

The gate clearly came as a shock to the young man. He tried it as Dalziel had done, then went to the back door of the house and, as Dalziel hadn’t done, started to beat on it.

“No use” said Dalziel remembering

Dalziel

“What’s all this Lord Ongor crap?” asked Stamper. “Was he a cop? Where’s he gone? And where are Kohler and Waggs?”

Dalziel shepherdng Stamper

Dalziel shook

MICHAEL GIZZI

from cured in the going bebop

Dear Double Jehovah with your beautifully tailored millwheel, pull out your eyeteeth with jujubes on Berber reverb, your quantum mechanics a beanie too late. Bodies located in the bright yellow cornmeal and amphibious sunshine of eighteen hundred siblings. Absence has a way of being there. To write in French about the fluid gain of artists is to universalize the nostalgic tourist and bond proboscisly with the inverse music charts of the unfettered shnozz of Charles de Gauze. Rimbaud now the amber camcorder of a cliché and self-affirming Rumplestiltskin for the classics. Upturned eye of a mosquito on the isthmus when he bestrides the lazy-pacing cloverleaf and sails upon the brimstone of the aerodrome. Or sits alone in perfect simulation and erects a decline, posting dispatches to Coco Chanel who relaxes in her medicine chest with an eminently worthy shrub.

•

combo

combo
Palaver about squash. Bop sunspots. Lump in mudbone where the river meets the train and a lonely woman vets funky gutbucket amalgams. Nine months before the chestnut hits the combine and Misterioso So-and-So solos on vibratoless velveteen beaver earning Bach bouncer points. To learn at a tender age a sunbonnet and a slate that short one cornea the payphone in the alley answers Ciao. Cling peaches on a path and Tristano discoursing on wickets burgles The William Carlos Sun Ra Room. Always down with the blood count, Lennie in leather on osier pins tells the swellest stories in Swordfish Land like how to handle Indiana noon mornings. I have and have not. Room here for hedge bandits punching a forgotten clock.

My dream a cycloramic cul-de-sac neighborhood Nautical Street. Canvas on cobblestone, Corliss in corduroy footlights by the bay. Like New Orleans in New England, hearing every living aspirin, a washcloth with a story: "Enough about me, Mr Back-from-the-Orient." Angel-headed heebie jeebies. All ingrained firehouse politeness and Ealing movie wild coast with cottages out the bedroom window. Genuine Wimbledon nose-colored loveseats. Evening crapsheets on the Rez. And blow me down, my anti-gravity pants have split, like a pink elephant’s appetite.

A tea shower eavesdrops on a treefort as two dingdong darning needles do the nappy dugout. Dragonfly stud (tide apples spent) gibbets into the off on his own. Lenox First Congo bells now play "Fluid Roosters in a Cage" while the Mud Simple Kid palms his spud like an ingot. It’s the Ray Gelato Show. Somewhere in the islands a listener remembers he’s not a clarinet, but a sunset. Party hats with embouchures for chickadees and rpm dueling phlegm semaphore seawrack, a "holiday" for the man on the lam. The gulf between tick tock pilot lights and time, Tristano forever Dracula-riding the escalator fleet of foot in blue obsidian velocity. Kabuki pie meet Papa Fazool. Almost a harp.

for Pilar

A Delft postman sails away on waves of Wynton K, breeze of a Saturday and synchronicity playing hoop with air fresh from Ludlow. I feel every inversion to lay down my hay and submerge myself in some tide pool drawing room before the glazier of autumn and the screwball at the crossroads stir me out. Is it any wonder ivory hunters are music lovers or that black Irish are often black. And never forget: A wasp is a dead flower with wings. Presto a fast pesto. Liquid secrets (round of applause) lick their jumpers clean. Mr P.C. with the wiles of an osteopath swaying philodendron to the precise tempo of "if he could see me now he’d be a McKenna on his mother’s side." Wall-eyed thought-fired ceramic morning sun, and checkers aside, I’ve got to get these lapidary song motes back on bath night. Call be a cab. Oops, missed it, must be the blues on purpose again. Start your maypoes, Elmo. After which a doorway blooms and don’t you know a mentholated Kelly cooks for the crew of the Hot Moon?

Heckel and Jeckel prowl the looking glass. Columbia camphor balls at halfmast while wiseass indigestion yeggs — overeasy — flip a sunmote. A sudden lack of vocabulary and dental sensitivity dusts with extreme prejudice the dugout of a crow craw foghorn. Bonehuffer Rex the dunder dog sires Sammy’s Shadow out of Statue’s Laugh. This is that and definitely not the other. Mesmer’s sunflower in his lady’s lap. No sooner does he reach cruising altercation than Heap Steroid cans his disciplinarian and pops a capsicum. Now a patch of biscuit scouts out hunting preserves. Welcome to pilgrim class and monumental massuh.

A palomino in my cream. Roy Haynes performing dressage, endorsing tubs. What time may we expect his sartorial cymbal with streamers? Did I also dream I was needing a pee? Why is health so time consuming? Can jazz fix it? Like writing about rowing, Roy sails in Zildjian moccasin over Andrew Hill. Now anyone can look over his shoulder and blackstrap molasses, fold notes spilled in piles to neaten up the world for bugs and birds and human convoluters with conniption traps. Roy saves the day with martial paradiddles and a breeze he didn’t anticipate—see? I didn’t. A schnapps tobacconist smoking boomerangs, Andrew pretends Angora hoodoo cat Monking silence. De Chirico bats crickets from a stacked sky. Anise honest autumn. Ordure on the vine, handprints on the air. And Mingus raising his corrugator, blushing "Where’s this coming from, Von?" Drab Topeka dungarees circle-dial postholes. The grey center of Albers’ yellow soul.
Five Poems

JESSICA CHIU

to philadelphia

If I grow out of frank o'hara, shoot me. No
more questions, I've asked myself that one too. Got money? Talk
slower, everyone runs at
once—it is so quiet. (hear it?) the small
gasps, stopped lips, swel
ling talk, summer runs me
to the ground, my
knees, nerves froze it was the
shock of speed and clam­
oring after you.

mothers day

that cathedral again. sharp
dropped down in front,
a dim sky. And you are
expecting me, what
we both have prepared.
another factory, an
other round of thick
waisted cylinders, silver
pipelines, of painted water. If
you knew the outcome, you
planned it. I knew the out
come from little control. You
know what the masters do. say
it. That is a prison—Wilmington,
Delaware. my eyes tight and
mouth straight like girders.

the successful ride home

Thrown together, I mean nothing
by it—departure. The gleaming chords, rails for trains
to ride, I too push along these wet veins
who is more determined? the metal and glass flash
flash. Light, my heart, flips it long fins, forgets more easily than me. I passed a man passing through
the parking lot freely. In Elizabeth, the looted
women sew the straightest rows, a harvest
in our sutured skein and fabric. Go on, the sentence
is not new, ride out now.

The men, like elk, long limed
a political sugar, the magician is on fire, and swings,
columnar flame, his head rolling. The boys
of Bucks County are poised, pistons, you see
the same girls roller skating around around, we are
training, sirs, for your gold to be won.

to my acquaintance

He speaks forget
it. You can be smart go
on without me, there is
a tree, watch the scampering
crowds. I am offended to
the art of his sneakers they
are crafty, catch my attention.
As a ball flung towards me
a prize pelted. No
throttling allowed, my
mother wd disapprove
of you. He slopes and
groans, a downy hill
aching poetically. This is my motor
car, I am off, can not
afford the screws of their behaviour.

letter #12

Notice the yellow sky, strains
wrung dry, the street winking.

My eye chokes I
mean to say this I am writing you I
am writing you.

One violin cracks, my hand
too bleeds profusely. Forget it, a
wound here and there and
there. My friend is generous, re-
lieves anxiety, looks for
exhaustion, it is abroad in
latin america it rests in my
throat too. Let me tell you.
She is taller than the tents we
pitch. Are you fit for

small children? Are you pleased
here? Still I say, this is the last
letter, this is the last attempt.

RAY DI PALMA

from The Ancient Use of Stone

Sia ammazzato chi non porta moccolo!

JANUARY 20 Speculate. This measure.
The golden section, Alferi's Kub Or. And the reference in Canto LXXXVII:

[and then the “Section”, the proportions,]

Broken in the balance—
The specifics of ever-shifting resources

Addressing the words themselves

JANUARY 23 Resolute will. Not to say. Cannot tell from what has been
told. This scavengaria! There's a telling, beyond the ship. Which to trust?
Cui vide... And not in any book. E pensava! He thought. E pensava, caro
amico mio. A 'd' rolled in the 'r'.

‘Chih’ [the word on the page] ‘Chung’ [its progress]. From baseline to
horizon—from the last man standing to the remark—what to do with this
vestige? Another ghosted owl. Où sont? M. would say there's nothing in all
this saying, better to tell you something about something surrounded by an
effective arrangement of something and something else. The bitter experience
or the rendered smile. All things are made relative by being placed in a larger
context. The expression of one is the exclusion of the other.
FEBRUARY 9  Brief cento:

The fount of gentle speech yields answer meet,
So that the deed and the sweet words be one.

Plectrum fallen into a pot of ink—

... enriched by the toil of those who have gone before.  [M]
... that they be not degraded by any accident.  [DVE]

Localization: self-taught.  The reputation of the response—
Circular motion symbolizes faultless activity.
The world still feels like winter.

FEBRUARY 16  Alternative drafts, partial erasures, repetitions, and additions
... No final form.  What remains is approximate and mutually exclusive.
There should ever be only two copies.

Dry, cold, moist, or hot—

Sanguine, hot and moist, Air
Choleric, hot and dry, Fire
Melancholy, cold and dry, Earth
Phlegmatic, cold and moist, Water

[... a learned store of ethical precept culled from many ancient authorities.]

Let Nepheg rejoice with Cenchris which is the spotted serpent.
For I bless God in the libraries of the learned and for all the booksellers
in the world.

-JUBILATE AGNO, Fragment B

Sentimental, ill-tempered, and enormous
And this distinction—
The distractions of great bones, gleaming blackness, and enormous frowns
A permission for death and nothing ornamental

MARCH 27  Comment was the best model—committed to the largely invisible—the stimulus of damage was obscured in the rush to say something remarkable and immediate—the contortions of clairvoyance set in motion by the barest suggestion of rhythm—a persistent infatuation—a reckless illusion—merely a way of saying they entered the room—the only imperative not not in motion—

Half a mile wide
No moonlight
The silent river
Shaded by trees
“Sawyers”
Shoptaw explains

DAVID KOPPISCH

improv #2

Work area next five mile stones may break my bones of contention is the mother of unnecessary evil spirits shop more save more than meets the eye for an eye to ich bin ein Berliner or without her medic needed inquire inside scoop of rocky road to where you’re going gets tough the tuft gets snowing on his black turtle necking in the back seat of his dad’s ear keys to the Kingdom of Heaven is paved with good intention is the step-mother of nest egg in your face value added or subtracted either way it comes up peanuts for this piece of land locked out of bathrooms water fountains restaurants schools of thought schools of action schools of finish line in the sand box car blues and greens are good for growing boys in the hooded sweatshirts and girls in the flooded sweatshops pray to themselves silently while you read aloud the brand name tags on the other side of the global warning signal turn left go 3 miles and it’s on the right wing conspiracy therapeutic touch down on Sunday makes the male of the species jump for joy to the world bank account for nothing ventured nothing gained though something for nothing is the theory of westward expansion then ultimate just wait contraction.
improv #3
Lamb of God you take away the sins of the world wide webbed feet of clay pigeon toeing the line’s busy bees get the worm hole in the bucket of gold card you at the door to door sales mannequin in the window to the sole proprietor of this establish mental block chopped off and onward Christian soldiers storm the beaches without suntan lotion without a real solution to the problem child care package goods and service stationary bike path through woods where wolves used to live and learn the hard way down in Mexico City visitors unaware of role in the oppression or even depression era morals reign at grandma’s house of cards comes tumbling down town and gowned for weddings and funerals weddings and funerals is all we do around here said the priest in his Roman cholera in the wake of tourist trap door to door sales manic depression in stock prices would be demonstrating a need now required before aid dispensed by private helpers who cause public catastrophes but you’re not supposed to know that or say it too loud.

improv #4: Out to Lunch
all you can eat or be eaten -to a pulp or without pulp the orange juice choices abound on the shelf life of most things our children eat is a crime statistics are in the eye of the beholder or of the needle through which Joe Camel cannot pass the salt miners murdered for organizing though you’d never know it here in the United States of Amnesia strikes those whose heads were struck like lightning bugs emerge in May now not June like they’re supposed to by four score and seventh seal will be broken hearts will pour blood counts dropping like pop flies in the alphabet soup of our epidemic proportions are so small here I don’t know why we keep coming back to back home run out of town because their skin was brown yes just like 50 years ago yet Action News makes it seem like isolated case closed said all white jury’s still out on our compassion fruits hanging from every tree is what I dream of heaven on earth quaking in our boots ‘cause don’t know if we’ll be fired like gun lobbyist smoking with Ralph Reed between the lines in the soup kitchens getting longer by the Minute Maid pays Brazil to bulldoze Amazon for orange farms and again never hear that on nightly newspeak softly and carry big stick of gummy bears now come in blue plate very special education is needed for all justice?

improv #5
we hold these truths to be self-sufficiency now mantra for (still) pale power play on word made flesh tone deaf to earth tones many of us vs. them vs. me vs. u-turn the other cheek but it’s blue & black hole in one in a million dollar man ‘o war is all men created unequal hence need for wealth redistribution only Way the Truth & the Life preservatives make us live long but not well into the night the family screamed down the hall of power covered its ears of frozen corn is “vegetable of the day” job won’t ever satisfy by high definition television in every pot & sports utility vehicle in every garage bands get contracts lose touch might be only answer yet many old guys in big hats or grey suits would get mad rush to Christmas sales is bad sign for future earnings only care of youth on corner sidewalk or corner office of president defiled by oral sex some say but what about bombs dropped on brown children for erection industrial sports complex sprouts in every dying city like municipal Viagra producing hidden cancers 10 years into future option to buy out spend all other candidates only formula for winning isn’t everything it’s the only nine-ninety-nine! if you act now and now is as good as time as any child can use it it’s so simple minds think a lake was on fire in Ohio does anyone Remembrance Day should be for those who ran to Canada not died for Canada drier than it was 50 years ago like rest of North Americana fills the shelves & pays the bills along the lonely high Ways & Means Committee controls you more than you think or be thought for or against the current salmon have a lot to say listen closely.

LAURA GOLDSTEIN

In Response to a Scar Theory

Rules dictate.
Things heal in the meantime or are covered. The totality may become scarred. What was beneath may become irrelevant. Reminder: rules dictate.
Pay attention to what has become the surface. The story will be told physically. Skin with no pores, no hair.
A story of tangled sinews petrified from what? What was beneath may become irrelevant. Watch the frozen
story again.
It stammers
its white and pink
lines. You sit silent
and watch and the
future waits. The scar
is a story and the
future waits.
The rules dictate
what? What
Has become the surface?

* an excerpt from Jen Hofer's "Scar Theory" appeared in Combo 3, pp. 5-6.

The Bath
Desire— a light cord
dangling in the blackness
above the bathtub.
When it is finally and securely tugged
what is illuminated?
Rose colored, peeling wallpaper,
a tub, a bowl of
bath salts, a sink with a
crack in the basin
fine as a child’s hair
and a bar of soap half gone,
still wet with suds.
Reflections of a candle
on a wooden shelf.
(Dream in the bath:
on the precipice of a wooden
platform not so high
off the ground is
a small bird lying at
the edge, twitching,
some blood beneath his
wing.)
You could be a false alibi
in someone else’s dream
a perfectly revolving aspect
in the most beautiful machine
luminous and compelling
of itself.

Low Coup for So What
They asked him the difference
Between In sane and Out sane
He said, you know the difference
That’s why you asking.

Two days later
They came back.
He had left a note.
It said the same
Thing.

That’s when his picture
Went up, in the Post Office
The caption read, “Wanted
For any reason you can
Think of.”

This meant
They really did
Understand.

Amiri B 8/98
PILGRIM'S PROGRESS

(A North American Jig)

Dig,

I met these two

Gentlemen
In a fit of contention

Arguing about

Which one of them

Was

God

A

White dude
& a Negro

with impressive

Credentials

To dispute either claim

WD be hard

So completely

W/o Bias

Or national pretension

I killed

Both

The motherfuckers!

AB 11/3/98

WORK SHEET

Think what if there were no thoughts
Imagine what if there was no imagining
Feel what if there was no feeling
do what if there was no doing

These are the recent suggestions
from the international kill everybody torture everybody
lie, cheat, murder, defraud
commission, of the new world order,
Ibis Feces Corpse Sensation
They have a Rock Group preparing to debut
DEATH TERROR LIES AND MONEY
Their first album is 'ALL YOU DUMB MOTHERFUCKERS THAT LIVE UNDER OUR RULE IS TOO HIP FOR DETAILS'
It is a mixed group...dead and live people
it is there fore multicultural multinational and multi here
The new slogan for our next fiscal year is: DON'T YOU KNOW?

These are notes from the meeting of the interior absence redeviv group
BRIAN KIM STEFANS

O’Hara’s Lofts

I.

Pushing language like an Eagle Scout
the good Gotterdammerung, the Nutrition Facts,
able to bleep pie-bald siblings with a sin-
ful pound, protestingly vengeance wagers, so
no snooty narcissist, bud, divagates
equality, within the room. Boys in round:

once, that was the ticket, but finally the fifties
but finally the relational soon after smothered

in this ageless, rather socially “up”
sentiment: they snare in my living room
and I snore in theirs, voiding school
of schools, such then that Blake was a principal
in the day-by-day calamities, sat be-
yond suspicion, and no agon fairly sees.

II.

This big budget, overproduced
kind of poem, notch in the hairdryer

a prisoner yawps at dawn,
stoically, bliss, but it’s on-
ly Brooklyn, IMF sundry coveman,
 —  the goal is seeking a blank shot
blindside, peepers reeling
 —  to be in, in the painting

is nice, the sentence welts and

groundfire, Snaggle Puss,

nod

nichts the paper or budgetary snore

voodoo over the traipse and

burn. Dawn drapes its reticence

and pardons clown, its best defense.
Humor, ranger, the cancer-language
purs purs inspex mahogany glue
off the graph, into the waffle iron
with daisies, a strong constitution,
libido. Cuss funday matrimony,
pizza cutters for the wanking classes,
desiderata reflects pint-sized
such that ovidion torsion flunks
migratory amoretto convening in town
aspiring to linden, haze can't-dos
with the arbitrators so suspicious
of me, lake tenterhooks largesse
neath crown, of thorns, barge in
laughing. The criminal ties her luck
up in numbers, fickle symphonies
sure sat well with the moment's club
abetting sergeant lies, punk sizes
gentrifying dis bordello's, or on
onus protocols, sandwiched jaundicity
like a crier bunting median chancers,
so there. Bleed yonder, masterly
balladeers diametric or diagnostic,
not, not indeed, the specialty,
expecting blooming fife's catalogue,
groaning, circumvents hip charms
and lesser developments in firearms
or doxa. Mediating torus likens
fantasy outside fragilities, hocks
californian raster shades, fungal
as any industrial waste, sphericity
the social pennant of the morasses
or adjectival dental panache,
hungering tiger eye lead in the field,
a prank that stifled mammon, grace,
a blizzard, pales beneath the rash
and other fine sentiments of christmas.

A CONVERSATION WITH BILL BERKSON

Michael Magee / August 18 to October 31, 1999

BB: Ornette Coleman — I don't recall how I discovered his music. By 1960 his
and Monk's were the important Sounds for me. I played their records as I wrote
(I wrote "to" them? sort of). Thelonious in Action was one, plus individual cuts
"Nutty," "Friday the 13th." Something Else. This Is Our Music, Change [of the
Century]. . .Friends & I drove around the outer drives of Manhattan listening to
Symphony Sid on the car radio; one friend argued that Coleman "wasn't
music." I got enraged, let him have it. I don't know how but it was exactly that
music I heard, for writing's sake, as both itself (it sounded sincere) and a
recognizable, tight format (I said "dixieland" at the time) — unison, 4 parts,
unison, & out — within which amazing things happened. I was trying to make
the phraseology of my teenager & New York uptown culture(s) into poems; I
had language but no syntax, & part of the language was disjunction. John
Cage I heard as a field of "interruptions"; that helped; his ideas helped; but no
one could write with those sounds in the room. Monk and Coleman were
instructive about tone, how what a structure or syntax might accommodate,
what the ear could not just tolerate but actually enjoy, light up with, "laugh
to hear the crazy music" (Kerouac).

MM: So, there are so many things that interest me here! and any way in which
you'd like to revisit would be great. Any guesses, for instance, on how you
discovered Coleman's music? I'm thinking that since he was an important
influence by 1960 you must/may have seen
him at that first run at The Five
Spot, which began 11/17/59? (Baraka: "We were all hit with the heavy impact
in GV of Ornette C. He was a New Thing in that era of new things.")

I'm also struck by the implied distinction between Coleman/Monk on the one
hand and Cage on the other, vis a vis your own writing practice: that you
played Monk's & Coleman's records as you wrote, and sort of wrote "to" them
but that writing with Cage's sounds in the room didn't work. Any thoughts you
have on this distinction would be great, and of course all free associations are
most welcome!

BB: I may have heard Ornette at that first run but I so associate seeing him at
the 5 Spot with being there in the company of Frank O'Hara and whomever
else — Mike Goldberg and Patsy Southgate, probably. About Cage's music: no
way could one write with, say, "Indeterminacy" playing — "Indeterminacy" is
mostly words — or the pieces like "Variations IV" or the various "Fontana
Mix" sessions with radio sounds. It was more the textures recalled of such
works that were so encouraging. Odd, in a way, because later, in the late sixties
and early seventies one wrote, as everyone did then, with rock & roll playing.
as it was playing constantly then in whatever room one was in, and the words in the rock & roll songs fed into the poems; in fact sometimes they were just reworked as poems. The words in Cage's music weren't available in that way. Then some of the words in the music, Robert Ashley's 'She Was a Visitor,' for instance, were memorable as spoken poetry alone. Obviously, though, the distinction is not a high/low one. I played plenty of Feldman's music — the Columbia recording with a Guston cover, the Time lp with Kline — while writing or reading. On the other hand, to be clearer about this, the music, whether Monk or Feldman or Mabel Mercer, was often just there: I didn't put on the lp and then sit down to write, but may have started writing, inspired by what I was hearing, or else the music was just one of many incidentals, including whatever it was I was reading at the time or seeing while staring out the window.

MM: I wonder if maybe you could talk about the Five Spot and Jazz Gallery as spaces in those days? The many writers & painters showing up, some of them musically trained (O'Hara, classically, but then Rivers as a jazz sax player, and Coolidge — though he's said to me that his writing "was in a fairly primitive state in 1959."). The Goldberg's, Hartigan's, Leslie's paintings on the walls of the Jazz Gallery. Coolidge recalled talking with Ornette between sets and finding him "totally open" — and I remember something you said about sitting next to Monk, similarly, at the bar. Then, of course, Coolidge was drumming w/ Buell Neidlinger who was playing occasionally w/ Coleman and often w/ Cecil Taylor — and Taylor was, as you've mentioned before, helping to run off copies of Baraka's/DiPrima's Floating Bear. I guess what I'm leading up to is some question of spatial and/or artistic proximity, and whether the closeness (spatial and personal) of the artists resulted in a certain analogic license, if that makes any sense? But anything you had to say about these spaces themselves would certainly be interesting. And you knew Coolidge from Providence days, right? Would you have run into him at Five Spot when he came w/ "a gang of musicians" as he says he tended to in late 50's early 60's?

BB: The 5 Spot had posters for art shows. That was true even when they moved around to St. Marks Place. For The Jazz Gallery, Termini must have either borrowed or bought big pictures by — as I recall, anyway — Goldberg, Hartigan, Leslie, and maybe Joan Mitchell. Funny, because the place was pretty dark, "cavernous," like they say.

I didn't know Clark in Providence. We didn't actually meet until the late 60s. We started corresponding around 1968, when Clark was still in San Francisco. Then in 1970, just as Clark was moving back East, I moved to Bolinas. At Brown I knew Alvin Curran who had grown up with Clark in Providence and who played music with him. Alvin and I wrote music and words, respectively, for a musical comedy about the Boston Tea Party. A terrible idea. The musical, for a campus contest, went unfinished, never produced; but Alvin and I wrote some pretty songs, I believe.

The thing about musicians on the New York School scene I know only by hearsay — or what's now history, in the books. I don't remember ever meeting Cecil Taylor. Monk came to the Jazz Gallery bar while I was sitting there, between sets, but I certainly had no way of speaking to him. I guess if Leroi or someone had introduced us it might have been different. I tended then, and even now it's this way, to be reticent around my heroes, unless there is a definite question to be asked. Clark could talk to Ornette as a musician. I didn't know beans about the forms these guys were working with. And the analogies were all a one-way street, as far as I can tell. Not that Monk might not have found kinship with my or Clark's poetry if he ever got to it. But did he?

MM: Not that I know of — but there's Taylor of course, writing poetry, and that list of his favorites ca. 1965 I've quoted to you before: Duncan, Jones, Olson, Creeley. I can't let the Boston Tea Party musical go by in this context without quoting you this thing of Ralph Ellison's:

"Americans began their revolt from the English fatherland when they dumped the tea into Boston Harbor, masked as Indians, and the mobility of the society created in this limitless space has encouraged the use of the mask for good and evil ever since... that which cannot gain authority from tradition may borrow it with a mask... When American life is most American it is apt to be most theatrical.

Of course Ellison is hip to all the problems of minstrelsy ("for good and evil" as he says) but he loves how even that can, in the hands of someone like Armstrong say, become this non-conformist, multifaceted joke. Don't know where I'm headed with this... towards some question about the flexibility of selfhood, the trying on of hats? I guess I'm thinking of another thing I remember you saying, that "that downtown scene permitted what seemed at the time very specific, uncategorizable relations: race relations, gender relations, sexual-orientation relations, & all that," which allowed your friendship with O'Hara, and even with Baraka, to be what it was.

I get some of this feeling from the beginning of a poem like "Russian New Year," — "Now trouble comes between the forest's selves, / And smoke spreads to pools in which we stroke / Our several smirks." In these "several smirks" I get the impression of masking, and the sense of the self's multiplicity. Then the hilarious quote, "I love you as my own dear jailbird. / I cannot think of you without thinking of the New York lighting system." Was that made-up or heard?

BB: hm, minstrelsy and camp...I've been thinking about what Chicanos call Rasquache, the hyper version of stereotype. Accentuate the negative perception. The Ellison quote is next to O'Hara's (not exact here) about how Americans have helpless love for anyone who gets up to do something in public, he meant
Ruby Keeler, but forecast, say, Chelsea Girls. Flexibility — or really, multiplicity, hybridness, or in any case, non-fixity — of selfhood is exactly the point. At some point, thanks to Norman O. Brown, this was called polymorphously perverse. I would still like a new hat, please. (See O'Hara in “A Step Away from Them” and also with Leroi in “Personal Poem.”)

You appear to be on target about those lines in “Russian New Year” — I myself have never guessed how much I was “saying” in those poems, I was so involving in having them be writing. “Jailbird” etc. wasn’t overheard, except that all the language in Saturday Night was “theatricalized” out of the talk I had heard around me — not Williams’s “Polish mothers” but their Manhattan and Hollywood equivalents.

MM: I’d be interested in anything more you had to say about this last distinction — WCW’s “Polish mothers” on the one hand, and your Manhattanites and Hollywooders on the other. This issue of “the American Idiom,” as Williams called it, or Ellison “the American vernacular.” Those two are on the same trail, it seems to me, but Ellison is privy every day to Harlem speech, NY speech generally, in the 40’s. Does the difference matter, and how much? Was that difference between what you were doing, picking up on, etc, and what Williams was up to, say, Paterson V, one you were conscious of? A friend once said to me, “the problem with Paterson is it takes place in Paterson,” by which I think she meant that he had cut himself off from the heterogeneous mix in NYC and suffered the consequences.

BB: Your friend was way off. Paterson was very heterogeneous — not just Polish mothers, but black mothers, & the whole of Wop Town (still called that, I think) was there to inform Mr. Paterson’s ear. Get Joel Lewis to show you around there sometime as he did me. You go from the Falls with rumbles of Alexander Hamilton & friends’ economic plotting (“harness” the water is the first order of business here), to who works the mills (immigrants), and onward, downward to the depressed little cities you see today — ripe for “renewal”.

But further, the American idiom had changed a lot since Williams came to it. Listen to speeches as late as the late 40s, into the 50s, with old guys in congress. Listen to Roosevelt, Al Smith, radio announcers. Listen to Burroughs who actually sometimes sounds like old-time American oratory. All that changed, street talk changed, in the 1940s-50s after the war or in the war. The formality went out of it. Slang became increasingly dominant. The GI Bill had something to do with this — a phenomenon that should be studied more closely, because it democratized American art, including literature (think of Creeley & O’Hara at Harvard, or anyone at Black Mountain or in Hofmann’s schools, or Juliard). O’Hara’s chat is so different from that of the characters (as Eliot called them) in Williams. It’s partly a difference in the cultural decades. The teen talk of the 50s was looser, maybe more violent, more doomed as well as based in a greater general affluence than before. The movies, though, had their great talking period from 1930 to about 1948; then dialogue took a

backseat, the “method” mumbles were in (not that Dean and Brando and Clift were not completely great actors). No Anglo poet after Kerouac and O’Hara really has the feel of live, momentous talk the way they do. (The way Victor Cruz does, for example, among us.) Maybe that’s why the generation of Barry Watten thought it important to put the kabosh on “speech-based” poetry; as usual, the job’s already been done by the culture, which makes their manifestos look pretty redundant.

Is this pretty much in answer to what you asked?

MM: Yeah, very much. I’m just deciding what strands to seize on! I think you’re right about Paterson — though it’s funny and uncomfortable to listen to the late Williams say stuff like “I don’t like jazz. It merely excites; there’s no subtlety at all” (in 1961) and can’t help wondering what might have happened had he made it to postwar New York more often. But then, he was very near the end of his writing — and, really, his New York was the NYC of the ’teens! (didn’t Olson say something like this?).

What you say about Cruz is especially true, to my mind, of Harryette Mullen — who has that feel of “live, momentous talk” and actually shows how it might be used in a way not at cross-purposes with language writing — she suggests how the vernacular might provoke/promote a de-centered subject, or how it might involve itself in “the politics of poetic form,” as they say, as much as (thoroughly different) a poem by Watts. This is an area I think where my generation, reading language poetry, wants some wiggle room — poets many of whom have grown up interested in rap music, for instance. Mullen’s an important bridge in that regard. But then, you were in Bolinas when all of this was going down — what was your impression/reaction (I was saving Bolinas/Big Sky issues for later, but here goes...)? Did you resist this professed need to “put the kabosh on ‘speech-based’ poetry”? I mean, it seems complicated because I can see where you must have been an influence on those poets and yet coming from a “New York school” history/context some of the ideas being put out there must have seemed mistaken? I’m thinking too about even new poems like the ones which appeared in Combo 3 — where, for instance, a line like “Digestibus does as Porky knows” depends for some of its punch on the formal/syntactical echo of vernacular truisms like “stupid is as stupid does.” And I’m curious about this notion that “the job’s already been done by the culture, which makes their manifestos look pretty redundant.”

BB: Yes, and Erica Hunt, too, whom I recently heard read in Boulder. Williams in New York was always displaced, worried about getting back to Flossie — see McAlmon’s story in Post-Adolescence, about WCW, Hartley, McA wandering around Cooper Union and going, or not going, to one of the Baroness’s parties. In the 70s in Bolinas I was fairly impervious to the theory in what Barry and others were up to. Barry would visit and talk in some concerned
fashion that was entirely opaque to me. Everyone respects his earnestness, and Perelman’s, too. Leave it at that. Most of the ideas from, as you say, “a New York School perspective” seemed late. “Speech” after all is a mode that can be made material to writing. Williams, for instance, was trying to make a literary language.

MM: Right, or also the opposite, a two-way street?—something Duncan said to Creeley about Black Mountain: “to transform American literature into a viable language—that’s what we were trying to do.” What had brought you to Bolinas? Bob P mentioned that Big Sky was pretty important for Watten, and I noticed that he typeset Homage to Frank O’Hara. Maybe you could talk in and around this area some? It seems an interesting in-between moment, those early seventies.

BB: A “viable language” is not a speech/language, as Duncan would have meant it, I think. There’s a pretty clear desire to arrive at an authentic high literary language in America, Melville and Whitman being the openers. There’s got to be a “vulgar” source; for Whitman it was the oratory combined with chat of journalism. I mean vulgar in the strictest sense. A realism. Pound’s “nothing that you couldn’t actually...say.” Williams went beyond that in the 20s, and he delighted in where Stein took her Mandarin speechifyings.

Michael, this is more interesting than about Bolinas for now. I have this pet rock about most manifestos, revolutionary activities being mop-up operations once the culture has anyway already moved. Manifestos are for laggards once the culture has anyway already moved. Manifestos are for laggards like vulgate, common, ordinary, curb your dog.

Why I left for Bolinas: I had worn out New York for myself. Lewis Warsh and Tom Clark were writing exciting letters from this tiny town on the edge of California. I went, saw, came back and stayed 23 years. The “in-between moment” you refer to included a kind of diaspora of New York — almost all my friends left for California, Colorado, New England, Chicago, you name it. Meanwhile, all sorts of younger people who later appeared in Big Sky were on the move — people who had read The New American Poetry and made their own cross-cultural blends: Jim Gustafson, Charlie Vermont, Hilton Obenzinger and his friends from Columbia University days. I knew Kit Robinson, Steve Benson, Alan Bernheimer and Alex Smith from the year I spend teaching at Yale, 1969-70, just before I left town. Then the New College Poetics Program got going, and writers like David Levi Strauss, Leslie Scalapino and Aaron Shurin showed up and mixed with, among others, John Thorpe, who remains a fascinating, unknown quantity.

MM: The issue of the vulgar as a kind of realism — I think I know what you mean, that sense of the poem growing up according to some experience in detail? But then too the literally vulgar seems important in the context of what Williams was doing — I’m thinking of a moment in Paterson where he writes, “Sit your horny ass down!” The first time I read that it was like a great relief! Like, okay, I didn’t know you could say that in a poem but now I know. “That’s when refreshment arrives,” as O’Hara said.

As for the issue of Bolinas, we can pick it up later, or not — just curious, I guess, about any causal or not-so-casual connections. Also, it seems to me that, however the language group was putting themselves across at the time, they’re actually quite various in their cares and practices, w/ a few quite perhaps indebted to that more New York way of doing the poem. Certainly what you’re doing ca. Best & Co. — “Rebecca Cutlet,” etc. — prefigures some of the things those guys made manifest in the 70’s? Anyway, I’m musing.

BB: Yes, yes, “language poets” as various, just as various as NY School or what have you. Kit Robinson’s nimble care, Benson’s sometime fury, others’ resentful satires. The New York connection for everybody seemed to be John Ashbery’s the Tennis Court Oath, maybe all the more because he was denying the value of the poems in that book, though he, John, once said to me circa 1968 that Clark Coolidge really was continuing from “Europe” in the best possible way.

What difference between the literal vulgar and vulgar in the strictest? I mean vulgar like vulgate, common, ordinary, curb your dog. “At least as alive as the vulgar,” O’Hara has it. Art regularly recharges itself at street level — like de Kooning “out buying some environment” (a Kleenex box), like Courbet working from popular prints. It’s also a method of recharging the lines of communication — of both ends, artist and audience, knowing the same matters, cognitive style (Michael Baxandall), recognitions. I was alarmed when after I read Denby’s sonnets at Natoma Street, Ron Silliman said the rhymes bothered him and when I said “oh yeah, Rodgers & Hart,” he had no idea who Rodgers & Hart were. What I take to be basic American culture he had missed by a mile. That’s a definition of Academic. Good students who never watched TV or went to clubs. Sinatra scared them. “Your horny ass” is just ordinary, you know; the OTHER vulgar is like bad manners, rude. A princess at the height of sophistication would say “your horny ass” and mean it.

Add this: I just figured out that the proliferation of television coincided with the end of talk in movies. There may have been some kind of dumbing progression from the highs of radio rush-speech ( Clem McCarthy at the races done by Spike Jones & Co.) to the more heavily scripted radio of later years to the “casual” voices (Godfrey, Como, Steve Allen) and puppeteerings of early TV. Talk on TV has always been “like, get Real!” “I dunno, whaddayoo wanna do, Marty?” {All this had better be Greek to you, Mike, or you’re a) a nostalgia buff, b) kidding us about yr age}
It strikes me that you only have to glance quickly through an anthology like *Poems for the Millennium* to realize that, formally, there are many poems — and hundreds of passages — as radically innovative as anything in Langpo. In fact, as John Shoptaw notices, a poem like Frank O’Hara’s “What Appears to be Yours” from 1960 would not seem at all out of place in *The Language Book* or *In the American Tree*. By the mid-1950s — as a reaction against the culture of Abstract Expressionism — the New York avant-garde of O’Hara’s and Ashbery’s generation had already moved away from an aesthetic based on the physical body in relation to the poetic line. If Ashbery himself talks about the influence of say Pollock on *The Tennis Court Oath* this has really everything to do with the enormous power of the critical vocabulary with which theorists such as Clement Greenberg, Harold Rosenberg and Meyer Shapiro articulated the project of Abstract Expressionism — that is, the difference between the art of Ashbery’s generation and the Abstract Expressionists was incapable of being described within the limits of the language and concepts available for thought at this particular period. And it is this that seems to me to be the breakthrough of Langpo — a breakthrough that is more a matter of being able to read — in an entirely new way — the more radical passages in the New American poetry than it is of writing poems in a fundamentally new way. (Here of course the reception to post-structuralist theory — particularly the Marxist inflection it was given by Althusser — motivated the character of this reading.) Nor does Ashbery’s influence end, as Mandel seems to suggest, with *The Tennis Court Oath* — I don’t think it’s mentioned in “The New Sentence,” but isn’t “Three Poems” the crucial stimulus for the explosion of Language prose poems written during the mid-, late- 70s?

**BB:** Yes, Debrot is pretty good and smart. The prose poems and mini stories of the early 70s had as much to do with Creeley’s *Presences* as anything else. But it was even more something in the air. Brownstein’s & others translations of Jacob’s *Dice Cup*, Padgett’s *Of Reverdy*, Padgett’s & Berrigan’s prose, Elmslie’s *Orchid Stories*, Brautigan — all are on tap. Let’s turn this around — Debrot does it somewhat — LangPo (I like that, is it Sanders?) contributed a lot collectively and individually. How to read the NAP was definitely part of it, how to read *Memoirs of the Lake Poets*, too. And there was a laziness and sentimentality abroad in the land that needed needling. The only thing Ashbery said he got from Pollock was the concept of risk, of going for broke with an very unpromising hand. His essay on the avant-garde is about that. I’d be very surprised if John Ashbery ever read a word of Clement Greenberg’s or Harold R’s “theorizings” — he may have attended Shapiro’s lectures at Columbia, however, as so many artists did. Scenario #3: Joan Mitchell reading HR’s Action painters essay to JA over drinks at the San Remo & John falling off his stool with either a fit of giggles or narcolepsy.

**MM:** This reminds me of that quote from Larry Rivers which I included in the Editor’s Note to *Combo 3* — the one where he needleles Greenberg for the confidence he has in his own taste. Is the commonplace impression that Greenberg had a stranglehold on “art” a very mistaken one? I mean, obviously it is, but was he a Papa to be bowed over, a Grampa to beiggled at, an uncle to be ignored? It’s funny to me that both he and O’Hara could champion Pollock, at the same time that Greenberg is saying stuff like this (1956): “I dare to suggest T.S. Eliot may be the best of all literary critics. The first credentials of a critic are his taste.” And then I think that by that point someone like Rivers is already moving towards a non-abstract aesthetic — in the somewhat cartoonish faces of “Washington Crossing the Delaware,” say.

**BB:** A GOOD INKLING YOU’VE GOTTEN HERE, I’D SAY. Greenberg’s stranglehold was on the institutional side. In the 1960s every city that could call itself such (La Jolla, for instance) had to have a contemporary art museum. The ones that were built almost uniformly went for Clem’s line (Noland, Louis, Caro, Motherwell and David Smith if they could afford them, Frankenthaler) and a little over that line into minimal (Frank Stella, Donald Judd). These were obligatory purchases for civic pride. Clem’s line was persuasive; that is, he was a very fine rhetorician. Nobody knew thought his theories were right; nobody now does; but as Danto put it recently, no other critic had a theory as systematic as Clem’s appeared to be, tho even Clem argued with his back to the wall that it wasn’t systematic at all, just his taste and intuition. But I didn’t hang with his crowd. See O’Hara in “Nature and the New Painting” where he writes of “our best critics” involved in tallying and ranking rather than responding — there he means Greenberg and Rosenberg. What happened in the 60s was the large development of the thoroughly administered, institutionalized art world we have today, where response hardly ever happens, it’s all by the book.

**MM:** So, as this institutionalization was happening in the ’60s, which artists were becoming important for/to you? I guess I’m looking less for a list (Rauschenberg, Johns, Rivers, Dine) than for some sense of what was going on in the way of both new *ideas* and work — and of course some biographical sense of who you were talking to most in those days. Were you in and around Warhol’s developing circle in those years?

**BB:** Sometimes I wish I had known Andy Warhol better. Instead, I knew my childhood acquaintance Brigid Polk and of course Gerard Malanga, tho Gerard and I were sort of off-and-on friendly. None of these people had any ideas to speak of. They were actors on the scene. They were amusing to be with.
Andy’s ideas were pretty interesting. I know now from reading his POPISM and Diaries, but to know it then you had to be deep inside his world. Just seeing him at parties wasn’t going to turn it around. Johns was the important one for me; everything he did was so interesting and slow in its way of gathering thoughts and intentions. In that, his feeling, the mood of his paint, was closest to Guston’s. Later, beginning in the late 60’s, I loved what Ruscha was doing, especially his books, which seem to be 20th century books of hours. “Les tres riches heurs do everybody.” I lost interest in the art world around 1966 or ’67. Had I stayed I would have grasped sooner more of what Eva Hesse, Robert Smithson and Sol Lewitt were up to — artists who matter a lot to me now. Luckily I wrote a line or two in ARTS about Hesse before dropping out. I caught her work “Hang Up” in a group show and said something like it was best thing in town.

It’s funny, Jim Carroll and I used to go and sit for hours in the back room at Max’s. That’s where the Warhol set gathered but we hardly ever gathered with them. I don’t know what we were doing. Just looking at or for the pretty girls — who may not have even been girls at that point! Meanwhile, as I found out later, Smithson and his circle occupied booths in the front room. The conversation there would have been a lot more informative, you betcha. Oddly, I went from sitting at the bar thinking it over with Ronnie Bladen in the early days of Kansas City to this rather nebulous back-room routine.

MM: Maybe we can follow some of these threads out in some more detail. It’s no surprise of course that Johns was so important to you and I can see how Ruscha would fit in (I have “Noise, Pencil, Broken Pencil, Cheap Western” in my mind’s eye). Were you close enough to Johns in those years that you were talking to him about the work he was doing?

BB: I knew Jasper, we talked, but rarely that I can recall about his work. I remember his telling me that he put the image of Ted Berrigan’s Sonnets into his painting because he found Ted’s poems to be sad, “and I think of my paintings as sad, too,” he said. The melancholy of Johns’s work isn’t discussed much. He said something similar about his affinity for O’Hara’s “In Memory of My Feelings.” I tried to register something of my own feeling for Johns’s work in a poem called “Out There.”

MM: I suppose I’m also wondering what made you lose interest in the art world in the late 60’s.

BB: I lost interest in writing criticism, mainly. The era of the professional axe-grinding critic had been ushered in and I didn’t want to compete in those ranks. Plus, I was more interested ultimately in what was going on around St. Marks, the Poetry Project, and my new friendships with people like Lewis Warsh and Anne Waldman, Ted Berrigan, Larry Fagin, and so on. And that group had no particular connection with the art scene. The artists were George Schneemann and Joe Brainard. Jasper, to some extent, remote, but he was close with John Giorno, and through John, with Anne.

MM: You mention Smithson: did things like “Amarillo Ramp” or “Spiral Jetty” grab you? I’m intuiting that the inability to get these works into museums might have been interesting to you in light of that sense of the institutionalization of art we discussed earlier.

BB: Well, the point is, I didn’t really connect with Smithson’s work until after I had left New York. It was easy to do so even then, because his writing is as much his art as the actual physical things he made or in some cases, more properly, did. I’ve never seen Spiral Jetty, have you, anyone? aside from the film and the photos.

MM: Right. And I suppose there’s the possibility that having photographs extant works against this idea of the work as fully outside the realm/grasp of institutions — though if “his writing is as much his art as the actual physical things he made,” as you say... I’m reminded of this funny, purposefully defeating, tautological statement of Lewitt’s I came across: “All ideas are art if they are concerned with art and fall within the convention of art.” It seems just the opposite of Greenberg’s appeal to taste.

BB: Yes, that’s absolutely right. Though you have a taste for some ideas rather than others.

MM: Well, that’s what makes this issue of “taste” tricky. Because one makes judgments — or else succumbs to a kind of false egalitarianism where even completely opposed aesthetics are tacitly approved of. And yet taste seems inevitably to suggest hierarchical grades: I think of one cathetic instance where Duncan takes on some conventional critic named Cecil Hemley who had disparaged Donald Allen’s The New American Poetry because Allen had shown “bad taste” and who had said he had no taste for Creeley’s work. And Duncan came back, “Since he has no other conceivable route to knowledge of that work, taste must suffice. But I can have no recourse to taste.” So, Duncan is in the middle of a historically charged battle, which we’ve already alluded to in re: Greenberg. But I wonder whether his point still stands and, if so, how one goes about judging without “recourse to taste”?

BB: My guess is, you’d have to read a lot of Kant. But seriously, what Duncan said is beautiful and provocative. Insofar as knowledge breeds recognition, I suppose he, Robert Duncan, meant that he could recognize something in Creeley’s work, something that gave it value for him. Oddly, the most interesting use of “taste” is that line in Olson about having a taste for stones & “if I have any taste it is because I have interested myself...” I don’t care in what. Interest itself is a kind of taste. I don’t see why one can’t approve “completely
opposed aesthetics” as aesthetics are only part of what there is in any art. That’s not egalitarian, but it’s practical: Schoenberg and Stravinsky have completely opposed aesthetics, I think, so it’s hard to schedule them together for concerts but not to have them both in one’s CD collection & let them fight it out for your admiration. Taste shows up ultimately in the (you bet your life!) quality of that fight, the ongoing banter about what you recognize and need. If your sense of hierarchy isn’t pretty generous and mutable, poor you.

MM: I know this is to switch gears rather quickly (though now that I think about it it does have to do w/ this issue of taste) but I just came across Big Sky 7 — “The World of Leon” — which I’d never seen before, and have to ask about it. It’s absolutely hilarious! The preface by Donald Hall (could it be real? — I’m guessing forged) I could hardly read standing up, particularly the conclusion:

“If there is one figure who is a key to the whole, it is Leon, standing as he does at the crossroads of Dada, traditionalism, Pop Art, romanticism, Cubism, lettrism, classicism, Marxism, Hard Edge, militancy, Richard Kostelanetz, Vorticism, voyeurism, chauvinism, Imagism, symbolism, neo-classicism, Zen, neo-Elizabethanism, minimalism, Maoism, and Thomistic Platonism.”

So, one thing that jumps out is the send-up of the idea of a unified selfhood (Hall’s subtitle: “Approaches to the Integration of Leon”) in Big Sky which is publishing poets who speak primarily of “selves,” plural. I know that your “Variation on a Theme by William Carlos Williams” was written collaboratively and included as “Leon’s” — who was involved in this project? Would you mind telling the story?

BB: As I recall it, the Donald Hall preface was authentic, but who really knows? It arrived with the final ms. and the cover design, which features an image of Leon Errol, a comic whose films had a resurgence in the early days of television. “Leon” was the signature affixed to a collaborative poem written in late 1968 or so by a group of people passing around a single outsized sheet of white paper. That may have been in Fort Jefferson, Long Island, where my mother had a house which Ron Padgett nicknamed “Brenda” because of a hurricane that passed by one weekend while we were there. From that moment, Leon just sort of caught fire. The World of Leon is the ultimate collection to date. There were others: Pictures of Leon, More Pictures of Leon, and so on. Some of the people who fed the flames were Ron, me, Michael Brownstein, Larry Fagin… I’m not sure who else. Not everybody was involved in the productions every time. The only Dada aspect to this was the “poetry-written-by-everyone” gambit: most of these poems were written at parties. The important predecessor left out in Hall’s list was Ern Malley, whose poems were published in the Australian literary and art journal Angry Penguins in 1944. (Check out previous issues of John Tranter’s on-line magazine JACKET for more info re E.M.) Now it can be told, I guess. But then again, I may have misremembered the whole thing.

Do you know Terry Southern’s interview for the Paris Review of Henry Green? Do you know the writings of Henry Green? Now there’s a Leon for you… Doting, Loving, Party-Going, Concluding, Blindness, Nothing, Caught, Pack My Bag, Back.

Mas tarde.

MM: Another shift of gears: I’m hoping you might have something to say about this, which I found very interesting but am not quite sure how to read. It’s the last section of a Watten poem which appeared in Big Sky 9.
Robert Smithson says there’s the scenic, lush, well-gardened: thesis, and the vacant, ugly, dry, spacious, discontinuous: antithesis—the idea which handles both is: picturesque. What you notice that causes you to see either one. You have to notice it without seeing it—itself comes across to hit you across—as if you’d never seen it before. What makes you see things after noticing it.

Wonderful spaces for your efforts open up. Freely to consider and improve those things when they occur. You can go inside—telling Rae over the phone about what was happening for the pure pleasure of clearing it up.

You can say what happened and have it be a part of that.

So, while that first paragraph/stanza self-evidently deals with Smithson’s ideas, the last two seem to be alluding to O’Hara’s Personism—where, in this case, “telling Rae [Armantrout, I assume] over the phone about what was happening” is glossed with the conclusion, “You can say what happened and have it be a part of that.” How, if at all, would you read the relation between these two sections I’ve mapped—and by association (perhaps) the analogy of Smithson and O’Hara? Watten seems to imply that at the very least the two artists open up “wonderful spaces”—but is he doing more than that, or, would you make more of such an analogy?

BB: It’s nice to see Barry addressing “pure pleasure” here. I suspect that these may not be his original words, however. What brings O’Hara and Smithson within range of each other here is Central Park, which Smithson wrote about as the work of its designer, Frederick Law Olmsted. Otherwise, I can think of no two sensibilities so different from one another—unless you count Barry and me. “You can say what happened and have it be a part of that” rings a bell; didn’t I say this in exactly the same words somewhere? or am I thinking of O’Hara’s riff on the Past in “Biotherm”? Maybe Leon? Who wrote what—always a slippery issue.

MM: Yes, and this is to the point — what interested me was that, despite the difference in sensibilities, Watten does sound, in this instance, like you, like O’Hara — and it’s not just the issue of pleasure but also the approach to language as active speech. And this at a time when he and Grenier had started This (where Grenier’s “I HATE SPEECH” appeared in the first issue). I’m also recalling another instance — from the 1985 book Progress — where this perhaps uncharacteristic emphasis on “saying what happened” comes up. Bob Perelman quotes it in *The Marginalization of Poetry*:

McNamara,  
Johnson, Westmoreland, Rusk.
The names are no pun intended.

A present dispensing its edges,  
But I call the Bald Eagles

For lust,  
lusty and silly

Happy and holy men and girls.

What’s interesting is that Watten himself glosses this section of the poem by saying “when I got to the end of the poem I was just writing what I had to say...I always wanted a poem that would...intend a meaning for those names.”

So here it seems to be the sense of urgency about Vietnam which turns him back toward “saying,” toward speech.

I don’t know why it surprised me (it certainly should not have) but I was surprised to see Vietnam foregrounded in some of the poems in early issues of *Big Sky*: Berrigan’s “What I Want for Christmas, 1970,” or Ginsberg’s “Graffiti in the 12th Cubicle Men’s Room Syracuse Airport,” even the apocalypticism of Anne Waldman’s “Insight: No End in Sight.” It brought home what should have been obvious: that these poems, after all, were responses to, and interventions into early ‘70’s events. I wonder how close art and politics felt at that moment, and what tensions if any arose as a result?

BB: No tension as far as I was concerned. As editor I had no policy that would have kept art and politics apart, though it was a time when such tensions arose. I’m thinking of Hans Haacke’s famously cancelled exhibition at the Guggenheim involving slumlords and the Guggenheim Museum’s board of directors — the museum’s director Thomas Messer canceled the show on the grounds that it was politics and “not art.” Or Joseph Beuys Free University and the 100 Days at Documenta in 1972, where “doing” politics was the work. Of course Bolinas in relation to so many earthbound current events then was like a space station.

Meanwhile, and this was part of its instruction, Bolinas had its own microcosmic politics — a bad oil slick, the water board, the school board, septic tank practices, the so-called “street-people” issue, all very heated up — somewhere between the intensely local and the immensely inane.

MM: What about this issue of speech — I don’t mean necessarily in relation to Watten’s or Grenier’s notions. But it strikes me that, in the poems in *Lush Life* for instance — many of which are full of quoted passages, bits of dialogue, etc — that you’re dealing with speech, using it, in a way quite different from
either, say, Olson's faith or Grenier's disavowal. So, to use a phrase of yours from earlier, how (or why) were you making speech "material to writing" in Lush Life?

BB: The lushness then was one of surface, as opposed to the rather shortwinded poems that I, and a lot of other people, were given to writing in the '70s — funny often, but as often as not stingly and distrustful. The main thing then was to amplify. There was a terrific moment of feeling the writing could just go on, and that had to do with types of language being "on the table," so to speak. In "Chaloff," for instance, the poem pivots on the introduction of a sort of music-critic voice earnestly discussing "Egyptian Gardens" as if it were a piece played by Serge Chaloff, which it isn't, it was a New York nightclub that featured bellydancing, and the "he" in that line was me. The point is, parts of everyday speech sometimes give the surface of a poem a certain pitch — a sweep or grandeur, even. Of course, that's partly because we recognize the grandeur inherent in those gestures as spoken fact, that it's its own kind of poetry — very seductive, dangerous to take on for poetry in a way, because it won't just automatically suit the poem one wants to write. And one doesn't want to just "use" speech, but have the sheer fact or semblance of it take place, have a life in this other amplification. Not speech, especially, either, but the various terms of language: all kinds of written languages (as in "Trashcan. See more at trash," which apes the lexicon), subglottal non-utterances, dream oratory, movie dialogue, waking back-brain, bicameral choruses, you-name-it, as well as, quite candidly, writing, putting one word next to another, next to another, in some sequence or shape. Equally seductive, dangerous and/or delightful, is one's "ear" for poetry as one has come to know it, remembers it, hears it from years of absorption — I have a taste or proclivity, developed semi-consciously in grade school, I suppose, for the Big-Band Music of Elizabethan English poetry, and that at best operates as a good, or occasionally as a regulator, rather than as a concept, as I write. All of this comes together under the heading O'Hara defined as "clearheaded, poetry-respecting objectivity": it should be pretty clear that anyone would want everything in the poems that the poems can hold.

MM: Yes, and what's interesting to me is that, the more the poem holds, the more any one language-object, appropriated or otherwise, is transformed by the juxtapositions: thinking of what you've said about Elizabethan English poetry, I also think of this poem of Ray DiPalma's from The Jukebox of Memnon,

...and overheard
much ado about
noting Will's way
to have truck
with the simple
come and go of it

or also, the semi-famous letter of Melville's which I recently posed to Ray as a kind of cousin to what he implies:

"I would to God Shakespeare had lived later, & promenaded in Broadway. Not that I might have had the pleasure of leaving my card for him at the Astor, or made merry with him over a bowl of the fine Duyckink punch; but that the muzzle which all men wore on their souls in Elizabethan day, might not have intercepted Shaksperfull articulations. For I hold it a verity, that even Shakespeare, was not a frank man to the uttermost. And, indeed, who in this intolerant universe is, or can be? But the Declaration of Independence makes a difference."

Likewise, and quite rightly it seems to me, your characterization of "the Big-Band Music of Elizabethan English poetry" — putting one thing with another as a way to particularize it, make it sensible to one's experience. Does that sound right?

BB: Yes, sensible as in recognizable in experience or somehow wonderfully parallel to it. I mean, realism works with recognition; art can go elsewhere, to really unknown, unrecognizable territory, but you usually have to sign in to that territory with some recognizable coordinates. I have a little trouble with the insistence on transformation in that respect. Often I would prefer to leave any object to be itself. If there is such a thing as a "language-object" — and it seems perilously close to that ugly sense of "love-object" — then that would be some fact of words — a phrase, an idiom, let's say — that I would like better registered as what it is but allowed to spread, to go upscale, in the presence of its possible meanings. I dunno, maybe that's too fancy. In meaning, I can imagine the presence of meaning, without meaning THAT. In an object, well, take the goat and the tire and the paint in Rauschenberg's Monogram: each one of those things remains itself; I would argue for no transformation in that work but plenty of spread. What is especially powerful in Pollock's drip paintings, for instance, is what Peter Schjeldahl calls the "dumb" fact of the paint, that you can see all sorts of stuff in it but you keep being called back to the dumb — unspeakable? — materiality of the thing. O'Hara in the "I do this I do that" poems keeps everything true to that level of factuality, and so meanings cluster around his facts, purposefully. So too I think — tho this is a less familiar area, because the works are new — so too does Ashbery keep faith, but in such a different way, as ever complementary to O'Hara's, in his recent poetry: the words and phrases, strung along as they are in his marvelous rhetoric, are just those words and phrases — richer for his handling of them; there is, you could say, more feeling in them now. Transformation seems to me to be some other procedure, whereby the original substance is bent out of shape, practically unrecognizable. Joseph Cornell is always transforming things in his boxes. Clark Coolidge recently distinguished between the artist who says "Look what I did" and the one who says — Clark had Philip Whalen in mind — "Look what I found." Even tho you have to do something to show it, something along the
lines of presentability, I prefer the latter approach.

MM: Yes, that latter approach — look what I found — reminds me of something Duncan wrote about Emerson, that he speaks for “the importance of whatever happens in the course of writing as revelation.” And it seems as if this issue of the “materiality of the thing” is pertinent as well — so that the “done” doesn’t subsume the “found”? As John Dewey warns: “When artistic objects are separated from both conditions of origin and operation in experience, a wall is built around them the renders almost opaque their general significance.” So, that the “thing” is never static but involves movement. I free associate to a poem like “Broom Genealogy,” where the symbolic relation to these broom plants keeps shifting — they never quite get pinned down as metaphors. Likewise selfhood as it relates to genealogy in the poem: “there / I am with French-Scotch-Irish-Dutch-Russian-Jewish in / a background nature, with some olive (Choctaw) inter-/ marriage on the side.” This need to get the wording right: “in a background nature” instead of “I AM” this that or the other. It allows then for a more fluid, material version of the culture interactions at hand. Then too, you end up quoting speech regarding “the Jewish part” which is a gesture toward the found. Are we back in the vicinity of our discussion of Williams’s Paterson?

BB: It sets one to dithering. No, seriously, that’s quite a tour — and to the point, the point being something like the scale of language, that it does, and so does anything we might call “self,” cover such ground. It reminds me of something Barry Watten wrote, perhaps also in that Big Sky piece: “My mind knows more than I do.” In the scale I’m talking about one can entertain the thought, even the sensation, of such divisions in what you call “selfhood” but it’s more interesting to reveal the goings on, continuities, that occur without forcing a syntax but rather letting it lay. Sorry, I’m stumbling around in the articulation of this but it’s something that’s very much in the air of what we’re talking about. “Broom Genealogy” happened as a sort of condensed epic, just like your adventurous thought process above; I didn’t plan the movement from landscape and marriage — I didn’t even plan landscape and marriage as, say, motifs — from there to the family-history letter my mother had sent maybe ten years before. The writing just went on — which is what someone who heard it at St. Marks said, “I thought it was over but it just went on.” And it went on without the forcing of metaphor. It seems that, according to etiquette, metaphor should never appear in poetry proper. It happens in the formative staring-out-the-window phase, in the drift, maybe. Isn’t it funny? Everything that’s taught as poetry in school — metaphor was so prominent in that context — becomes not-poetry, uninteresting as technique. Only naive writers use metaphor. Only art-school artists “resolve” their pictures.

MM: Mmm - Ashbery’s line, “In school all the thought got combed out,” from “What is Poetry” — and that poem actually begins with a list of metaphors which are undercut because they’re couched as questions.

BB: Yes, because, anyway, etymologically we seem to have a language that’s an aggregate of metaphors. Poetry in its various aspects works to pile up or erode or subvert or blast through those parts that need... what?... ventilating?

MM: What about newspapers and newspaper-speak (I have no idea whether this constitutes a logical transition!)? I’m interested in the fact, for instance, that Emerson grew increasingly enamored of newspapers in direct proportion with his abolitionist involvement. (One of my favorite quotes, Emerson to Carlyle writing about the Civil War: “I hate to write you a newspaper, but, in these times, ‘tis wonderful what sublime lessons I have once & again read on the Bulletin-boards in the streets.” Carlyle hated newspapers.) I didn’t know until reading your brief memoir in The World 55 that you grew up around newsrooms, the Daily Mirror, etc. I have in my mind for some reason Kenneth Fearing’s poems. And the way you integrate, say, Leopold and Loeb, or Al Capone, into the memoir seems very dependent somehow on newspapers to me, though I can’t put my finger on it. What say you to this non question of mine?

BB: I’d like to ask you more about that Emerson-Carlyle exchange. I wish I knew more about the history of the news. What I do know is the degree to which newspaper writing was a source for Whitman — that is, to a great degree. Which brings us to a little mentioned aspect of anybody’s poetry, namely diction. And, excuse me, but does diction instantly imply “Speech”? Somewhere John Thorpe wrote “Whitman spoke real ceremonial American” — Shao (as John Thorpe is called) meant Whitman in his poems did this, and/or the poems speak in this way — they have this particular, recognizable high diction. That was Whitman’s realism, just as Courbet’s was the staging of his images according to well-known popular prints. Loeb and Leopold were made household names due to the currency, the attention grabbing of the press, the newspapers — so much so that I knew of them later by hearsay. Then when my father mentioned that he knew them I was impressed and listened hard to his stories about going out on double dates to jazz clubs with Loeb in the ’20s. Or about knowing Lucky Luciano later in New York. But those were my father’s stories. Newspaper people in those decades met all kinds of people, they had interesting lives. The American diction we were discussing earlier had carried over to some extent from Whitman’s era. I could hear remnants of it tonight in Carl Rakosi’s reading. Rakosi is 96, the same age exactly as my mother. Born in Berlin in 1903, but raised in the U.S. I love the sound of his voice, the crispness and generosity of his diction, which to me is like old radio programs.

MM: I’d like to ask more about this “carry-over” from Whitman. You asked about the Emerson-Carlyle debate — I’ve been writing recently about their correspondence during the antebellum and Civil War period which is increasingly peevish because of Carlyle’s proslavery sentiments. Alongside that quote
I mentioned I'd put this other one, from Emerson's second major address against the Fugitive Slave Law: "When I say the class of scholars or students, — that is a class which comprises in some sort all mankind...in these days not only virtually but actually. For who are the readers and thinkers of 1854? Owing to the silent revolution which the newspaper has wrought, this class has come in this country to take in all classes." This puts him in marked contrast not only to Carlyle but, say, Nietzsche, another newspaper hater. And puts him smack in the vicinity of Whitman, right? Is this egalitarian impulse related to what you say about Rakosi's "generosity of diction"?

BB: What Emerson says in 1854 is tantamount to a prompting of Leaves of Grass, no? Of Whitman's subject matter and his readership as one mass. Fearing, whom Rakosi knew very well in the thirties, probably hated the mass media, or anyway the language of advertising — I've always read him as a satirist in that regard, which may not be true, because I haven't read him very carefully, I admit. A lot of slam poetry sounds like what I think Fearing is like. By Rakosi's "generosity" I meant something more like amplitude, the inclusiveness of his address to his imagined audience. Inclusiveness is not the same thing as egalitarian. The minute someone — even you — puts "egalitarian" in a question, I suspect it's a trick question.

MM: The Emerson-Whitman connection is of course an actual one — W.'s famous letter to E. about the unknown Leaves of Grass. And as fellow abolitionists — I read where Whitman said that when Emerson came out for John Brown "it was with the power, the overwhelmingness, of an avalanche." I see what you mean about a word like "egalitarian" — it's funny how these words ossify to such an extent that when you use them people assume you mean their opposite. I had a conversation with Nate Mackey where we talked about the term "democracy" — he prefers, I think, to use a term like "heterogeneous inclusiveness" in its place, because "democracy" has been so abused. On the other hand, someone like Cornel West wants to wrestle the term "democracy" away from its kidnappers. I suppose the question is how to decide which tack to take when? Then too, "egalitarian" isn't really a synonym for "democratic" is it? — since the former seems to lack that sense of "antagonistic cooperation." It reminds me of something Kenneth Burke said about anarchism: "Begin by rejecting all authority, and you end by accepting any." Does something like that account for why "egalitarian" implies trick question?

BB: That sounds right. It's conceivable that all people might be equal in a situation where people, humans, have no authority. That's no longer mere sci-fi, which anyway, as Tom Disch has shown, is usually a thinly veiled version of what's already in place — like Don Siegel's Invasion of the Body Snatchers — but multinational corporate deals seem to be out of everybody's hands: without any "they" you can point to, those things are run by tools and a certain icy demon logic, against which even William Burroughs-type "cut-
preeminent Pound follower — and therefore he needed that clean edge. Whitman’s optimism, Williams’s “ruminations” (what Pound called WCW’s attentiveness to whatever was there) had none of that edge. Late Whitman — the disappointment, rage even, evident in Democratic Vistas — seems to have escaped his notice. He must have felt Whitman’s large effect on American poetry made for too many wrong turns. And in a way he was right: Whitman’s “what have I for my poems? I have all to make” needed answering, at least by saying look we can have this “live tradition” — Europe, China, Greece, Propertius, Egypt (& why stop there, Ez??) — gathered from the air. That he had to nail it down autoritatively, ascribing permanent non-egalitarian value to whatever he himself had need of, well that’s “taste” for you.

MM: I think you’re right that what Whitman says — his content, say — would have bugged Pound: on the surface perhaps, useless, but underneath that, offensive, threatening. It strikes me that there’s a sort of Whitmanian content inscribed in your piece in The World 55: for instance, the “pioneer mix” of ethnicities on your mother’s side. Then too I think of your recalling the amazement which accompanied your learning that your father was Jewish. Were these aspects of your personal life brought to bear on your reading of Pound when you did eventually read him? I mean, did they arm you with a sort of practical skepticism toward Pound’s symbolic economy. And if so, could that be separated from, or could that co-exist with, an appreciation of the many valuable aspects of Pound’s work, some of which you’ve already mentioned?

BB: I had little “practical skepticism” (good phrase!) about Pound until later. First, his early poetry, Personae, was a gift from John Silver, a teacher at Lawrenceville, who had annotated his copy of the book with glosses on Pound’s erudition. That was tremendously helpful, because not only could I read these gorgeous, very high-sounding poems but I could get something of what Pound was referring to culturally. Then, when I got onto the Cantos, the simultaneity in them was inspiring — that way of gathering from all vectors as one went, with so much elbow room! A little later, tho, around 1964, Pound’s authoritativeness took hold of me in a bad way: I think it had to do with my uncertainties in starting out as a teacher; I used Pound’s ABC of Reading, and also Hugh Kenner’s interpretations of Pound, Joyce and Eliot, as overriding authorities. It certainly wasn’t about precision for me, it was just looking for cover, as if I had to be, as Pound pretended to be, the master of the situation — modern poetry, for a start. The effect on my poetry for about two years was nearly disastrous. Something shook me out of that, I don’t know just what. It may have been the younger students who came along, “younger” meaning they were just about my age: Bernadette Mayer, Peter Schjeldahl — and John Godfrey who would sit in on the classes sometimes.

Pound’s “paet” with Whitman involved recognizing, as Pound says elsewhere, that Whitman considered himself only a start for the “poets to come.” The idea of “American” literature, though, was offensive to Pound.

“How about ‘American biology’?” he scoffed, taking Williams to task. He was right, too. Imagine him looking at the Donald Allen anthology: The New American Poetry, with that boosting flasg across the cover. It’s not there in the new UC Press edition, I notice. (But I also notice that UC press has managed to misspell a number of the poets’ names — “Lee Roi Jones,” “John Weiners,” “Brother Antonius” and so on — on their cover.)

MM: Yikes! — I wonder how that could have happened. Somehow I’d never noticed that flag! — but I look at my old copy now and there it is, squeamishly triumphantist, huh? It does seem to me though that some of that emphasis on American-ness had a value in this moment, particularly if “America” functions as a multietnic, multiracial sign (which includes some of the races and ethnicities that Pound would have no truck with). I think of Baraka, ca. 1963, contrasting the “gaudy excellence of 20th century American poetry” to “disemboweled academic models of second-rate English poetry” written by poets who are “content to imperfectly imitate the bad poetry of the ruined minds of Europe.” Though Baraka now might say that the distinction has lost some of its bite and purpose?

BB: This is true. It seems we had to struggle away from being just an annex of English verse. Pound and Eliot behaved as though they were just continuing the English tradition. I remember LeRoi laying into W.D. Snodgrass on some television panel: “You’re what’s wrong with American poetry,” he said, and he meant the “disemboweled academic” wrongs. Poor Snodgrass didn’t know what hit him, or what Roi was talking about either.

BB: Hard to say. I think I stopped writing poems for a year or so. There were two or three poems that appeared in the Paris Review that went elsewhere. I was doing a lot of art writing and working at the Museum of Modern Art as a guest editor. Then, in 1968, while at Yaddo, I wrote a whole book, Shining Leaves. I remember feeling as I wrote some of those poems that something had shaken loose. Oddly enough, it had less to do with what poetry I was reading than with the music I was listening to: that summer I was particularly big on Otis Redding, for instance.

MM: You mentioned how rock music was all pervasive in the late ’60’s — and now, thinking of Redding, soul music — what do (did) popular musical forms like these provide which avant jazz and classical music could/did not. Or is that a necessary distinction? I remember Bob O’Meally saying that when he was putting together the Smithsonian collection of jazz vocalists Cecil Taylor suggested that he include Marvin Gaye! — I loved the idea of that. And it
reminds me now that '68 was a time when jazz fusion was picking up steam.

BB: There was just less jazz in the air then, because, famously, the whole music industry had gone for rock & roll and/or soul. And socially those musics were on every household turntable, people sitting around smoking dope, wiggling their feet and ears to the beat and the song lyrics. Avant-garde concert music was audible mostly in dance settings, the Judson Dance Theater, Cunningham and Trisha Brown — though of course new composers had come along, like LaMonte Young, James Tenney and Max Neuhaus in New York, and the whole Morton Subotnik-Terry Riley mix in San Francisco plus Rzewski and Curran working with what became MEV in Europe. Most of this was electronic. By 1969 or '70 you had Miles's Bitches Brew contingent opening for Neil Young and Crazy Horse at Fillmore East (that's what's on the Live at Fillmore East album) and at intermission the Neil Young fans were asking “What was that? Is it what those guys were playing music?” The fact is, it was a wonderful, inspiring evening, and someone should issue the tapes of it, Miles and Neil Young consecutive, entire.

MM: I want to pick up this thread involving the Miles/Neil Young show — it strikes me that that's the context in which the value of or innovation of fusion might be most clear. I wonder how far you were/are willing to go with jazz-fusion. I'm thinking of this essay by Stanley Crouch, "On the Corner: The Sellout of Miles Davis," where he slams Miles for what he sees as a wrong turn (and here he's not thinking of Bitches Brew so much as the very late stuff like You're Under Arrest). There's an argument going on here about "popular" vs. "artistic" music which I'm skeptical about, though I do think that a lot of jazz-fusion music was/is not-so-hot. But was it an aesthetic wrong turn or does it just depend on who's doing the playing and why?

BB: I checked out around the time of On the Corner, about which time I began to miss the Miles of "Bye-Bye, Blackbird," the balladeer. In Bitches Brew I was impressed by how, amid all these neat electro loops and pops, Miles reserved a clear, solitary channel for himself — very much like the show he put on, when he wasn’t playing, by posturing in black shirt, black pants at the side of Fillmore stage and eventually leaving the stage completely, only to return when his chorus time arrived. This was all supposed to be part of his rage but it was baloney. It’s not that On the Corner was bad or unlistenable, it just wasn’t interesting, there was plenty of other, and more dedicated, party music around. Miles Davis had a very exquisite — and to that degree, very limited gift — that thin, aching trumpet sound, not the open, bandshell style of, say, Clifford Brown or Navarro or, certainly, Armstrong. Miles was like Frank Sinatra, a bel canto genius. The "jabbing" manner of the later stuff, the sort of "Jack Johnson" conceit of it all, only hurts the music, finally. Sorry, but I hear the same dullness in the dj crowd that claims to love Miles for those very moves: Laswell, et cetera.

Then again, when you mention “fusion,” I hear Joe Farrell, Airto, Hancock’s Maiden Voyage — things we listened to a lot at Tom Clark’s house in Bolinas. Maiden Voyage still sounds good on the radio.

I don’t see any problem in the pop vs. “artistic” division. I don’t even see the division, really. I mean, who can divide their values according to such terms? “Commercial” versus “Fine”? The connotations get pretty weak thereabouts. If something is stupid, hollow or boring or else has “a too palpable design upon one,” goodbye to that.

MM: Your take on Miles and the comparison to Navarro recalls this quote from Jimmy Heath on Miles vs. Navarro impromptu at Minton’s in the ‘40’s: “Fats ate Miles up every night. Miles couldn’t outswing him, he couldn’t outpower him, he couldn’t outsweet him, he couldn’t do anything except take that whipping on every tune.” I’ve always loved the sincerity of this — and the way it suggests a disjunction between the happening and the history of the happening.

BB: “Little” Miles Davis, isn’t that what Symphony Sid says on the 1949 All Stars broadcast, introducing the Bird group. Miles must have hated that. But he never became “sweet” exactly, any more than Sinatra did. It’s a different beauty and vulnerability those two project. Hearing Lester Young with John Lewis in trio session just now: Miles could have picked up and carried on the emotional edges Pres had in those later times.

MM: Yeah, or Holiday? I’m remembering she and Lester Young on some TV show in the late fifties (Ben Webster too?) — and she looked so tired but was still making it work.

BB: Sound of Jazz on CBS.

MM: We talked some before this particular conversation got started about NYC Ballet — I wonder if you might talk about how/whether your experiencing of Balanchine, say, was integrated with your experiencing of the downtown culture we’ve already discussed. I'm wondering, I guess, whether such markers as “freedom” and “the new” had their equivalents for you in ballet.

BB: When Balanchine died, in 1983, there was a feeling that the pleasures of a large civilized art went with him. Bingo, and bye-bye Civilization. Edwin Denby and Rudy Burckhardt were downtown figures, as, I guess, were de Kooning and Frank O’Hara. But Balanchine’s dances and the company he formed to perform them were like the whole New York skyline; they encompassed so much and held out such an open hand. Lincoln Kirstein who brought Balanchine to America and who directed the business end of the New York City Ballet was an aristocratic esthete, a good poet (Rhymes of a PFC), a follower of
just read in the new issue of BB: I guess the key word there is amusing deformation of classic shapes due to an unclassic drive or terms? where I'm headed with this - wondering, then, why does one do it differently? Or is it personal (out of boredom?), is it a projection of extra-artistic aspirations? 

Crane. 

classy diction, Creeley has interesting diction and great tension. But nobody’s got the three cherries like Balanchine and Monk. Of the Balanchine/de Kooning generation the one who came closest was Auden, and next to him Hart Crane.

Enough of that.

MM: I understand, I think, why you’re uninterested in dropping vagaries like “new” or “free,” thank goodness. Neither did Ornette Coleman, or Monk, for that matter. They all make sense together in terms of breadth, of scale, balance and momentum — and finally in terms of the immense pleasure of their works, their rightnesses. Balanchine and Monk and de Kooning — that’s Ultramodern art — classy and tense and surprising you at the edge of your seat, like Mozart. If contemporary poetry has a problem, it’s that none of our poets came up to that company. O’Hara came close in tension and surprise, Ashbery has surprise and classy diction, Creeley has interesting diction and great tension. But nobody’s got the three cherries like Balanchine and Monk. Of the Balanchine/de Kooning generation the one who came closest was Auden, and next to him Hart Crane.

It was all so nearly alike it must be different and it is different, it is natural that if everything is used and there is a continuous present and a beginning again and again if it is all so alike it must be simply different and everything simply different was the way of creating it then...More and more in going back over what was done at this time I find that I naturally kept simply different as an intention.

The matter of factness of especially this last sentence sort of reminds me of Monk’s matter-of-factness. How does what Stein says here relate to what you were saying above — or, does it? And if you wanted to just run over into some conversation about your relationship w/ Stein’s work, that’d be great too.

BB: Amazing how one hears Stein in such paragraphs as that. How “different” changes, “sounds” differently as she repeats it. I think that’s what she meant. And you’re right, her tough matter-of-factness is a match for Monk’s. Monk’s music, a lot of it, stays in that present tense, it puts its scale there, the scale of one large emphatic note or chord next to one other equally large, emphatic, clear. “Those bells ringing behind you,” as Lacy said. Stein was a modern Mandarin. Mandarins simplify and declare their simplifications in common parlance. A Mandarin is both at home in and visitor to the idiom. Monk was
like that. Most people just think of him as delightfully weird, just a visitor. The more I think of him, the more a figure of awesomely high culture he cuts; higher culture than Stein, really, who was limited by her artiness.

Yesterday, after talking with Stanford students about this pop culture-into-and-out-of-art syndrome, I realized that what art critics and literary scholars never seem to get is how anyone’s general culture is put together, how very unsusceptible to high/low distinctions culture as it is lived really is. Art as high art exists in such specific places in this realm as to come last in anyone’s itinerary — I mean it’s in the museums, where art critics may spend most of their time but the person who becomes and even then exists as an artist doesn’t unless that artist is an academic nerd or art-world sop. Likewise, you and I don’t spend all our days reading poetry, tho some days may be spent entirely writing poetry but that’s another matter. Critics, most of whom live sad little lives, act as though everyone is inside doing their homework all the time. It’s all detention, as opposed to retention, attentiveness, the gathering of diverse elements that stick, that mean something (as Frank said about juubes and aspirin tablets) because they are there, and sometimes they are much more there than Rimbaud or Dante or Frank O’Hara, or conversely what is great about Rimbaud or Dante or O’Hara is that each one’s work has a presence equal to those daily things. It’s from there that their meanings grow. Because after all, if they are special, as specialty acts, who needs them? Specialists, I suppose.

The recent controversy over young British art amounts to this: most of the artists either naturally, or because they feel called upon, refute the traditional beaux-arts (i.e. museum/academy-based) gentility of British art, but it’s not so much an outgrowth of critical consciousness as a shot from another cultural vector: you can, after all, grow up as an artist quite handily without having spent long hours in the National Gallery figuring out how to respond to Piero della Francesca. Just because I’m a Piero nut I may regret the absence of that strain in Damien Hiirst’s or Chris Ofili’s culture. But that doesn’t make what they do any less high or true.

MM: I’m mulling over some more complex question dealing with this idea that “A mandarin is both at home in and visitor to the idiom,” in relation to the whole issue of high and low distinctions. It seems as if you’re suggesting — and it’s quite a good suggestion it seems to me — that whatever one might call “high” is itself idiomatie in nature — which is to say, it’s a way of speaking which, among other things, tries to position itself way up the ladder — but is still just a way of speaking, and often not a very interesting one at that. But this is just me trying to get my head around what you said. My more specific question has to do with the idea of Monk as a visitor — since here I can’t help but be reminded of aliens — I’ve been curious for a while about the outerspace theme in various forms of Black Art — Sun Ra of course, George Clinton and P-Funk, etc. I suppose to some degree it’s a logical place to go to express a feeling of outsider-ness. The youngish poet Thomas Sayers Ellis has been working on a book of poems which focuses on P-Funk’s whole symbolic economy, the various characters invented for stage shows, all that — the Carnivalesque side of sci-fi. And I think too of the rap group OutKast whose CD “ATLiens” merges the word aliens with their hometown Atlanta. Is this something you’ve thought at all about? or am I taking a bit of a long shot?

BB: No, definitely. Think of John Ashbery as a visitor to the human/Anglo-American idiom, which involves John in a contemplative perspective, however split off it must be, on his given humanness and Anglo-Americaness, as well. And there is Carnival there too, in the register of Camp. Is Sun Ra so very different, with his clearly very classically minded players like John Gilmore? It’s funny that a degree of intelligence in such musical genres registers as “weird” and “from outer space” to get put across, to play the houses. I keep thinking the best descriptions of this phenomenon, which is more general on the heights of artistic activity than we realize, is in the writing by Tomas Ibarra Frausto and others on Razquache/Razquachismo, a kind of Chicano/a form of camping around greaser/beaner/zootsuit identities, paintings on black velvet and the like. Bebop in the Dizzy/Monk mannerisms mode was in that vein. You got your goatee and your shades, which align with your “inscrutable,” “hombre invisible,” other worldly aspect.

MM: I finally tracked down Artforum and the [Hilton] Als article on O’Hara you mentioned — is he out of his mind? As I mentioned before, having read his tone-deaf take on the Beastie Boys in the NYer a while back I can’t say I’m exactly surprised that he doesn’t like O’Hara. I guess I am surprised at the nature of his awful opinion. Is Als gay? It seems the only explanation for why someone would feel free to deliver such an apparently homophobic rant in public space. And this not to mention the dig at “lower-middle class Irish superstitions” and the “brilliant but mad LeRoi Jones” (thanks for the concession, Hilton!). My first reaction is just to say, agh, screw this guy, he and his opinions will fade into history while FOH! and Baraka continue to be read. But on the other hand, people will read this and believe, some of them. And of course his actual take on O’Hara’s poems is significantly more pea-brained than any student paper I’ve received on the subject.

BB: I understand that Alex Katz has written a letter to the editor. I can’t because it would appear too much like “family” closing ranks. Yeah, who is Hilton Als? Imagine doing “an Als” on Als doing something like this: This overblown colored queen, presumably named after one of Elizabeth Taylor’s husbands, or the hotel proper. (Francis R. O’Hara at least had the good taste to take a saint’s name.) Usually found hanging around the fringes of haute couture, Als’s sweet on fashion and sentimental politicos like Dorothy Dean [about whom actually I know nothing, thanks to Als’s disinformation piece on her a while back], but sour on Frank O’Hara, whose poems he claims lack "discipline." One wonders what poetry Als likes to read, if any. Indeed, you may well ask, is he gay? It just goes to show what doors to wrongheadedness
the superficiality of Brad Gooch’s book left wide open. And the wrong turns in gay politics, too, the namecalling and false class consciousness. Als the anti-fag bashes O’Hara the faggy anti-hero; he can because he’s an insider to the outhouse (like only a queer says “queer” these days). And what other place would publish such mean-spirited mental flatulence but Artforum, the undisputed champion art-world fag rag? [END OF ALS ON ALS.] That business about O’Hara throwing vitriol around at himselfs recognized in others, where does that leave Als’s acidic sprinklings? Right on target, it seems. But like you say, the guy’s out of his league, and depth. Having thus discharged the dishonorable toxin, best forget it.

P.S. Is Leroi/Amiri mad, and since when?

I dunno maybe none of the above gets to the point. But it needed trying. What else is new?

MM: I think it does get to the point — and perhaps best in this format rather than a letter to the editor (although I’m glad someone is writing one and thought I might send one off myself, w/ a dig at his NYer article for good measure) or, god forbid, a counter article which would inevitably elevate his own. Whereas here it can be informal and honest. Portraying Amiri as “brilliant but mad” — what condescending horseshit that is. Which seques nicely into what’s new b/c Amiri sent me poems and drawings for COMBO 5 — a helluva nice surprise. The drawings remind my untrained eye of Twombly — the Iliad piece in Phila Museum of Art, say — and are done alongside or sometimes on the poems.

I trust you caught the 2nd 1/2 of the American Century show? Whaddya think?

BB: You know, I went especially to see the Whitney’s own Pollock hung vertically the way Pollock himself or Lee or Betty Parsons tried it in 1950, that, along with the two stacks of smallish square pictures, also from the 1950 show. But I got to walking through the whole show — a bit too quickly, because we had appointments, Connie and I, but through. The de Koonings didn’t look good in Pollock’s company — not like at the Met where Attic and Autumn Rhythm can at least converse. (The real deal would be Autumn R. and Excavation opposite each other on the mat at Gold’s Gym!) But enough of that. Big show. Go see it for the work you don’t get to see often enough: those small Pollocks, the huge Wesselman, Morris’s I. forms, Die Fahne Hoch, DeFeo’s Rose (never looked better!), the Johns Map, Hartigan’s Sweden (hi, Frank!), the Hesse tangle, the Oldenburg Bedroom Ensemble... About 1975 in those rooms I become a conservative; nothing means as much after that point, though there are great things. Serious omissions: no Arneson or Wiley (northern California doesn’t exist after Bruce Conner?), scant on Ruscha, no (no?) Spero, no David Smith Cubi or Zig. The 1980s look totally weird from present perch and Lisa Phillips’s selection: Salle comes on top. Maybe because Warhol is treated so sloppily — putting the paintings on the wallpaper, ridiculous, obtrusive! You’d never know his was the presiding spirit of 1980s. Does a show like that really tell you anything about “the times”? or just about what art still has the energy to spare? The documentary rooms — those great old book jackets! — teach more. I think if you want to learn about an era, you look at the good period art that doesn’t hold up later; Caillebotte for the 1870s, Nick Krushenick for the 1960s, Fischl (I fear!) for the 80s. Then again, you’d never know from the selection how really good Kline, Rivers, Katz, Porter, Rothenberg, Rosenquist, Frankenthaler, or even Rauschenberg could be. & clearly all pretense at “multicultural” viewpoint/inclusivity is long gone. (A Bob Thompson in the stairwell helps no one, and anyway he’s being made to carry more weight than warranted.) Ultimately, it is a dogged, professional, unimaginative show — which is exactly how things are, and have been, in that museum world lately. The same curator did the Beat Culture show, another red herring.

So what’d you see? A very different perspective I’d be curious to know more about.

MM: I haven’t been yet. I did get a chance to go to see MassMOCA recently, which I was happy about. Have you been? I found it pretty fascinating — the architectural decision to leave the old factory buildings essentially intact (looking like old factory buildings) came off much less gimmicky than I’d imagined. Having grown up in Western Massachusetts, I appreciate the anxiety over class conflict that went into that decision. I’m a bit biased because my friend Laura is the curator there — it’s a refreshingly mom & pop operation, though I suspect that’ll change. As for the art, I’m a sucker for Nauman’s conceptual rooms and spaces (they have his green corridor and yellow room). There was a film by a dancer whose name I can’t remember — computer generated, one of those things where sensors are attached to his body and the computer sketches an impressionistic outline of him as it moves. And I liked Rauschenberg’s ¼ mile piece more than Schjeldahl did (“disaster” was the word he used I think). I’d be curious to get your opinion on that. I suppose the argument is that it’s pure hubris on Rauschenberg’s part, and he’s taking up space that would be better used by several artists? But, if one takes it to be a journal of sorts, why can’t we take as such, full of shit and luminous moments both? I mean, no one really begrudges, say, Kora in Hell its tedious moments.

BB: Yes, that’s important, that not begrudging. Certainly, where a serious artist is concerned — Williams, or Rauschenberg who insists on doing what comes to hand, to see what happens — makes a critic’s, Peter’s, mood swings so very uninteresting, in fact intrusive. It is a critic’s job to respond, but not like a wind-up toy banging off the walls full-tilt every time. On the other hand, Peter’s review of the Century Part II show, which I read last night, seemed pretty fair, and he reminded me of one terrific work I’d left off my list: Vija combo
Celmins’ comb. (Also to be fair to Phillips, there was more No. Cal. work than I mentioned, mainly the terrific Colescott painting.)

MM: I thought I’d shift gears to something I’ve been thinking about the last couple days — I’m teaching Hart Crane right now — The Bridge, principally — and it’s got me thinking about how Crane seems to have influenced our generation less than those previous — certainly a lot less than Williams or Stein. Whereas for Creeley or O’Hara — they’d mention Crane in the same breath as those others, right? So, I wonder why this is so and what relationship if any you have with his work?

BB: I recall that Barry Watten had a particular view of Crane but not what it was. That’s the only instance of an interest in Crane on the part of anyone else near my own age. I can’t recall any conversation about Crane otherwise, even with O’Hara or with Ginsberg who certainly included him in his teaching at Naropa. My own interest goes back to high school and finding the Waldo Frank edition — has it ever been superceded? — of Crane’s poems. There’s a “shape” I think of in his poetry, not of The Bridge, but White Buildings certainly, it has to do oddly as “shape” or scale with the Big Band sound of earlier English poetry, the reason Crane, and Auden too, got so drawn to T.S. Eliot; reaching for that sort of amplification, of which The Bridge is the great instance but by veering off differently, a more sensational line. The paucity of connection with Williams is interesting. Williams says somewhere he was “stumped by” Crane’s poems but they exchanged letters, which were never, I guess, collected. But Williams would have liked that poem about sailors “drinking Bacardi and talking USA” if he ever got to see it. “Eternity” it’s called. And the prose poem “Havana Rose.” Inside the shape is the specificity of every word, which is what O’Hara must have admired, being a great word-for-word poet. Ted Berrigan once said that the curse of those of us who followed O’Hara was the very sharp sense that in a poem every word counts — a specific, characteristic intensity for each. Crane has that toughness, that feeling of consideration. Mythologically, Crane links up with Lorca. And they both partake of the Ultramodern expansion one finds in, say, de Kooning, and before him, Léger. Ultramodern, for one thing, has a very expansive scale, unlike the cabinet scale of early 20th century modern.

MM: This issue of expansive scale is something you mentioned before, if I’m remembering right, in relation to de K., Balanchine and Monk. Thinking of it now in terms of Crane, I wonder: is there anything lost, anything one gives up which is missed, by going for such expansive scale? Which is, to say, what, if any, are the drawbacks of the Ultramodern?

BB: I can’t see any in that sense, not generically. Nick Dorsky spoke of the same mode as having “let the sunlight of classicism into modern art.” The drawbacks would be obvious to anyone with other purposes than a large-scale, inclusive art object. However, my feelings for Crane are based on scant knowledge of what his purposes were, and right now, as opposed to maybe 40 years ago, less of a clue as to what’s actually in his poems. I have an impression of their surfaces, is all. Whenever I now look at Crane’s poems I tend to scan their surfaces, a phrase here, a line there, an end word, and get the excitement off the top, but I never dig in to find out how a whole poem goes or what’s in it. I don’t know that I ever did get deeply into his work. Same goes for Stevens, as opposed to Auden, Stein, Williams, Reznikoff — or earlier, Pound and Eliot.

MM: I wonder if, as a writer, there’s an advantage to this “scanning of surfaces” — by which I mean, perhaps that reaction, “the excitement off the top,” is what provokes one’s own best writing — whereas the more deeply one knows another writers work, the more the words remain insistently theirs. Does that make sense? Emerson once told a young writer named Charles Woodbury, “Do not attempt to be a great reader. The glance reveals what the gaze obscures.”

BB: I once heard that Charles Olson mainly read the prefaces to the huge scholarly works he referred to.

Then there are times when you need to dig in, read closely and see if not the whole work then particular poems in their aspects. It took me a long time to do that even with O’Hara. Earlier on I did it in a sophomoric literary way with Eliot and Pound. What else can you do when you’re in your teens or early twenties and have little experience to match those that went into their poems? The nice thing is, that when you can read deeply, the plausible meanings make those other poets’ words, phrases, lines less insistently theirs: that sense of what’s being put forth is where you get to turn theirs to yours — or, forget that, it’s the concatenation that matters, which seems fairly impersonal, though you are its critical, practical agent.
BOOK REVIEW

Norman Fischer. Success (Singing Horse Press, 1999).

The book, published, models a practice. Not an endpoint, not a success-model, which we can visit and admire and leave as we return to our lives. Fischer's book returns us to our lives (What always goes on to another place) by effacing itself with the process of its own creation (She said something about that once / But it wasn't anything she said that it meant). This going on, this movement through forms - the body, the sentence, the poem - makes exploration its success, and makes success into nothing much, a daily, living practice.

I am struck by Fischer's heroic everyday (It is no accident that I am writing /). Here, literally everyday - Twenty-eight lines a day for a year. The importance of certain artistic or religious details (28 days in the moon cycle), ideas, and practices leads necessarily to the importance of all details (And the menstrual cycle), and thus to their equal non-importance as well (And it is a perfect number / [generous explanation of perfection]). Once you notice any one detail (And not only that.), it immediately fractures into countless others (it's the atomic weight / of the nitrogen molecule), and this fracturing goes on until no details exist any more (Which makes up over 70% of the atmosphere). There is a remarkable ease in Fischer's writing which is not the ease of brilliance (The choice of twenty-eight lines for these poems); rather, the ease of writing in a space wherein the idea of individual brilliance has no meaning, but connection (be it immediate, or stumbling, indeterminate and contentious) is incandescently brilliant.

Fischer is a Zen priest, currently the spiritual director of the San Francisco Zen Center, and his writing is a meditation practice. In his essay on the experience of Zen, "On Questioning," Fischer writes: "[Questioning] is heroic in its essence, but of course it is also very ordinary, and Zen is nothing if not practical and grounded." Similarly, in the essay following Success, he writes:

For me this sense of making poetry or art as an heroic and grandiose undertaking whose cost and goal is everything sounds about right — providing you don't get too excited about it, seeing it as anything more or less than any human being is doing, or would do, if he or she reflected for a few minutes about what is a worthwhile and reasonable way to spend a human life.

More or less, he is reflecting (Thursday, 24 May), and all sorts of objects, his loved ones, the names of days (Ascension Day, Election Day, A longer day than usual), various dogs and theories, a vat of chocolate, himself, wander into his meditations. But —

These details don't begin to indicate
The kind of calculation necessary
For a total resolve of incorporation
There are several angles
All bearing upon a central point
Where shape compares favorably
To duration

There is no final picture (Only way to talk is to listen), just the reflection (To give everything up) which occurs in 28 lines and then passes as the form takes up the next day's reflection (Especially a place to be in). In the end, this form (its space and its time and its commitment) gives itself up to Fischer's audience, a model inspiring through its own rigorous accommodation.

That is not to say Fischer's poems are not ever touched by such personal inclinations as intention (To hope to chart or press / Upon a soul in sorrow / Some upward forming arc) and love (As we did fourteen years before) and usefulness (Because I believe / Each and every poem / Should contain at least one / Piece of information / Useful for living) and exchange (Only with thought which is a form of money). These quick motivations make the poems (which are, after all, just one poem), but Fischer never lets these momentary desires turn the poem into a heart that's plugged; they pass through the 28 lines as another idea begins to make words its way. (Hearts know perfectly well / And dumbly / There's just a single endless / Beginning / But minds, thinking, grieve).

As I read Fischer's poem and essay, I am reminded of Stein: "The thing one gradually comes to find out is that one has no identity that is when one is in the act of doing anything. Identity is recognition." Fischer lets even this recognition wander into his meditation, and lets it go, too. What remains is his practice, the dailiness of it, the enormously empty space of those 28 lines.

—SHAWN WALKER
CONTRIBUTORS' NOTES


JESSICA CHIU's poems have recently appeared in *APR Philly Edition, CrossConnect, and Interlape*, and will be the focus of an upcoming single-author issue of *Nine to Zero*. She writes and plays for the band The Ladies.

RAY DI PALMA has new poems in the *Chicago Review, Rhizome, Cybercorpse, Backsteer*, and *Verse*. His translations (with Juliette Valery) of *Two Works by Emmanuel Haugard* is forthcoming from The Post-Apollo Press. *Further Apocrypha* (Standing Stones Press) and *Chartings* (a collaboration with Lyn Hejinian) from Chax Press are to appear in early 2000. He currently teaches at New York's School of Visual Arts.

MICHAEL GIZZI's most recent books are *No Bath and Too Much Johnson. cured in the going home* will be out in 2000 from Paradigm Press.

LAURA GOLDSTEIN is a recent graduate of the University of Pennsylvania where she majored in English and Minored in Philosophy. She is currently an instructor for the Center For Literacy in West Philadelphia. Laura also teaches Yoga, studies T'ai Chi and massage, is involved with the organization Poetry For the People and loves Philadelphia.


BRIAN KIM STEFANS' books are *Free Space Comix* (Roof) and *Gulf* (Object Editions), which can be ordered by writing to bstefans@earthlink.net. Forthcoming is *Angry Penguins* (Harry Tankoos). His growing body of web poems can be found at www.ubu.com.

SHAWN WALKER lives in West Philadelphia. The first Writers House Resident Coordinator (1996-97), she returned to Philly after spending a year in England and now works as a staff member at Penn. Her first book, *The Purchase of a Day*, is out from Handwritten Press.
ANSELM BERRIGAN

MICHAEL GIZZI

JESSICA CHIU

RAY DI PALMA

DAVID KOPPISCH

LAURA GOLDSTEIN

AMIRI BARAKA

BRIAN KIM STEFANS

BILL BERKSON

SHAWN WALKER